
One Woman Army

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For my library....

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WHITE

Crew

Becca brushed an auburn curl away from her eyes and poked at the green paste in front of her. *What miserable gunk! This isn't food at all; it's just taking on fuel. Food has a texture. Food has a taste that you can easily identify.*

The food on board the *Tong Dizhou* had been designed for portability and nutrition, thus was tasteless and unappealing. They were hitting the last month of the trip and the stores would need to be replenished at Pegasi-51.

She imagined cooking a *real* meal: browning diced onions in olive-oil and chopping up parsley. *When I get home, we're going to get the whole family together for a feast. I hope this is the last trip I have to do. Surely the pay will be enough that I never have to get on a ship again. Praise be! The simple life is waiting, as soon as I'm done with...what is she doing?*

Evie, the chief engineer, was spooning her green gunk into a little mound. She achieved some desired shape and stopped to admire it. Evie pushed back her thick glasses and said, "This is important. This means something."

Becca sighed at the mound. "It means you should have no problem shedding a couple kilos." As the ship's doctor, Becca had to keep track of every crew member and maintain records during the three-month trip. Evie weighed eighty-six kilos and Becca was worried about her health.

The engineer rolled her eyes. "You don't watch any of the old fictions, do you? We have an actual *boatload* of information on this ship."

Because it was one of the smaller freighters available, the *Tong Dizhou* generally did mixed runs. Once the crew dropped off the heavy machinery, textiles, and new seeds, they would transfer their store of fresh data from home: audio, video, texts, missives from families to their loved ones, images of children slowly becoming adults...

Evie squashed the "important" mound and shoved a spoonful into her mouth. "I think this is supposed to be spinach, or seaweed, or something." She sang to the tune of a popular jingle:

*The galaxy's full of our spawn!
Once we get going, we don't stop...
The height of all our tech flies on
Inside, however, we eat slop.*

"Nonetheless," Becca said. "Either reduce your intake or get some more exercise."

"People in zero-gee usually eat less." Evie grinned, a bit of green paste stuck between her uneven teeth.

Becca took a spoonful of breakfast and held it, upside down, between them. The goop took two seconds to dislodge itself and plop on her plate, obeying the laws of spin-induced gravity.

Evie shrugged. "I can hardly walk five paces without falling flat on my face. How am I supposed to run eight kilometers? I almost broke my foot on that door-jam yesterday."

"Try swimming. We have a wave-tank on board."

"No one wants to see me in a suit."

"So go there off-shift when no one will see you," Becca suggested. "We have the time."

Max, the junior engineer, sat down with his own plate.

Evie turned to him. "How are the air scrubbers holding out?"

Max rubbed the back of his head. "It's breathable, Chief. Depends on what kind of diet we get the rest of the trip."

"The cee-oh absorbers," Evie explained to her doctor friend, "can only handle so much. We get much more of *this*," gesturing to the green lump on the plate in front of her, "and we'll have to retro-fit the entire assembly when we get to port."

Judith (the second-mate and only daughter of Captain Wainwright) came in and gave Max a kiss on the head. "Hey, Max honey. What's this morning's fare? Brown mash, gray mash or..."

"Hi, Judi sweetie," Max gave his fiancée a little peck on her warm brown cheek. "It's Franz's special green mash."

"It's super nummy." Evie grinned.

"I hate breakfast." Judith sniffed and rubbed her broad nose. "It's always like this at the end of a trip."

"We'll be picking up stores once we hit Peg-51," Max offered. "Won't fresh fruit be nice? Maybe some berries the first month, then plums and pears."

"Or apples..." Evie seemed lost in thought.

"Apples not as much," Max said. "They last a long time, so that's more of an 'end of the trip' kind of thing."

"An apple would be wonderful," Evie said dreamily. "Like that one that Franz is eating."

The group swiveled towards Franz, the chief steward. Franz was a Pegger, a native of Pegasi-51, so this was a trip home for him. He munched away at a Granny-Smith that he held delicately with the tips of his fingers, never closing his hand to obscure the crisp fruit.

"Look at that clever bastard," Max hissed at the stout, furry, gray man. "Advertising his wares when we're at our weakest."

Becca nodded. "It's working."

"That's fresh," Judith whined. "Oh, it's not frozen or freeze-dried or vacuum packed."

"Franz..." Evie smiled. "You know I'm good for it. You give me a number and I'll leave it for you under my pillow."

"How many?" Franz asked between bites.

Evie held up two fingers.

Franz handed Evie two Granny-Smith apples. "I want a system for grilling installed. Something so I don't need a pan. I'm tired of using those blasted induction pans."

She took his hand and kissed his broad, rough knuckles. "You'll have it by this time tomorrow."

"Promises, promises," he grunted.

"Franz and I have a colony/colonizer relationship," Evie announced as she polished one of her apples on a sleeve. "He gives me raw materials and I give him technology."

"No, Chief," Max moaned and held his head in his hands. "You're just rubbing it in now."

"You're worse than those damn squiddies," Franz said. "If you're so smart, why can't you make an engine?"

Evie shot Franz a harsh look. "You just wait. Maybe I will."

"Save me the seeds, at least," said Judith. "If we can turn a section of the ship into a garden, it might be better business. I want to know if we can grow apples. Granny-Smiths are so much better than those red things we usually get."

"Captain's daughter has never gawked an apple tree!" Franz laughed. "They take up too much space; take a long time. Plus, don't breed true. Don't know what you would have by the time they give you anything."

"Well, here." Evie handed one of the apples to Judith. "You can save your seeds. You could even give Max half your apple if you wished."

Judith held the fruit with both hands. "Oh, Evie, oh, thank-you." She handed the apple to her fiancé. "You have a knife, Max. You can have half."

Max chuckled and pulled out his multi-tool. "The trade for technology continues..."

Evie pulled out her own multi-tool, deftly sliced the remaining fruit, and handed half to Becca. "Stay in the good graces of the Wainwrights, and you'll always have passage somewhere."

"How long have you been riding with them?" Becca asked.

"She did a couple runs with my uncle," Judith said. "Dad wanted a good engineer for this run and she came recommended."

"You'll be an official Wainwright any day now," joked Max.

"The other uncle," Evie pointed out. "Stella's brother, Lucian."

"If you're not flying with a Wainwright," Franz said, "you're flying with a Trechantiris. I did a few runs with a Homer Trechantiris." Franz puffed out his cheeks and stuck out his belly. "I has been running ships for many generation," he said, in a bad Greek accent. "We map the world, and we map the skies while you was hiding in tents!"

"You imitate my cousin so well! Don't stop on my behalf." The room turned to see Stella Wainwright (née Trechantiris), wife of the captain and chief-mate of the *Tong Dizhou*, laughing and clapping. Even joking, Stella was willowy and graceful at all times.

There was nervous shuffle as the others stood to attention. Franz tugged at his bangs and backed silently into the galley.

"Everyone, relax." Stella smiled neatly. "We are on the last leg of this trip and we can't get complacent. This is the point when mistakes are made and we've made it this far. I'm sure all of you are getting a little impatient and maybe even stir-crazy, but trust me; the present tedium is preferable to the excitement a tiny mistake could bring now. I am sure that you won't let a little boredom get in the way of fulfilling your duties to your best ability."

* * * * *

Seventeen-year-old Paul Wainwright was at the helm but signed out of his station when Becca entered the bridge. He was the Wainwrights' youngest son, with dark eyes that never missed anything, shining black hair, and an aquiline nose; he had inherited his looks from his mother and shared her stunning grace of action.

"End of my shift," he said. "And I'm off to bed. See you at dinner."

Gordon Gorsky, the junior pilot, came in after Becca, and moved to his station at the helm. Whereas Paul's good looks were quiet and refined, Gordon's were broad and brash. He brushed blond hair away from his face, blue eyes glittering, and flashed Becca a sheer, white smile.

Becca sighed. *Why must the handsome boys all be pilots?*

Gordon caught Paul by the arm. "Is that engine still acting up?"

Paul shook his head.

"Anything I should be watching for?" Becca asked Captain Wainwright.

"Nothing abnormal." The dark man rubbed his chin and referred to Evie by her last name. "Gaines cleared up that issue with the under-powered engine, so we don't have to make anymore compensations." He signed out of the station and stood. "I'll be in my berth if anything comes up."

Becca sat, logged into the com, and called up a text on fire-suppression systems.

"Looks pretty boring, Beks." Gordon was looking over her shoulder.

"I figured I'd get some reading done. And don't call me *Beks*."

"On a lovely day like this?" Gordon leaned in closer. "You could be having a nice conversation instead."

Becca forwarded the text and tried to ignore his advances.

Judith looked up from her display. "There *is* more than one unattached woman on this ship."

Gordon wrinkled his nose. "But only one of them is good-looking."

"And uninterested," Becca answered.

Gordon paced the floor and eventually flopped back into his chair. "Bored bored bored *bored....*"

Judith laughed. "Long haul trips usually are."

He leaned back in his chair. "But the pay's good. What are you gonna do with yours?"

Judith shrugged. "Save up for my own ship. You have to trade for the engine, so--"

"What are you gonna call it?" he interrupted.

Judith frowned. "That's up to the Shipping Authority."

"I might go to the mountains," Becca said. "I've been meaning to go for a long time."

"Too cold up there." Gordon frowned. "You should go someplace warm, someplace with a beach."

"So you can ogle her in a swim-suit?" Judith asked.

He shut his eyes and smiled. "I might. See how she matches up with my imagination."

"How odd that you should mention that..." Becca grinned. "I was just suggesting to Evie that she use the wave-tank we have on board."

Gordon frowned and opened his eyes. "You're all out to ruin all my fantasies."

Judith chuckled. "Serves you right."

Gordon sulked for a while. Becca continued to read.

Finally, "What do you see in her anyway?"

Becca looked up from her text at Gordon. "What do I see in who?"

"That Evie chick," he sulked. "You spend a lot of time together."

"They're friends," Judith offered.

"Oh?" He chuckled. "*Friends*. That's what they call it."

Becca shook her head. "You have completely misunderstood the nature of our relationship."

"So it's a *relationship*?" He laughed. "I see how it is."

"Some-body's jea-lous..." Judith sang.

"Well," he countered. "You have to wonder. A long trip like this...and you spend so much time together."

"Knock it off, Gorsky." Becca glowered at Gordon. "Just because a girl isn't interested in you--"

"You sound like my ex."

"I'm sure you have a lot of those," Becca said.

Gordon frowned and returned to his screen. "Not as many as I'd like."

* * * * *

By the time Becca went back to the galley for dinner, Franz had a new piece of equipment in his kitchen. It produced a lightly-colored field in which he held a piece of soy-beef. There was no open flame, so Becca felt a little foolish for spending all that time reading about fire-suppression and she noticed that Evie had even included a reflecting shield that fitted over the apparatus.

"I should have bribed her weeks ago." Franz chuckled as he turned the wire cage containing the imitation meat. "Now, I know why the food on the tanker *Shui Mang* was so good. The steward there never told me the secret, but I figured it had to be something."

Human Fix Ship

A week later, Becca was on deck with a safety report when a tinny alarm went off. A distress signal had been picked up.

Stella spotted it first: a tiny ship, some type of lifeboat or escape pod. Captain Wainwright leaned over his wife to study the display.

"It's squiddy design," he finally announced. "That's a Vencume ship."

"Isn't that where we get our engines?" Gordon asked.

"Yes," Stella answered. "This is your first deep flight, so you probably haven't run into one before. The Vencume maintain a pretty broad territory, but this is a little out of their range. They must have originated near Peg-51, but they usually come from the other direction."

"They aren't responding to hail, but it's the source of the signal." Wainwright was chewing his bottom lip.

"Do we have time for this?" Stella asked.

"It's regulation; we don't have a choice," the captain said. "The black-boxes have already recorded us getting the signal." He rubbed his chin again. "Get a bay ready. Tell Gaines to suit up. She's worked with squiddies before."

Stella checked a display. "We can bring the Vencume in on bay seventeen in the center section. It's empty and we can reduce the spin there for them."

"I'll suit up as well," Becca offered.

"No." Wainwright stopped her. "Be ready if we need you to go in, but I only want one crew member in there at a time. There's still an infection risk and I don't want my third-mate involved."

"Infection risk?" Gordon asked.

"Our exposure to Vencume germs," Becca said, "and their exposure to ours. Sure, we've dealt with them before, but it's not worth the risk of going in without a suit."

"Also," added Wainwright, "we don't know why they're in distress."

* * * * *

As soon as the center section stopped spinning, two lines were sent out to retrieve the Vencume pod. Once it was safely inside, the hatch shut and the spin started again, but only half-speed. Evie was already in her bright red bio-suit and adjusting the translator around her neck before the bay was brought to pressure.

The entire starboard side of the pod was dented and the engine on that side was sputtering still. Most of the sensor array had been knocked off, so any surviving Vencume inside were flying blind.

Evie crossed in front to port and yelled a "Hello!" then banged on the side, 2...3...5..., the accepted greeting of "civil-kind". The sense of gravity alone would have signaled safety on a ship, the shout indicated atmosphere, and the prime knock let the survivors know they were in safe hands.

There were four, deep-purple Vencume in this pod; they huddled together, running long tentacles over each other. A fifth was dead from what looked like severe burns. Evie also noticed a raw space in the center the gray, vine-like mass where something had been removed.

The remaining four Vencume chattered. Evie's translator spoke in a smooth, unhurried, female voice:

Time constraint. Ship coming. Gratitude for safety. Indebtedness to Humans.

"You're very welcome," Evie answered. "You're on board the freighter *Tong Dizhou*, headed to Peg-51. What happened to your ship? Why were you forced to evacuate?"

The massive Vencume shuffled out of the pod on trunk-like legs and clustered around her; they had a poor sense of personal space and did this to everyone: running long, multiple fingers over everything they encountered. Their five arms waved, each arm ending in a knot of many twisting digits.

Ship damaged. Signal sent. Ship coming.

"So you have another ship coming?" Evie asked. "You've sent your signal and someone is coming to pick you up?"

Time constraint. Ship coming. Understanding.

Captain Wainwright's voice buzzed in Evie's ear. "They have someone coming. Let's get them out the door."

Evie approached the main engine on the pod and asked the Vencume, "Did you run into some kind of debris?" There was visible damage across the central thruster. "We can take you the rest of the way to Peg-51, but we can't stop and wait here. You know we can't dock with Vencume ships."

The Vencume shuffled again, their five large feet scraping against the floor.

Time constraint. Understanding. Ship coming.

"You're safe with us. We have quarters where we can put you." Evie started to back towards the hallway door. The Vencume followed and she pointed at one of them that was holding a pressurized container closely. "We have a refrigeration unit for the--"

"Quit making promises we can't keep," Wainwright buzzed in her ear.

*Misunderstanding. Ship coming. *Tzikzik* coming. Time constraint.*

Evie tapped her translator. "Sorry, what else is coming?"

**Tzikzik*. Time constraint.*

She cocked her head. "What is *Tzikzik*? Is that an event or--?"

*Not civil-kind. Concern for safety. Understanding. *Tzikzik* not safe.*

Evie gestured that the Vencume stay by the hallway door and pressed a hand to her ear. "Hey, guys, I think we have a new word."

Captain Wainwright sounded more annoyed than curious. "Gaines, what do you mean, a 'new word'?"

Evie frowned, hearing her family name again. "I mean a word the translator hasn't heard before. They seem pretty agitated and keep asking me to hurry; but, they're worried about something called *Tzikzik* as well. Maybe there's something else out there."

"This is deep space and we're so far out we'll never run into anything," Wainwright said. "Look, this is a cargo run, not a science-fair project. Just get the thing up and running. I don't want those squiddies on this ship any longer than necessary."

Evie approached the pod and ran a gloved finger across the twisted metal. "It's too badly damaged. It might be able to hold pressure, but the life-support on it is minimal and there's no thrust or sensors. It looks like the array was knocked off and the main engine unit took a direct hit from something either massive or fast. The control panel inside is toast and there's a dead Vencume in there."

Captain Wainwright paused before asking, "They already cored the dead one, right? That's why they're in such a rush. Just get them presentable enough so we don't get fined when the Shipping Authority hears about it."

"I don't think this is like that," Evie said. "Maybe--"

The sentence was finished by an explosion and Evie hitting the wall.

"Gaines!" Wainwright shouted in her ear. "What happened down there? We just watched an explosion. Are you all right?"

"Fuel cell went up." Evie made sure to get up slowly, as to prevent flying across the bay. "It finally had enough atmosphere to go." She stopped. "I have shrapnel in my hand." She ripped off her glove and the bloody, plastic mess came apart.

"Right, get out of there," Wainwright ordered.

"What about the Vencume?"

"We'll put the squiddies on one of our life-boats and they can get it back to us some other time. The Shipping Authority will be satisfied with that."

The Vencume came up on her fast, chittering away.

Ship broken. Human fix ship. Human broken. Vencume fix Human.

And one of the Vencume reached for the bloody shrapnel.

"No!" Evie slapped the squid-like mass of fingers away. "Gwen, don't!"

In trying to prevent infection and slapping away what could be called a hand on a Vencume, Evie managed to break what could be called a hand on a Vencume.

"I'm so sorry, I only..."

No malice. Vencume fix. Understanding. Infection. Vencume fix. Understanding.

One Vencume produced a small vial and sprayed the broken "hand" of its companion. The flesh sizzled a moment before the digits wiggled freely. The Vencume clustered and touched each other again, the mass of tentacles that stuck out from between their arms interlacing.

Understanding. Vencume has helix. Vencume fix. Human fix ship. Understanding. Vencume fix.

Evie was backing to the door. "No, we cannot fix the ship. The ship is too broken. We will give you one of our lifeboats. Little ship? Your ship can pick up little ship?"

The Vencume were keeping their distance now.

Not dock. Absorb. Understanding. Similar now. Acceptable.

"Dr. Tabib is waiting for you," the captain said. "I'm sending Franz in to escort those things to bay fifteen."

"OK." Blood was dripping around the protruding shrapnel. She turned back to the Vencume. "Someone else will get suited up and take you to one of our little ships."

One of the Vencume spun up suddenly and pressed the vial of spray into her uninjured hand.

Barter. You fix. Understanding. Human ability. Understanding. Human fix ship helix useful. Understanding.

"Thank you." Evie said, uneasily. "I have to go now. Other Human fix this Human, OK?"

The Vencume shuffled back. The others received it, all of them running tentacled masses over each other.

Vencume understanding. Human fix ship helix. Usefulness. Understanding.

"Yes, yes... Much gratitude. I understand. Thank you, of course. I have to go." She felt ill, and it would do no good to be ill in a hood.

"Other Human fix Human?" Becca was waiting at the bottom of the zero-gee conduit with a syringe and some bags. "How about a little extra adrenaline before we go to bay and you crash out?"

"*Vesta, Diana, Minerva...*" Evie swore as she ripped off the hood of the blood-red bio-suit and vomited into one of the bags. "Thank the universe for centrifugal force."

"How much do you think you bled back there?" Becca asked.

"The rungs might be slippery the next five minutes," Evie said. "And that blood is just going to vaporize over time. We'll have to wash out the whole thing."

"Franz will take care of it," Becca said.

Evie wriggled out of her bio-suit and the two stumbled to the sick-bay.

Evie had to take her watch off so Becca could strap the wrist and prevent further bleeding. The piece of shrapnel was the length of Evie's palm and the width of her index finger and it took two minutes to remove it without damaging the surrounding tissue.

Becca had numbed the area before extraction because Evie had refused general anesthesia; she wanted to watch the process and studied Becca's work the entire time.

"Why don't we use the Vencume spray?" Evie asked, looking at the vial Becca had placed in a plastic bag.

"Because it's made for Vencume," Becca explained. "I've seen it before. Some sort of stem-tech they have. We don't know what it would do in your case. You want a squid for a hand?"

"You might want to get another barf-bag ready if you're going to talk like that."

Becca chuckled again. "She says, looking at the insides of her own hand."

Evie shrugged. "I've seen it before."

"So I've guessed," Becca said. "There's a lot of heavy scarring here. You make a living with your hands; you should take better care of them. Granted, it was an unavoidable accident."

"No." Evie was staring at the knuckles of her right hand intensely. "I put myself there. I could have stayed grass-side and never met a Vencume. I decided on this life."

"A little late to have doubts now."

"It's not something I doubt; I just know that it isn't blind chance. I decided to live this way." Evie turned her hand over to look at the tiny star-shaped scar on her right palm where the Shipping Authority had inserted her identity chip.

"Hey..." Becca tried to lighten the mood. "You're going to miss the best part. I have to do another saline wash."

"Oh, lemme do it. I've seen this lots of times." Evie grabbed the bottle from her doctor's hands and cleaned away the raw wound.

"You should get out of engineering and be my assistant."

"I could never. Can't stand the sight of blood unless it's my own."

Becca stitched while Evie stared. There was a minor stopping point when Becca had to give Evie another injection to keep the hand numb. "How do you go through this stuff so quickly?"

"I can't help it," Evie explained. "I process it quickly or something."

Becca gave Evie another injection. "Who's Gwen? You said, 'Gwen, don't' before you slapped the Vencume. Someone you left behind?"

Evie frowned. "I don't want to talk about it. Let's just say I dropped a glass and then caught it."

"Just missed the manual tendon here." Becca stated. The piece of shrapnel had entered the palm halfway down and two centimeters in from the pinky. "Good thing we didn't have to go digging. Wiggle your fingers before I close it up."

Evie wiggled her fingers. "That's always weird. I see them move, but I don't feel anything. It's only my will that makes them move."

Becca nodded. "When you regain feeling in this hand, it's going to hurt. I'll give you some pills for it."

"I don't want pills."

"At least talk to Franz about putting ice on it to help prevent swelling."

"Isn't pain how we know we're healing?" Evie asked. "What about those people who can't feel pain? Don't they get hurt all the time? They burn themselves and chew up their lips and scald their esophagus. Isn't pain how humans learn what's safe?"

"Are you talking about neuropathy?" Becca asked. "Yes, OK, pain is important. Children with the disorder are in constant risk of self injury....And we're done. Be mindful of those stitches."

Evie rubbed at her eye. "Do you think pain is important for human development?"

The ship's doctor slipped into her role. "You want to talk about that fight you had the other day?"

The patient stared at the knuckles on her right hand a moment. "No."

Becca examined her friend. "Evie, you're too hard on yourself. What was it you and Gordon were fighting about anyway?"

Evie raised a maimed paw. "I have to go put ice on this. We'll talk later." And with that, she stood and limped in her usual way out of sick bay.

Becca sat in the empty room for a few minutes. *What the hell were they fighting about? Why won't she talk to me?* She started to clear away the needles and gauze. *Look at that; she forgot her watch as well.* It had a short arrow pointing to an IX and a longer arrow pointing at a VI. *Typical engineer stuff; it always has to be complicated.* She started to put it in her pocket, *No, then I'll forget,* and put the timepiece on her own wrist. *I'll give it to her when I see her next, which should be as soon as she realizes she's forgotten it.*

* * * * *

Becca finished cleaning up and filing the incident report. She ran into Franz in the corridor.

"Do you have the remains of that glove from Evie's suit?" he asked.

"No," she answered. "She already had the glove off when I met her outside the bay."

He shook his head and sucked air through his teeth. "I wanted to see how bad the damage was and if I could fix it, but I can't find it anywhere."

"It probably got purged," Becca said, "at the same time when we opened the bay door to send out that Vencume body. They didn't seem interested in taking it with them."

"Yeah, I guess." Franz nodded. "Those squid were in a big hurry to get going. Probably had to do with those two cores they had with them."

* * * * *

Becca is dreaming about New Year's Eve. She is riding on her father's shoulders and swaying with each step he takes. Above her, fireworks explode: deep booms that she feels in her chest. The colors glitter across the night sky.

"How's my little princess enjoying the show?" her father asks.

She tries to answer, but no sound comes out. A brass band plays one note, over and over.

In the dream, her father repeats the question, thinking she hasn't heard him. Again, she opens her mouth but is unable to speak. Her father gives her arm a little squeeze. "Rebecca, honey? You OK up there? Were we out too late for you? Have you fallen asleep? Rebecca? Becca? Becca?"

* * * * *

"Becca, wake up!" It was Judith, shaking her awake. Behind her, there were flashing lights. An alarm was going off.

"What? Where?" Becca fell out of bed. "What's going on?"

"We're under attack! They're attacking us!" Judith looked near panic and ran out of the room.

Becca got dressed, hurriedly putting on pants, shoes, and jacket. No time to comb her hair. *Who is attacking?* She grabbed her quick-bag: filled with the things that mattered most.

Stella's unnaturally calm voice came over the intercom, notifying the crew of evacuation procedure and asking them to move to bay fifteen.

Becca saw Franz in the corridor. "Why are we evacuating? What's going on?"

Franz took Becca by the arm and continued his brisk pace. "About twenty minutes ago, Stella picked up some kind of large ship on the display. It didn't respond to hail at first; then it started lobbing stuff at us. Mostly junk, from the looks of things. Paul tried to evade—even dropped out of field—but they're fast and now our

ship's starting to suffer. We're close to losing one of the holds. Judith went to get you because you weren't responding to the intercom. We were actually worried your berth had gone out."

They caught up with Max and Evie.

Max was giving a basic rundown to Evie. "We're short one lifeboat, due to our *magnanimous* nature, so that cramps the nine of us in one. Engines are still keeping a good push. Sensor section is breached but the shutters are in; no idea on the cargo. Spin is slowing down so we'll be swimming the last lap."

"This must be what the Vencume were running from!" Evie was shifting her quick-bag from shoulder to shoulder.

Already, Becca felt her steps gaining a little more spring. Soon, they would have to push off from walls. She leaned forward and kicked.

"We should have listened to them!" Evie shouted over alarms. "They tried to warn us!"

"Shoulda woulda coulda!" Franz yelled back.

By the time they made it to bay fifteen, the section had completely stopped spinning and the crew had to grapple with doorways and kick off from walls. The lifeboat sat in the center of the bay, gripping the hold-stays while Captain Wainwright floated just outside the craft, making sure his crew was safely aboard.

Franz gave Max a good push to where the captain caught him. Franz pushed himself off with a huff.

Evie kicked off and pulled Becca with her. "Relax," Evie said as she lazily rotated in the air and looked Becca in the eye. "Glide with it." She spun again in a lazy arc, pointing Becca at the lifeboat door.

Inside, things were cramped. Gordon was already sitting at helm, prepping for the launch. Stella and Judith were in the two seats behind. Paul pulled Becca into the seat next to him. Franz, Max, the captain, and Evie crowded in behind.

Captain Wainwright shut the hatch and gave the order to go. The hold-stays released and the boat started to float up from the floor. The only problem was that the bay door wasn't opening.

"I'm giving it the command," Gordon said as he mashed buttons, "but there's no response."

Paul leaned forward and peered through the window. "It's not even trying to move. We'll have to open it manually."

Evie was already opening the hatch on the lifeboat. "You don't have time to suit and crank. It's the receiver on the side wall. I can send the command from the loadmaster and ride the magnet down."

"I can do it," Max said.

"You're getting married." Evie stopped him, "and I work better in zero-gee." She pushed off from the hatch.

A painful three minutes later, the bay doors opened. Even from inside the insulated life-boat, Becca could hear the groan as the half-meter thick doors parted and the atmosphere in the bay rushed out.

"We're free!" Gordon shouted, and pressed the LAUNCH button.

Judith scrambled to the controls. "No! You forgot Evie!"

The hatch on the life-boat was closing. Max looked around frantically for something to hold them open. He rushed to the hatch, his legs pressing against the embarkment steps as his long, thin arms strained against the pressing top-hatch.

Franz hurled himself between them, his squat body straining against automatic emergency measures.

Max twisted himself to yell at the loadmaster. "Chief! Hurry up! Get down here!"

Becca huddled in the corner with her hands over her ears. The rush of atmosphere was deafening.

Captain Wainwright grabbed Max by the arm and pulled him away from the closing hatch just as Franz's strength gave out and the doors clanged shut.

The lifeboat shot away from the *Tong Dizhou*. Becca only caught a glimpse of the freighter as the engines on one side sputtered to life and turned the ship away.

At dead spin, the freighter looked very small. For some reason, the motion had increased its size. Maybe, it was because a ship with spin looked like a place where people could live and Becca had lived there for three months. Now, it just looked like an incomplete model or a broken toy.

Adrift

"You left her! I can't believe you left her!" Judith was crying and took frantic swings at Gordon.

Paul struggled to hold back his older sister. "Judi, Judi...no no, calm, please, calm."

"What was I supposed to do?" Gordon shouted. "The moment I turned the engines on, we shot out of the bay. The doors shut on their own."

"Lifeboats on deep-flight ships do a hard burn to get us away from the wreckage as quickly as possible," Max said. "You could have waited."

"Unless, you didn't know that..." Paul said.

Captain Wainwright pointed at Gordon. "You're off my crew. That's it. You'll never fly with a Wainwright again."

"Or a Trechantiris," Stella added.

"Your career is over," Franz said, under his breath.

"There may be criminal charges," Wainwright continued, "once we get to Peg-51--"

"If we get to Peg-51!" Gordon snapped. "We're still eighteen days out and that's on a freighter with a field, not some dinky lifeboat. We're in the middle of *nowhere* and those...*things* might still be after us."

"Shut up, you *ass*," Stella hissed.

Paul handed his sister to her fiancé and pulled Gordon out of the pilot's seat. "Evie managed to get the ship turned after we *left*..." He let the last word linger. "So, we shouldn't have to worry about any pursuit. We're still headed the right direction to get to our destination. We might get...eight days?"

Max gave Judith a hug and patted her on the back. "We'll make it."

Stella was already going over the comm. "We can do a general distress for now. Once we get close enough, we'll switch to a narrow beam and the Shipping Authority can send someone out to pick us up."

Franz was checking the storage hatches. "We're stocked enough for half-rations, but that's not going to last more than a week. There's enough water for...six days...for the eight of us."

Wainwright pointed at Gordon. "There's enough water for *seven* of us."

"You can't," Gordon pleaded.

"I'm the captain. If I could throw you out an air-lock right now, I would."

Gordon looked around the tiny ship. "It was an honest mistake. I didn't know--"

"Ignorance is no excuse," Franz said, as he swam in behind Gordon to twist his arms behind him.

Max found some zip-ties.

"You can't be serious!" Gordon squawked. "You need every able hand you have on board! Beks!!"

"Able hands," Becca growled. "And don't call me *Beks*."

Max punched Gordon in the stomach. "You'll be quiet or I'll gag you."

"Enough!" bellowed Captain Wainwright.

Franz rested a hand on Max's shoulder. "We're going to be here a while. Let's not start in on that."

"He left the Chief behind!" Max protested. "You can't just—"

"*We're going to be here a while*," Franz repeated. "These are tight quarters. Swing too wide, you might hit the wrong person."

Judith tried to calm her fiancé. "Max, honey, please. Come here and sit next to me. Let Franz handle it."

Max was unconvinced. "They've had one fight already; who's to say he didn't *mean* to leave her behind?"

"Max, please," Judith pleaded. "We won't make it if we go on like this."

Franz nodded. "Listen to your fiancée. Girlie's a fielder and knows it on a ship. There's no walk to blow off steam here."

"He's a murderous bastard!" Max pointed at Gordon, who was still recovering from the punch.

Now, Captain Wainwright moved in close to Max. "Every time you lose your cool, you use up twenty-five percent more oxygen." Their faces were centimeters apart. "I'd like it if they found us found alive."

"Are we settled?" Stella asked.

Max looked over at Judith's pained face. "Yes," he finally agreed. "We're settled."

* * * * *

The crew took shifts sleeping. Paul and his father traded turns at the helm. Judith and her mother swapped as navigator. Max and Franz guarded Gordon.

Becca slept and tried to stay out of the way. She checked Gordon over a couple of times to make sure he wasn't too badly dehydrated.

* * * * *

It had been maybe a couple weeks prior on the *Tong Dizhou*, Becca was in the bay getting an inventory order ready.

The trip, thus far, had the usual list of complaints common on a ship. There had been a round of the sniffles the first week as the crew got adjusted to the recirculated air; that had been handled with antihistamines and saline sprays. Three cases of dry eyes—Stella, Paul, and Judith—and easily dealt with drops and swabs. Gordon got food poisoning once. Franz had cut his thumb. Max had sustained a first-degree burn.

And Evie...Evie had twisted an ankle, bumped her head, bruised her thigh, broken a toe, and dislocated a finger. *She may as well be berthing here.* Becca looked over the chief engineer's file again. Because of the ten-centimeter difference between one leg and the other, the longer leg usually suffered the most injury. *Those stupid hips. Why couldn't anyone set those properly?*

The intercom beeped: Paul's voice: unnatural calm. "Dr. Tabib, I need you in bay six. Bring something for a broken nose and some busted knuckles."

Bay six was in the third section of the ship and it didn't hold spin because crew rarely went there.

Becca floated into the hold to a regular welcoming committee. Franz was holding back Gordon and Max was holding Evie.

"I don't care what you think!" Evie was yelling, "I've had as much as I can take!"

"You think you're all that!" Gordon was shouting back, somewhat nasally. "You aren't *anything*. You're just *here* because you failed *there!*"

"What's going on?" Becca asked. "Why is everyone back here?"

"Evie came in to work on one of the connection linkages," Max said. "I came back to assist."

"I was doing an inventory," Franz said.

"Gordon came back here and started razzing on Evie," Max said. "*Again.*"

"I came back when Franz called the bridge," Paul explained in surprisingly measured tones. "Captain asked me to handle this for him."

It struck Becca as odd that the captain would send his son down in his stead. *Maybe he's getting him prepped for his own ship. He's so young!* She also found it unnerving whenever Paul would refer to his parents by their titles.

Gordon wiggled a bit in Franz's arms. "OK, OK, you don't have to pin me."

"I'll free a fool, but you'll just make me regret it," Franz said.

Becca was trying to keep herself upright in zero-gee. "If that's the case, then maybe—"

Gordon had already glided up to Evie, getting his face close to hers. "So, how's that, huh? You can't take a little ribbing? You're a danger, ya know? I don't know why anyone would let such a hot-head on a ship."

"Ribbing is one thing," Evie muttered. "Constant harassment is another."

"Oh, come on!" Gordon rolled his eyes. "One little joke and you start popping noses. This might never set straight."

"We can just go to the bay and—" Becca offered.

"I've got it, Beks." Gordon held out a hand. "I just want to know why wonder-star here thinks it's OK to start smashing faces when she—"

"I'm dreadfully clumsy," Evie said with a grin. "Things close to me tend to get whacked."

"It's not that bad, Chief," Max said.

Gordon started to mock-laugh. "Oh, no, I see how it is. You're the great equalizer, aren't you? You won't be happy until we'll all lop-sided, myopic, emotionally-stunted—"

Evie twisted in the air and kicked Gordon in the stomach. Becca noticed that Evie wasn't wearing any shoes.

"Enough!" Paul shouted.

Evie righted herself quickly. "He started it."

"Who swung first?" Gordon demanded, trying to catch his breath. "What crippled little freak decided to take a swing rather than talk through her issues?"

"It wasn't as much a swing as much as it was a head-butt," Max said to Becca. "She actually busted the knuckles when a wrench slipped."

Evie had perched on another container. "I'm not dealing with this. Not today. You got that? *Not today!*"

"No one's dealing with anything..." Franz held out his hands in a defensive posture.

"No fighting on the ship!" Paul shouted. "You two have been at each other this whole trip! I'm tired of hearing the captain complain about it!"

Becca grabbed Paul's sleeve. "Can you two get him out of here? Get him in the bay and I'll meet you there."

"I have to take him up anyway for a dressing down. Captain's irritated there was an altercation. And you better get Evie ready for a little 'talk' as well." He turned to Gordon. "Gorsky!" It was perfectly authoritative. "You, me, them, out, *now!*"

As Max followed the others out, he caught Becca's sleeve and flicked his head back towards Evie. "She's been distracted all day."

Becca nodded and watched the men leave, then looked up at Evie, still clinging to the container side. "Did you get that connection linkage fixed?"

"Yes," Evie snapped. "No thanks to that JACKASS who snuck up on me."

"Are you going to come down or do I have to go up there?" Becca pushed off from one wall to where Evie was perched, like a blotch, in her red jumpsuit. "I've done field medicine before. I'll patch you up right here if I have to." Becca caught herself clumsily on one of the support beams.

Evie was pulling on her shoes and muttering under her breath, some string of numbers. "*Eight three two seven nine five zero two...*"

"Measuring something?"

Evie stopped and removed her glasses to rub her eye. "Just a thing I do to calm myself down."

Becca held out a hand. "So, let me see those knuckles."

Evie presented her right hand to Becca. This didn't even warrant a local anesthetic; it was a simple matter of two butterfly sutures.

"Are you two really that bored? There's got to be a better way of dealing with things than *this*."

"I can't stand him." Evie looked away.

Becca chuckled. "I think he's jealous of you."

"How could anyone possibly be jealous of me?" Evie rubbed at her right eye. "He's good looking and—"

"I think he envies your skill," Becca explained. "How many runs have you done?"

"Fifteen," Evie said. "Seven were long haul."

Becca tucked away the suture backings in a pocket. "That's a lot. This is my fourth. I didn't think you were that old."

"I'm not. I just don't take extended breaks like everyone else does."

"So, you just go from one ship to the next." Becca nodded. "You don't take any dwell-time?"

Evie shook her head and patted the connection linkage. "I've flown with a guy like Gordon before."

Becca kicked towards the passage. "How'd that turn out?"

"He came in too fast and wrecked a port in Cancri-55. It took two weeks to fix the damage. Lucky no one got spaced."

"You think he's like that?"

"I think he's the kind to make a dumb mistake," Evie said. "He's going to forget some little detail and it's going to cost someone their life."

They floated through the passageway and grappled the ladder into a spinning section of ship.

"Max told me you've been distracted all day," Becca said.

Evie brushed off her jumpsuit. "A little. It's no big deal."

"No big deal?" Becca asked. "I understand that's why I had to patch up your hand. Again."

"Just thinking about stuff." Evie sniffled and rubbed her nose with the sleeve of her jumpsuit. "It doesn't matter anymore. That was a long time ago."

"Evie, if something is bothering you, please, let me know. I'm not asking as your doctor. I'm asking as your friend."

"I don't want to talk about it." Evie checked her watch. "I have to go. You have to report to the deck soon. Maybe later, OK?"

* * * * *

The second day on the lifeboat, Becca realized Evie's quick-bag was still on board. It was filled with data-storage stiks, some tools, what looked like a paper-journal of mechanical drawings, and—at the bottom of the bag—a tiny automation.

"Franz..." Becca handed over the mechanical mantis. "This is for you."

Franz held it gingerly. "What is it?"

"Evie was making it for you," Becca said. "To help you pick up. It's a model."

He nodded. "A tiny helper for a tiny ship."

* * * * *

A month before the Vencume pod came on board, Becca had stopped by Evie's workshop after dinner to return a data-stik she had borrowed two days prior. It had been a rather drab read and Becca was going to see if she could find something more entertaining.

Evie was sitting on the floor in a loose-fitting blue smock, tinkering with a tiny automaton. It only stood twenty centimeters high and moved in fits and spurts.

"Here's that thing back." Becca held out the stik. "What are you messing with?"

Evie picked up the mantis-shaped invention and pulled a screwdriver out of one of her many pockets. "I was thinking about how Franz has to do so much cleaning up after us, so I decided to work out a model of something that could pick up trash."

Becca lowered herself to the floor and brushed aside a curl of hair. "This is what you do with your spare time?"

"This was *easy*." Evie set the electronic device back down on its feet and watched it move. "What I really want to do is work on ship design. Everyone tells me that no one could ever fly in one, because of how fast I make them move." She grinned and scratched the strap that held her glasses in place, then poked at the mechanical mantis. "I've decided to go with a Brooksonian model on the programming for this guy, so it's only going to need about six commands. What did you think of Francis Bacon?"

Becca's head snapped a bit at the change in topic. "I wasn't sure. The language was pretty stodgy."

"You read medical texts drier than that."

"Maybe, but a pharmaceutical white-paper holds my attention more because it's something I can use."

The mechanical mantis wobbled over to Becca's foot and took a few exploratory stabs at her toe.

Evie picked the thing up again and made some adjustment to its underside. "Are you only interested in things you can use?" she asked.

"You make it sound so cold."

"I was just curious." Evie set the mantis down again. Its movements were a little smoother.

"It's not that I'm only interested in things I can use," Becca explained, "but I suppose I am a little more forgiving of the prose when the material is something that affects my life."

Evie put the screwdriver back into a pocket of her blue smock and pulled out a pinch of hex nuts. "*I confess that I have vast contemplative ends, for I have taken all knowledge to be my province.*" She scattered the nuts on the floor and the tiny automaton started to pick them up.

"How do you remember things like that?" Becca asked. "Is that your Francis Bacon?"

The engineer returned a crooked grin. "Things like white papers are a mental paste; everything is pre-digested. Writers like Bacon, on the other hand, are like fiber for your brain. It takes a bit more effort to cut it up, chew it, and digest it, but it's more rewarding in the end."

"You're wasted on this ship."

"It's work I enjoy." Evie shrugged. "I have enough time to think about things. People don't bother me all the time."

"You seem to get along with people OK."

Evie sighed. "I'm judged here on what I know and what I can do, not...how I look."

Becca knitted her eyebrows. "I think you look fine. Why would you worry about that?"

"It still matters to some." Evie rubbed at her right eye.

"Evie, you're not some horribly disfigured monster."

Evie knocked over her mechanical mantis and watched it struggle to get up. "I'm fat and I'm clumsy and I have crooked teeth and a lopsided skull that puts weird pressure on my eyes."

"You're also clever and knowledgeable and generous—"

The engineer flopped onto her back and imitated the mantis' struggle for a moment. "She has a *lovely* personality," she squealed. Evie suddenly sat bolt upright. "The arms are too short; it can't right itself." And she scooped up the mantis to fiddle with it more.

"You're distracting yourself."

One arm came off the mantis and Evie studied it. "It amuses me."

Becca pointed to the automaton. "I could never do that. You think up a thing and make it. I don't think anyone on the ship can do that except you."

Evie twirled the tiny arm in her fingers. "If it was only that easy, to take a thing apart and fix what was wrong with it. Maybe that's why I like to work with machines. I can do for them what...what no one can do for me. I wish I could do it for myself."

* * * * *

The third day on the lifeboat, Stella was speaking in low tones to her husband. "Oh, David. What are we going to do now?"

"We'll be OK." The captain held his wife's hand. "It's not the end of the world. Brian is still out there. Jason is doing well. His wife is going to have a baby soon."

Stella nodded. "Yes, I read that. Maybe Paul and Judith can book passage with one of their brothers."

"We'll be all right," the captain said. "You'll see. We still have family out there."

* * * * *

Two days before the Vencume had come on board, Evie was swimming in the wave-tank, her uneven legs thrashing behind her gracelessly.

Becca checked the timer on the side and took note on the force of the water. *That can't be right.* "According to this, that's been ten kilometers," she said. *She's been at this for hours.* "Evie, that's *well* past more than enough."

Evie didn't hear her, so Becca turned off the wave.

The engineer bumped up against the front of the tank and raised her head. "I didn't know you were here." Evie pushed up her goggles and rubbed her right eye. "You told me to get in this thing, so..."

"You've been swimming non-stop for three hours?" Becca asked.

Evie sank in the water, letting it lap against her lower lip. "I don't know."

"If you're shy...." Becca sighed and turned around. *She must have stepped out for a few minutes and forgot to turn the wave off.* There was a splashing sound behind her.

"OK," Evie said.

Becca turned back around to see Evie in a slightly wet black jumpsuit and toweling her dark hair. The goggles had pushed the bangs back and Becca could see a couple of fine scars at the hair-line.

"Where are my glasses?" Evie asked. She was trying to scan the room but could not focus much further than a half-meter.

Becca handed Evie her glasses and watch. "I'm glad to see you're taking my advice, but you have to pace yourself."

"If I have to do it, I have to do it," Evie muttered, putting on the watch.

Becca frowned. "Well, don't *over*-do it. You only have to do three kilometers a day. You can't cram exercise. You're going to hurt yourself."

"It's almost time for lunch," Evie said, ignoring Becca's warning. "Let's go see what that's going to be."

Something from the galley smelled good. "That's new," Becca noted.

Franz was grinning madly, grilling a piece of previously frozen soy-chicken in the device Evie had made for him. "I love this thing!"

"Glad it could be of some use." Evie smiled. "A happy cook is a happy ship."

"You should patent it!" Franz continued, brushing on a thick helping of some Pegger sauce.

Evie shook her head. "*Not for money or for fame, but out of the belief that we all of us have the right to live to dream as we choose—*"

"Spare me the philosophizing and pull up a chair." The squat man pointed.

"How much do you read," Becca asked, "that you can pull quotes like that?"

"Deep flights give you a lot of time to think." Evie flopped in a chair. "We're like floating monasteries."

Becca nodded. "I've been using the time to write a letter to my cousin. Do you have anyone back home?"

Evie's face darkened. "No. Not anymore."

* * * * *

The fourth day on the lifeboat, Gordon was begging Franz. "Please, please, just a little. It hurts. You've got to give me something."

"I gave you something," Franz answered.

"It hurts to swallow," Gordon whined. "You've got to give me some water."

"I'll give you water when we get picked up."

"I'll die before then. Are you guys going to eat me when you run out of stocks?"

"What a noble sacrifice." A hollow chuckle from Franz. "I hadn't considered it, but we might get desperate enough."

Becca rolled over sleepily. "Save me his right hand," she said.

Vencume

The fifth day, Judith was staring at her display and chattering excitedly. "This is the lifeboat from the freighter *Tong Dizhou*. Lifeboat from freighter *Tong Dizhou*. Eight souls on board. We are five days out. Do you copy?"

The crew was clustered around the chattering comm system. Becca rubbed the sleep out of her eyes.

Franz rummaged through hatches. "Where's that blasted translator?"

"There should be one built in." Max leaned forward and made an adjustment. The chattering was transformed into a calm woman's voice:

Human ship. Vencume recognize. Understanding. Vencume gratitude. Human help.

Stella pointed at a large object on the radar. "There she is."

"It's huge," noted Paul.

Judith was still trying to give the Vencume information. "We are five days out and supplies are low. On route to Pegasai-51. Eight souls on board and in need of pick-up."

Understanding. Vencume recognize. Human help. Vencume help.

"Found it!" Franz waved a translator. "I knew we had one on board."

"Does this mean we're saved?" Gordon asked. "Does this mean we're going to make it?"

"You're not off the hook yet," Wainwright said.

The Vencume ship suddenly appeared, dropping out of its own "borrowed time" field. It was a massive craft: at least eleven, star-shaped, rotating sections. One section was slowing down.

"That's where they'll bring us in..." Max pointed. "Once the spin has stopped."

Eventually, the section stopped spinning and a hatch door opened. Three small ships flew out.

"Are those recovery craft?" Becca asked.

Stella tapped the display. "No, they flew past us. Maybe they're making room."

"They certainly are fast," Paul said.

"Looks like they're sending out a couple of lines," Wainwright said, pointing at the two harpoon-style guns that had emerged from the hatch. "Hold on."

Two rocket-assisted electro-magnets shot towards the lifeboat. There was a *clang* and one wall of the lifeboat became down.

"They're pulling us in kinda fast," Max said.

Everything turned upside-down again.

"We're on board," said the Captain. "They're starting the spin."

The sense of gravity was slowly returned. The crew held their breaths. Then, a noise outside of the lifeboat; that meant atmosphere. Finally, a clanging sound. 2...3...5...The prime knock. Captain Wainwright opened the hatch.

Three Vencume greeted them. One wore a translator around its arm that spoke in a deep, male voice:

Much gratitude. Human ship broken. Welcome Human.

"We don't have suits," Wainwright stated.

Understanding. No infection. Lab ship. New Vencume. Understanding.

"What's a 'new' Vencume?" Judith asked.

The crew slowly exited the life-boat, legs wobbly from days in zero-gee.

"Thank you," Stella said. "You have no idea how much this means to us."

These Vencume were taller than any Becca had met before, by an extra half-meter. Standing so close to them, she could hear their bark-covered feet grip and release the floor. They clustered around the crew and ran fingers over everyone.

One Vencume leaned into the lifeboat. Its entire mass wriggled and its color shifted to a deep-violet.

Human fix ship missing. No core. Missing Human fix ship.

Captain Wainwright nodded. "Our chief engineer, yes."

Human fix ship fix Human ship.

"Maybe, I...we don't know."

The Vencume wearing the translator turned it off. The others chattered excitedly amongst themselves and the tentacles above their arms interlaced. Some consensus was reached and the lead Vencume turned the translator back on.

Understanding. Human follow. Vencume transport. Pegasai-51. Have both Human ship now. Feed Human.

One Vencume was running fingers over Gordon. The junior pilot was disgusted but too hurt and weak to push them away.

Human broken. Human fix Human.

Becca held out a hand. "I'm the ship's doctor. He's OK."

A Vencume approached and ran fingers over her. Becca had never felt actual Vencume skin before; it had always been through a suit. It wasn't an unpleasant sensation; the skin was soft, smooth, cool, and thin. There was also a smell that Becca couldn't place that reminded her of miso soup.

Human fix Human.

Becca stammered. "He's fixed enough. He..." She saw Wainwright shoot her a look. "He'll be OK."

Human fix Human. Fix arms. Human arms broken.

Max pulled out his multi-tool. "They aren't broken, we just had to...to keep him from hurting himself." As he moved in to cut the zip-ties, Becca heard him whisper, "You keep your trap shut. The Vencume might space you if they find out what you did."

Gordon nodded and rubbed his wrists.

The Vencume led them down a long tunnel, chittering the entire time. Becca thought they spun as they walked, rotating from one foot to the other. This was a much quicker way of moving than the usual five-footed shuffle.

The leader stopped and turned on its translator.

Human outside ring. Understanding. Stay Human outside ring. Understanding. Vencume inner ring.

It turned the translator off and the others resumed their clatter.

"They want to keep us separated?" Becca asked.

"The centrifugal force is greater on the exterior of the spin," Max explained. "Upper levels, closer to the center, will have a lighter pull. It's just like on the stations."

Franz handed Becca the translator he'd rescued from the lifeboat. "How do I work this?"

Becca took the translator, set the controls, and turned it on. The calm woman's voice started:

*Much damage. Uprising. *Tzikzik* control. Extension.*

The Vencume stopped and clustered around Becca. One stepped on her toes with a gnarled foot.

Human fix Human. Translator. Human translator. Human fix Human. Human device.

"Sorry," Becca said. "I was only showing...Franz...how it worked..."

Captain Wainwright took the translator and turned it off. "We are guests. Let our hosts speak in private."

The lead Vencume turned its translator back on.

No malice. Understanding. Human translator. Human fix Human no malice.

Another Vencume ran its fingers over the captain.

Understanding. Human fix Human curiosity. No malice. Understanding.

A third Vencume stopped ahead and opened a door. It was a lift with a complicated lever and they all went down what looked like two levels, based on the lights. After exiting the lift, left, then right, then another door.

Human place. Understanding. Human stay with Human. Understanding. Outside ring Human place.

This was a large room with five doors. There was a table in the center with seven chairs and to one side was counter with three displays, like coms.

Max entered first and opened one of the doors: a smaller room with two pallets. "Looks like beds," he said.

"Were they expecting us?" Judith asked.

Franz gave Gordon a shove. "You're with me."

Becca turned to the lead Vencume. "We have Human waste. Humans make waste. We need to clean."

Understanding. Human fix Human follow Vencume.

It led her across the hallway to another room of smooth plastic with nozzles on the walls. The Vencume pressed a button on the floor with one of its feet and the room was filled with spray. It turned the spray off and pointed to a hose attachment. After pressing another button, the Vencume waved a set of fingers over the opening so Becca could hear the suction.

Human fix Human. Understanding. Human waste. Human clean. Understanding.

Becca nodded and chuckled, in spite of herself. "I understand. It will work."

Acceptable. Human fix Human. Understanding.

"Yes." She found the situation so absurd she had to laugh. "It's acceptable."

Human fix Human. Understanding. Human acceptable. Vencume similar. Understanding.

"How bad is it?" Stella asked when they returned.

"It's primitive," Becca explained, "but it will work."

Another Vencume entered with what looked like zero-gee rations.

Human feed. Vencume return. Human stay Human.

The crew took seats at the table, except Franz, who loomed over Gordon.

The lead Vencume ran its hands over the captain.

Human lead Human follow Vencume. Broadcast Pegasai-51. Other broadcast. Understanding.

Wainwright stood and nodded to the crew. "I'll be back soon."

Stella handed out the rations, saving one for her husband. Franz grabbed the ration from Gordon, but Stella made him give it back. "We've tortured him enough."

The captain returned with the Vencume a few moments later. "I let Peg-51 know that we're not coming in with that shipment. The Shipping Authority's making arrangements. I also sent a burst so Jason or Brian will know what's going on."

Judith leaned over to Paul. "Maybe we'll get to see Jason and his wife."

"The squiddies are also checking to see what's left of our ship," the captain added. "This ship picked up our first lifeboat, the one we gave those four the other day. They had adjusted course to return it, so it was a little surprising that there was no freighter where where they thought we'd be. After they picked us up and found out what had happened...Well, the news may not be good, so try to come to grips with it now."

Stella nodded. "I know we're all thinking about Evelyn. She may be maintaining the wreckage of the *Tong Dizhou* but we can't be sure. We all know how resourceful she was."

"Is," Max corrected. "We all know how resourceful she *is*."

"Is, yes. Of course."

"The point is," Wainwright changed the subject, "the last leg of this trip is going to be a little unusual. Humans haven't berthed on a squiddie ship before, so this is a rare honor for all of us. We've been given free rein, so we're welcome to wander a bit as long as we stay on the outer three rings of this section. Do not abuse this."

Stella nodded. "It may be best if we clean up and get some rest for now."

Rooms were assigned: Captain Wainwright and Stella in one room, Max and Judith in another. Both Paul and Becca had their own rooms and Franz shared the last one with Gordon. The crew cleaned as best they could and prepared for some sleep.

As Becca undressed for bed, neatly folding her five-day stinking clothes, she noticed she was still wearing Evie's watch. She knelt on the floor and watched the ancient-style second-hand sweep across the dial.

I'll never see her again. I don't even know how to take care of this thing. She held it to her ear and listened to it tick. *This is nothing but time.* Becca put her hand on her chest, feeling her own heartbeat. *The battery will run out. It will stop. Why couldn't she get a quiet watch?* The long hand pointed to an II and the short hand to a V. *Why couldn't she get a watch that just tells you the time?*

Becca hurriedly re-dressed and stumbled across the hall, stamping the button that would activate the shower. She stood in the steamy spray, knowing the noise and the tears would be washed away.

It was hard to sleep. It was abnormally quiet on the Vencume ship. The watch kept ticking. Becca's clothes itched. When she finally did drift off, strange dreams woke her. She finally got up and went into the main room.

Max was fiddling with one of the displays.

"You can't sleep either." Becca sighed.

He grinned in the half-light. "I have a puzzle to keep me occupied."

She sat next to him.

"It's a primitive keyboard." He poked at the display buttons. "But, there's no markings on it, just these raised bumps." The display screen itself was a matrix of tiny metal balls and the texture changed as Max pressed buttons.

"Like Braille." Becca ran her hand over the display screen. "Do you think the Vencume can see?"

"They must. There are lights on the ship."

She nodded. "Maybe they can't see that well. I can never make out any eyes."

Max continued to poke buttons. "This is a system, like any other. There has to be a pattern to it. I only have to figure it out."

"Find out how long the rest of the trip will take."

"Oh, we'll be there two days after schedule."

Becca stared. "How can you be so sure?"

The junior engineer smiled. "Follow me."

Down the corridor from their quarters was an observation deck of sorts. An actual window, maybe a half-meter tall, ran half the length of the room. As the section they were in did its lazy spin, other sections rotated at the same rate.

"Over there." Max pointed to a green nebula and a faint red spiral. "Those two will get closer as we approach Peg-51. Back home, they're on opposite sides of the sky."

Becca watched through the short window as the two bodies dipped under the horizon of the ship. "Did Evie teach you that?"

"No." He looked at his feet. "Judith."

They watched the spinning sections for a while. One section rotated so quickly, it was little more than a blur, and Becca wondered what a Vencume ship would do with such high gravity. The others looked like the rolling clouds of an impending thunder-storm.

"I miss rain," Becca said.

Max laughed. "So do I. Sometimes, I tune in static. It sounds the same."

They laughed half-heartedly at the mutual confession.

Becca sighed. "How did we get here?"

Max leaned against the glass, breathed, and doodled the start of some schematic in the condensation. "Because we had to. Chief used to talk about it. 'We're looking for a back-door to the garden of Eden.' I think she might have been religious."

"She had me reading Francis Bacon," Becca said.

"*God forbid that we should give out a dream of our imagination for a pattern of the world,*" Max quoted.

"Do all engineers do that?" she asked. "Memorize obscure and ancient quotes?"

"No." He breathed against the glass again, erasing away whatever he had drawn. "Just the good ones."

Human Fix Human

Becca woke up to the sound of a muffled struggle from the next room.

Paul was already next door, helping Franz subdue Gordon. Gordon had a bloody mouth and Franz's ear was bleeding; he'd been bitten.

"We have to get out of here!" Gordon was shrieking. "They're going to eat us!"

"No one's going to eat you, you squirrely bastard," Franz growled.

Paul rushed to Becca's side and took her arm. "Please tell me you have sedatives in your quick-bag."

"Enough to put us all to sleep forever."

He wrinkled his forehead. "Morbid." Then he grinned. "Pragmatic...But a bit more than we need."

"It's regulation—" she started, but realized all the quick-bags were still on the lifeboat. She ran from the room and bumped into the captain.

"Where are you going in such a rush?"

"Our quick-bags are still on the lifeboat." Becca snatched the translator off the table. "I'm running down to the bay to get some sedatives."

She turned right, no, left, down the hall and sprinted down the featureless corridor. *He would freak out. Never should have been brought on board. Cracked under pressure. Can't deal with guilt.*

Then, the lift and its complicated lever: up two levels, or was it three? Each level looked the same. Down a hallway. Right?

She was lost. *How embarrassing.* It was best to just go back to the others at this point. Back to the lift. Down three levels. Was this right? Down a hallway and left...

No, not this floor. How far was the room from the lift? Up one level. Then right?

This floor looked right. There was a room with an open door down the hall, so that must have been it. *The Vencume must have come and helped.*

No. Not this room. Curiosity got the better of her. This room had what looked like an operating table, but wide and short. The lips curled up and there were slots along the sides. The floors curved up to form a smooth surface with the walls. *Easier to clean up.*

Another room. There were empty core containers here. Becca looked in one and thought about the thick, insulated walls. There were cylindrical tanks here filled with a dark liquid.

Another room. Mostly empty except for thick columns throughout.

In the last room, another tank: roughly two meters long and a meter tall. Tubes and wires fed into it, surrounded by pumps and other devices.

Before Becca could get any closer, a door opened and two Vencume came spinning into the room, with a third shuffling slowly behind. Becca hid behind a column and quickly turned off the translator, hoping for the camouflage of silence.

Unable to see anything, she had to deduce events from the sounds she heard:

Excited Vencume chittering. A splash, something being taken out of the tank or put into it. Some metal device clattering. A monitor beeping at an increasing rate. More chittering. A splash, and then what sounded like thrashing.

And a *cry*, near-Human. Becca jumped. It was a tongueless sound: a hollow moan that ended with a gurgle. There was additional clicking, but it sounded like it was machine-made, like a translator. The thrashing stopped and more metal clatter.

The moan started again. It sounded like a baby—an incomprehensible wail of pain and fear. Some kind of squishing sound...no, Becca had heard that sound before: once, during a surgery she had assisted on. The thing in pain would moan and mechanical chittering would start new.

It went on like this for an eternity. Metal on metal, near-Human groan, mechanical chitter, Vencume chitter, splashing, monitor beeping.

Finally, the Vencume left. The room was silent, save for the monitor's beep.

Becca peered around the column. There was only the tank, its surface still settling. It was full of some dark liquid, so she couldn't see the contents.

She approached it carefully. "Heh-hello?"

A device at the head of the tank flickered to life and produced a mechanical chittering. Becca turned on her translator, which mangled the inorganic message with the only vocabulary it had.

Human fix Human\Vencume\selfcollective not allowed imperative no one planet\potato\orb not here.

"My name is Doctor Rebecca Tabib of the freighter *Tong Dizhou*. Our ship was destroyed and the Vencume picked up our lifeboat. What were they doing to you?"

Find\tell\discover\welcome not safe unpleasant\cold\dry\unsatisfactory.

"Are you in any pain? There are eight of us. If you need our help, we might be able to do something for you. We're going to Peg-51. There's eight of us. We might be able to--"

Pegasai-51 constrained\limit\blocked not here departure time\soon\now.

Becca stared at the inky surface of the tank. If she put her hands in it, what would she feel? There was something in there, but something in pain. She rolled up a sleeve and started to dip her hand into the liquid. It was thick...slimy.

Carrots\beets\radish not allowed uncover repair device.

Her hand was going numb and Becca pulled her hand out quickly. The liquid was viscous enough to roll off in salty-sweet smelling drops.

Human fix Human.

Becca swung around to see a Vencume behind her. It set down a covered tray and approached her quickly, long digits wiggling.

No Human here. Understanding. Stay with other Human. Understanding. Not safe. Understanding.

"What's in there?" Becca asked. "What are you doing to it?"

Other Human. Human fix ship. Recovered pod. Vencume fix Human.

"That's Evie? You found Evie?"

Human fix ship. Understanding. Vencume fix. Not safe. Understanding. Stay with other Human.

"No no no," Becca protested. "If that's Evie I have to stay here. I'm a doctor. I fix Humans, OK? I have to stay here and fix her, I have to see how you're trying to fix her, OK?"

Great damage. Not safe. Understanding. Stay with other Human. No Human here.

A second Vencume had spun into the room and the two tried to push Becca to the door.

She shoved past them and ran to the tank. "You want me to stay, don't you, Evie? You need me to stay."

Departure required\needed\requested observation silenced\covered\missing.

The door opened and a third Vencume entered, accompanied by Captain Wainwright.

"Doctor Tabib!" the captain shouted. "Get away from that. Come here right now!"

"But, Captain..."

"I know what you're thinking and it doesn't matter. There's nothing you can do for her right now, so come here and leave her alone. She has to rest. Now, come on."

Becca stared wildly around the room. The Vencume. The captain. The tank. The Vencume. The door.

Captain Wainwright held out a hand. "Rebecca," he said softly. "Come with me. I'll explain it all to you."

"Those three recovery craft the squiddies...Vencume...sent to find what was left of the *Tong Dizhou*..." Captain Wainwright explained, "only found a trail of debris, but it looks like the Tzikzik had left behind the Vencume pod we had picked up. The Vencume could retrieve their own property, at least. They towed it back and found Evie inside. She was in pretty bad shape; how bad, they won't say. But, because we had helped out those other four, they agreed to help as best they could. All in the spirit of inter-species good-will, right?"

They were walking back to the lift and Captain Wainwright sighed. "I guess the Vencume felt responsible for her predicament, seeing as how we had given up a lifeboat for them, so they decided to alter some of their stem-tech and see if they could 'fix a Human'. I don't know what's left in that tank and I don't know what we'll be facing when it comes out, so I'm asking you to be quiet about this. There isn't anything you can do for her at this point; the Vencume decided this for us. If it fails, well...I don't want the others to get their hopes up."

"So, this is an experiment for them?" Becca asked.

"This ship we're on is a floating laboratory." Wainwright gestured around him. "Turns out, the Vencume have hundreds of them throughout their empire. It's part of why they're able to accommodate us. You may have noticed that no one has insisted on bio-suits for us. They're probably exposing themselves to infection so they can work out what anti-bodies or whatever is needed. I imagine once all of this is over, we'll never have to use suits with the Vencume again."

Becca nodded. "They're preparing to use us as allies in their war against the Tzikzik."

"That may be true," Wainwright agreed. "And it may be justified. The Tzikzik have already shown some pretty strong aggression against us."

"I can't just leave her in there alone!" Becca dabbed at her eyes. "It's obvious she's in pain. If only I could explain to them how Humans work. They have to know how to stop the pain."

Human fix Human, Becca's translator intoned. A lone Vencume was waiting and ran long fingers over her.

Human fix Human. Understanding. Human fix Human follow Vencume.

Wainwright nodded. "Go with them. It should be OK."

The Vencume led Becca down the corridor to a darkened room with a model of a human skeleton in the center; multiple Vencume clustered around, running their fingers over it. A clattering sound, and the model changed into a circulatory system. Another clatter, and the form shifted to a nervous system.

Human fix Human understanding Human.

Becca stared in wonder at the model. It looked like a basic anatomy; nothing distinguished its gender. As she got closer, she could see the model was made up of many, tiny, metal balls—like the display screen that Max had been playing with.

Human fix Human answer Vencume questions. Human fix Human fix Human fix ship.

"Yes..." Becca watched the layers peel and restore. "I'll tell you how to fix her right."

The model shifted again.

Human fix Human understanding structure. Human fix Human understanding broken structure.

The pelvis on the skeleton changed from normal to twisted, to normal again.

Helix for one shape. Vencume find broken shape. Human fix Human understand shape.

"Her pelvis." Becca understood. "There was an accident. It was broken and didn't heal correctly."

Vencume fix shape. Match helix.

Now, the skull on the model flickered.

Broken shape. Helix shape. Human fix Human understand broken shape.

"The same accident." Becca watched the skull making its adjustments.

The skull peeled away to show the brain and eyes. The two orbs elongated and contracted.

Broken shape break sensor. Helix shape fix sensor. Vencume device fix.

The skull returned and the jaw flickered. Teeth misaligned and straightened.

Helix create extra shape. No evidence shape.

"Wisdom teeth. They were probably removed."

Common remove shape. Vencume misunderstanding. Extra shape from helix Human remove.

Becca nodded. "It's quite common to remove wisdom teeth."

The model showed the digestive system. The Vencume ran a hand over the appendix.

Misunderstanding helix shape. Vencume find missing shape. Helix creates shape.

"The appendix," Becca explained. "It's like the wisdom teeth: a leftover from our evolution. She probably had it removed as well."

Human fix Human fix helix.

"Yes, a doctor would have removed it with surgery. It was probably infected and had to be removed."

Helix create shape for infection. Misunderstanding. Human fix Human explain missing shape.

"We can live without them, so it's not vital. Some animals don't have them at all."

Human fix Human not fix helix. Misunderstanding. Helix broken.

"It's not broken, we just still have them."

Vencume fix helix.

And it went on like that for several hours. Becca was reminded of all the questions Evie had asked her in the sick-bay. Why did the knees work that way? What were toenails for? Why is the lower back submitted to so much pressure? Why did bellybuttons scar the way they did? Why do Humans have so many filtration and excretion systems? How do Humans eat and breathe through the same tube?

When Becca finally crawled to her pallet to sleep, she couldn't help but think it was a wonder the human body worked at all.

* * * * *

Becca was rubbing the sleep out of her eyes when a Vencume entered the room with a plastic box. It handed out clothes to the crew.

Vencume make new skin for Human. Understanding. Human clean. Human put on new skin.

"What's it talking about?" asked Max.

"He's saying we stink," said Franz, "and need to put on clean clothes." He held out one of the new articles: loose fitting shirts, practically smocks. The pants were long with drawstring waists. There were no shoes.

Vencume take old skin. Vencume clean old skin. Understanding. Return.

"So, we get our old digs back." Max pulled off a shirt.

The Vencume waited to collect each crew member's crusted clothes and became agitated when the crew insisted on washing one at a time. The humans made allowances and went two at a time instead: the captain and his wife, Max and Judith, Franz and Gordon, then Paul, then Becca.

Becca let the others go first and got a little extra sleep. There was no soap, but the water was under pressure and served as a massage and shower.

After everyone was changed, a Vencume came and the captain left with it. When the captain came back, he was all smiles. "Judith, Paul, you have a four-kilo nephew."

Judith's eyes lit up. "She had the baby!"

The family hugged.

Captain Wainwright patted his children on the back. "Jason said his name is Stephen. There's another Wainwright in the universe!"

Paul smiled. "I can't wait to show him how to bring in a 200-tonne freighter."

"Or how to calculate the distance between systems," Judith added.

Stella kissed her husband. "Congratulations, grandfather."

Captain Wainwright hugged his wife. "You too, *grandmother*." He turned to the crew. "The passenger ship Jason captains, the *Jiang Gong*, will be making a return trip fourteen days after we hit Peg-51. Becca, Franz, you're more than welcome to berth with us."

"I'd never take advantage of a new grandfather!" Franz laughed.

"Do they need a doctor?" Becca asked.

"They just had a baby!" Stella beamed.

* * * * *

A Vencume had brought back the crew's clothes, but now they were clean.

"They brought our quick-bags, too." Max was giggling as he went through his. "Now, I have pen and paper."

"Good." Wainwright checked his bag. "Keep at that display. Let me know if you've made any progress."

Judith rummaged through her bag. "Everyone brought stiks, but no one brought a comm."

"There's one on the lifeboat," Stella said. "We can use that."

"Who wants an apple?" Franz grinned.

Judith frowned. "You hid those from us the whole time..."

"They were a last meal." Franz handed them out, even to Gordon. "I knew they'd keep. Now, they're a celebratory meal." He handed Becca an extra apple and winked. "Just in case."

Evie

Three days passed. The crew spent the time going over their data-storage stiks on the comm in the lifeboat. They were taking turns and started to sleep in shifts again.

One morning (or late evening, according to Evie's watch), a Vencume entered, chittering excitedly. It ran long fingers over Becca, tentacles vibrating. The creature's translator spoke in smooth baritone:

Human fix Human invaluable. Human fix Human answer Vencume questions. Vencume understanding. Vencume has helix. Fix Human fix ship. Understanding. Vencume fix Human fix ship. Human fix ship fixed. Understanding. Human see Human fix ship.

The door opened and a figure came in, its head obscured by a mask...? *Goggles?*, but with multiple small lenses, moving independently. Its hair was short and white; dressed in a white, clinical pajama, it sat cross-legged on top of a...*a walker?* with legs wrapped around a control that rose from the seat of the device. The walker looked like a chair with a high-back, but a section of it dropped below, like a rest. *Like a jack with no arms*, Becca thought. But there were arms—four jointed legs that started under the seat of the device with knees that stopped at the figure's shoulder-level.

It moved without any noise besides a slight hiss and the bulk of the thing filled the room. It looked almost like...

"Evie!" Becca shouted. *That's* what it looked like: the tiny mechanical mantis Evie had been working on all that time ago.

Lenses on the goggles swiveled rapidly to focus on Becca; the head slowly turned.

"We thought you were dead," Gordon said with relief.

"No," Evie said stiffly. "Not dead."

Max approached her. "What's with the get-up, Chief? This a squiddie wheelchair?"

"Something like that, yes."

"Why are you wearing that...?" Becca didn't know what to call the set of lenses that wrapped around the upper half of Evie's face.

Evie brushed her fingers across the array. "The pressure this puts on my head will re-shape the skull. I might not need glasses once this is over."

"But, that's fantastic!" Judith exclaimed. "Why couldn't anyone do that for you before?"

"Because, I'm still half-blind wearing it," Evie explained. "My eyes are actually shut underneath this mess. I have to rely on..." She twisted and pointed to the back of her head, lightly touching a bulky mass at the back of the mask that wrapped behind the skull. "...These inputs, back here. A direct brain-and-machine interface. I can see, but, it's...imperfect. I'm not sure how they figured it out."

Franz examined the walker. "They have you sitting cross-legged? Isn't that uncomfortable?"

"It's actually better for my hips," Evie said. "They, it...it has to set again. It should set right this time."

"You won't limp anymore," Becca said.

"I might still limp. I've been limping my whole life. I have to learn how to walk again."

"I am so happy to see you again." Stella came up to Evie and gave her a complicated hug. "This is so wonderful."

Paul pointed at Evie's head. "Why is your hair white?"

"Trauma," Becca interrupted.

"Yes," Evie answered with a slow, single nod. Her movements were jerky. "It might grow in normal later. The Vencume shaved the back for these." She tapped the goggles.

"You have to tell us everything," Judith said.

"You have to tell us about that wheelchair! It's incredible," Max added.

"What happened to the ship? Was it in one piece when you left it?"

"What did the Tzikzik look like? Did you see any?"

"Did they take the ship or blow it up? I heard there was some debris..."

Evie looked from speaker to speaker, the lenses on the goggles constantly adjusting. "I'm not used to this attention." She shook her head. "It's very...it's too much." She covered the lenses with her hands. "I can't stop seeing."

The Vencume ran its fingers over Evie.

Understanding. Vencume device weaken Human fix ship. Understanding.

There was moment of silence, which Gordon broke awkwardly. "I have to apologize to you." He glanced at the others and looked for approval from Captain Wainwright. "It was my fault you were left on the ship, I panicked and--"

The entire mass of the walker shifted forward as Evie barreled towards Gordon. She caught him midsection with the lip of the walker and trapped him against a wall, the front legs of the device pinning his arms to his sides.

"Gaines!" Captain Wainwright shouted.

"I've had a lot of time to *think*," she hissed, ignoring her captain. The walker's front legs raised centimeters at a time, lifting Gordon off the ground in minute increments. "I can't tell you how much *thinking* I've been doing."

"I'm sorry! God, I'm sorry!" Gordon cried. "I panicked! Anyone would have done it in that situation!"

"Gaines!" Captain Wainwright tried again. "Put him down!"

"Not *anyone*," Evie growled at Gordon. "You. *You* did that."

The Vencume was agitated. It wiggled long fingers.

Human fix ship not break Human.

The back legs on the walker were slowly straightening. Evie was putting more pressure on Gordon.

Max was holding Judith. "Chief, hey, listen—"

Gordon bleated. "Puh-puh-please!"

"Oh, Evelyn, please," Stella begged.

Evie leaned forward in the walker, her face getting closer to Gordon's. "Have I told you about the almost *complete* understanding I have of how a human fits together?"

And she let one of the front legs on the walker bend, only a little, and snapped just *one* of Gordon's ribs.

The Vencume chittered and twitched.

Human fix ship break Human. Human fix ship not stay with Human.

"Evie," Captain Wainwright said, raising his hands. "Killing him won't change anything. He wasn't going to be on any return flight; we've already decided that. Put him down."

"I don't limp in this thing, *pretty* boy," Evie growled at Gordon.

"Evelyn Augustus Gaines!" Stella yelled. "What are you thinking? You put him down *right now*!"

Evie gasped and covered her mouth. She hugged herself tightly and covered the lenses with her hands. The walker pulled back, dropping its prey in a pained heap.

The Vencume spun over to Gordon and ran long fingers over him.

Human fix Human fix broken Human.

Becca ran over to Gordon. He held his side and moaned.

"Chief?" Max held out a hand to Evie. "Are you...?"

The Vencume had shifted a deep purple and the skin changed texture to a scaly mottle. Its five arms hugged close to its body and the twisted masses of fingers tightened into balls.

Human fix ship break Human.

"Please, forgive me..." Evie stiffened in the walker and she rose nearly to the ceiling. The legs lowered again, putting her back at eye level with the others. "I'm sorry," she muttered. "I'm so sorry. I'm jumpy. My head hurts. I didn't mean to do that."

"It seemed pretty deliberate," Captain Wainwright stated.

"You've had a rough time," Stella said. "You need some rest."

"I'm sorry." Evie was backing out of the room. "It...it won't happen again."

"Do you want to lie down?" Becca asked. "We have room. Paul and I can double up."

"No, no..." Evie was shaking her head. "I have...a room, upstairs. I can't be here...with you."

"One of the upper levels," Max guessed. "Where you won't weigh as much."

Evie shuffled the walker out into the corridor.

The Vencume turned to follow but Becca stopped it. "I'm her doctor," she said. "Please, let me know if you need anything."

The Vencume ran fingers over her.

Understanding. Human fix Human.

* * * * *

It was later that day when a Vencume came for Becca. It led her to a lift at the end of the corridor and they went up three levels.

Evie was out of the walker, wobbling between a set of parallel bars. "Just like old times," she said. "Except these bars are too short to really get much work done."

"You're doing wonderfully," Becca said, holding up a Granny-Smith. "Franz had packed some apples in his quick-bag as a last meal. He sends one up and wishes you good luck."

"Tell him, 'thanks'." Evie smiled. "Put it on the chair. I need a goal."

Becca noticed that Evie was taking light steps. "You're not working the muscles. Try to put more weight on your feet and not your hands."

"It's not the muscles as much as it is me learning how to use them."

"You've lost weight," Becca observed. "How long were you on the—"

"As long as you," Evie said.

Becca nodded. "I was just thinking about how much weight you'd lost. And the hair, of course. You just look like you have more than five days of growth, so—"

"Becca?" Evie asked between uneasy steps. "Is that translator on?"

"You haven't heard it chittering?"

"Turn it off," Evie said.

Becca deactivated the device.

The Vencume chittered and spun out of the room. Evie watched it leave. "How much do you think it costs to put me back into one piece?"

Becca looked at the door. "Why do you ask?"

"I ask..." Evie was going for another round on the parallel bars. "Because I know it can't be cheap. I know how much it cost my folks the first time around. I'm just hoping you're OK with what I paid for it."

Becca watched Evie wobble and falter. "What do you mean by that?"

Evie caught herself on the bars. "What did you guys do to Gordon?"

Becca frowned at the change in subject. "Max...might have hit him a couple times. I guess it was that obvious?"

"He moves differently," Evie said between pained-looking steps. "In the heat of an evacuation, someone would have looked for a release. And then, considering—"

"We were out five days."

"Only five days?" Evie's breathing was a little labored. "Wow. Tell me you at least fed him."

Becca dodged the question. "Franz has taken charge of him."

"You're going to break him," Evie said. "That guy is messed up. I feel bad enough about that rib I cracked, but you guys really worked him over." She huffed to the end of the bars and did another turn. "Where's that Vencume?"

Becca opened the door and looked down the corridor. "It left. Should I turn the translator back on?"

"Might as well." Evie stumbled back into her walker and collapsed against it. She sighed and quoted something. "*Oh, I'm wearied wi' walking, and fain wad lie doon.*"

"Are you sleeping OK?"

"It's these things." Evie tapped the goggles. "All this pressure on my head. Plus, I can't turn them off. Makes it hard to sleep. If there's any movement in the room, I see it. It wakes me up so I can't get more than a few minutes at a time."

Becca looked at the device. "There must be a switch or something. Maybe you can't feel it."

"Maybe," Evie said, leaning forward. "I just want it to be dark for thirty minutes, you know? I want to give my brain a rest. This is making me crazy."

Becca ran her hands over the goggles. "I can't find anything." Evie's head was covered in tiny scars.

"There's a pin here..." Evie pinched the head. "I think that takes them off, but it might not kill the connection."

Becca shook her head. "No, that would be too much. You'd be getting stimuli from two sources."

Evie straightened out and brought the walker to life. It raised to near the ceiling before settling at eye-level. "What time is it?" she asked.

"Oh!" Becca fumbled with the watch on her wrist. "I almost forgot. I still have your watch."

"So I saw." Evie smiled. "When you were looking at my head cast. It picks up motion in a weird way, so that second hand really stood out."

"Head cast?"

"Well, it's setting bone." She took the watch from Becca and tried to put it on. Her head wobbled. "I can't get a fix on it."

"Let me." Becca took the watch and fastened it to her friend's wrist.

"You put it on upside down," Evie said. "I'm not that blind."

"Just too blind to work a buckle."

"I can't see the holes."

Becca undid the watch from Evie's left wrist and started to refasten it. "I don't even remember why I had it."

"I left it in your bay when—" Evie snapped her hand back. She crossed her arms across her torso, tucking her hands into her armpits. "I have to go."

"Are you OK?" It was sudden and Becca furrowed a brow. "Do you need help?"

Evie shook her head and the walker turned to the door. "No, I'll be fine. I have to do something. Sorry."

The door opened and Evie almost knocked over a Vencume that was coming in.

Human fix Human fix Human fix ship.

"No, I didn't fix her. There's a broken part there."

Misunderstanding. Vencume fix Human fix ship.

"No." Becca shook her head. "There's a part in there you can't fix. I have to."

* * * * *

Max looked up from the display. "How's the chief?"

"Tired," Becca said. "She's having trouble with that goggle get-up."

Franz handed Becca a ration. "But she *is* doing OK? I know you guys are friends and all."

Becca nodded. "She's going to be OK. The Vencume goggles are putting a lot of pressure on her head. They also said they'd see about turning them off. Turns out, Vencume don't sleep. They thought eyelids were only for cleaning the eye."

"You spent a good amount of time with them the other night," Wainwright stated.

"They have some sort of machine, like the display screens." Becca gestured. "They kept talking about the 'helix', so I think they have some way of looking at DNA. They didn't understand why Evie's hips looked one way when the DNA said it should look another."

"The accident," Stella whispered.

"What was the accident?" Max asked. "Chief never told me."

Becca laughed slightly. "She fell off a roof as a child. She'd built a crude spaceship out of cardboard boxes and kitchen chairs."

* * * * *

A Vencume came to Becca the next day, visibly upset. Its skin was a mottled purple and it had twisted each of its five hands into tight balls.

First Human broken. Human fix Human not explain. Human fix ship not honest.

"What's wrong with Evie?" She was suddenly gripped by fear. "What happened?"

Human bleed. Human bleed not normal. Human fix ship say normal. Human fix ship not honest.

Becca tried to figure out what the Vencume was talking about. *Evie is bleeding but she says it's normal. What kind of bleeding is normal?* "It's her period," Becca explained. *It was never an issue before, but her entire pelvis has changed. That's why she left in such a hurry.* "Yes, that's normal. It will end soon. It happens roughly every twenty-eight days."

Human helix broken. Bad design. Human fix Human explain.

Becca calmly explained how the human reproduction system worked and what was happening. She also stated it could be suppressed using hormones, as she did.

The Vencume calmed down once it understood how to stop the process, its skin shifting from the mottled purple back to a smooth blue. It uncurled its hands and ran long digits over Becca.

Human fix Human honest. Human fix ship honest. First Human not broken. Helix broken.

* * * * *

When Becca saw Evie again, she found her on the observation deck, staring out at the rolling sections of ship.

"It looks like the ocean," the engineer said.

Becca leaned against the glass. "I thought it looked like thunderclouds."

"If you listen closely, you can hear it." Evie craned her neck. "Or it's the scrubbers. It even smells like the sea-side here. You know? That seaweed smell."

"Yeah," Becca agreed. "Are you doing better? Are you still having...?"

Evie nodded. "It was a...stomach thing. I won't bore you with the unnecessary details. The food here is weird."

"We're adjusting," Becca said. "You're still working on your bars?"

"I hope to be out of this thing soon." Evie rubbed her head. "My right eye itches."

"Try not to think about it."

Evie made a fist. Becca noticed her sleeves were a little longer; only the tips of her fingers peeked out.

"It's like wearing a pressure suit," Evie said finally. "You have something you want to scratch or press only...you can't. For whatever reason."

"What's the longest you've spent in one?"

"A long time." Evie sighed. "This last trip was...it's rough."

"But you made it to the Vencume pod OK. You lost so much weight, so it must have been more than a week for you. How long were you in there?" Becca asked.

They were interrupted as Stella and Judith came onto the deck.

Judith smiled broadly at Evie. "It's good to see you again."

Evie tapped the goggles. "Good to kinda see you."

"Having a moment?" Stella asked.

"We were talking about the ocean," Becca explained.

"Oh." Judith shrugged. "I've never seen it."

"There's more than one ocean." Stella looked out under the roll of the ship and placed a hand on the glass, leaning against it. "We'll have to send you back home for a while. So you can see why we do what we do."

The four women looked at the stars.

"Just when we think we have pretty good grasp of what's going on," Becca said, "someone like the Vencume come along and point out how ignorant we are."

Stella quoted, "*Humanity is now ready for the truth. Slowly, but surely, he approaches his end, which is perfect knowledge and absolute dominion of the universe.*"

"Not you too," moaned Becca.

Evie smiled. "Verne! Ah, 'The Eternal Adam'. And, as Bradbury noted in his commentaries, 'if we reach the stars, one day we shall be immortal!'"

Stella gave Judith a hug. "Deep space flights give a person time to think. But we'll grow up, in time. We're just children in heaven right now."

Becca pointed. "Look."

Stella had left a hand-print on the glass. It arched across the stars.

Judith sighed. "How poignant."

"No," Becca said, pointing again. "Look!"

There were five glittering points moving towards the ship. They darted and weaved between each other.

"Oh!" Judith exclaimed. "The guys have to see this!" She ran off the deck and soon brought the others in tow.

Max squinted. "What are we looking at, ladies?"

"There!" Paul pointed at a glittering cluster of quickly moving objects, keeping close formation.

"They're coming closer," Franz said.

"What is that?" Gordon asked.

It was like five points of an invisible star. They contracted to a single point, fanned out in a spiral, then formed the star once more.

Max cupped his hands against the glass. "Is it just one thing that changes shape?"

Paul rubbed his eyes and squinted. "I think it's five things, not just one."

"I still say it, or *they*, is getting closer..." added Franz.

It was a *they*, and *they* were five ships. They were larger than lifeboats, but the design couldn't hold a large crew: the rear assembly was occupied by an over-developed thrust array.

"That's not a Vencume design." Wainwright was rubbing his chin furiously. "It looks like our design, but not. It's almost Vencume, but it's almost us."

Becca backed away from the window. "It's not...Tzikzik, is it?"

"Not what you're thinking," Evie said sternly.

Captain Wainwright was peering under his cupped hands against the glass. "Tzikzik looked a lot like—"

Two Vencume spun onto the observation deck. Becca's translator droned, female calm:

New design. Blue design. Good fast. Much turn strong.

Becca turned her attention back to the ships outside. They were much closer now and one would break off from the formation, circle its compatriots, and return to formation. The tiny ships took turns doing this.

The Vencume were chittering to Evie. She leaned towards one, smiling.

Much fast. Much turn strong. Good fast. Good blue design. Good yellow pilot.

Outside, the ships were going through other patterns now. Their formation turned, expanded, and contracted again.

Evie started to laugh. "They're *playing!*"

Becca's translator chittered.

Now that they were close enough, the crew could make out the golden color of the ships. The five craft fanned out and started to skim the surface of the massive Vencume ship. One would break and roll over the others; they adjusted their order in this way.

"Can you hear them singing?" Evie laughed again. "This is absolute *child's play* for them!"

The Vencume seemed excited by the entire affair. They clustered around Evie and ran long fingers over her.

Blue design much good. Much turn strong. Yellow design useful. Much fast.

"They're going to hit us!" Judith threw her arms in front of her face just as the five ships skimmed past the glass, meters from impact.

Evie burst into uncontrollable laughter. Part of Becca was happy to hear her friend laugh again; a greater part was terrified.

"So!" Evie finally exclaimed, with a triumphant grin. She leaned into a Vencume, whispering...

She was chittering. *Evie was chittering.*

Becca tried to get closer, hoping the translator might pick it up, but the group decided to leave: a grinning, white Evie and her shuffling, chittering retinue.

Gordon whimpered, "I think you lost control of one of your crew members."

The captain glared back at him with disgust.

"They *were* fast," Franz stated and slumped to the floor. "Can you imagine the gees involved in maneuvers like that?"

"And so precise," Paul added.

Wainwright was chewing his bottom lip. "Those aren't Tzikzik; I'll say that now."

"You said Tzikzik were like...?" Max let the question hang.

"Tzikzik look a lot like Vencume," the captain said. "The ship that attacked us looked like a Vencume ship."

"You think it's a faction?" Stella asked. "Are we looking at a Vencume civil war?"

Wainwright pointed at Becca. "You two are friends. What's she playing at?"

Becca started at her feet. *What was it that had made Evie leave so suddenly the other day? Why had she been so upset when I mentioned the stitches....?*

The thought grabbed at her chest. It was too horrific. No, the evidence was there.

"I..." Becca started. Then stopped. *There must be a better explanation. But then, why the longer sleeves? But the scars on her head...That can't be what happened... but...they had her quick-bag. Those ships...Who knows what was on those data-stiks? And those drawings!*

"What?" Wainwright barked.

"I'm not even sure that *is* Evie, to be honest," Becca said. "I think the Vencume may have...cored what was left."

Judith was wringing her hands. "How do you mean?"

Becca explained: "We know that the Vencume core their dead; we've all seen the units. I think they take out what equates to a brain and grow a new body for it."

"Aw, no," Max objected. "So her hair is white. Just because we can't see the chief's face doesn't mean—"

"None of us have," Stella said. "We don't know what's under those goggles."

"And..." Becca stopped and stared at her hands. She traced a finger across the tiny star-shaped scar on her right palm, where her identity chip had been implanted by the Shipping Authority. *My entire history is encoded on that tiny piece of silicon. Everyone on a ship has one.* "And..." she tried to start the thought again.

"And?" Wainwright demanded.

"And I've seen her hands."

Wainwright took a conspiratorial air. "What about her hands?"

"She has no scars," said Becca. "The Evie we're dealing with now has no scars on her hands."

Children

Becca ran down the corridor, hoping to find Evie again. Into the lift, up two levels, right, then left, then...

I did it again. I'm lost.

Right, then left, then back to the lift. *Was it two levels or three?* She must have made a mistake going up, so if she went back down again, it should be OK. *It's these controls. This is too confusing.*

Off the lift again, and Becca looked down the hallway. *They all look the same. There's no markings. Well, no markings humans can see. I'll bet the Vencume can see giant red and yellow arrows. THIS WAY TO MESS HALL or THIS WAY TO OBSERVATION DECK.* Becca laughed nervously. *THIS WAY TO CLONE OF DEAD FRIEND.*

She turned the corner and nearly ran into three girls.

The girls were human, yes, maybe ten years old, but already going into gangly adolescence. They couldn't have been over twelve, but had soft gray hair, *like a Russian Blue cat*, thought Becca. Their heads were large and their skin was pale, translucent--near gray. The girls stood and stared with small orange eyes, blinking like birds.

The quartet stood in silence, sizing each other up.

One of the girls, with a wild mop of hair, spoke first. "You're Rebecca Tabib." She smiled. "You're Doctor *Doctor*. That's what *Tabib* means. You fix hands."

A second girl, with her hair neatly tied back, held out her hands. "Our hands are good, Doctor-Doctor. We don't need fixing."

The third girl, her hair cut short, frowned. "You're not supposed to be here. This area is off limits."

The first nodded enthusiastically, her unkempt hair falling into her face. "iDana is right. You're lucky we found you. It would have been bad news for you if it had been the Reds..."

"...Or worse," the now-named iDana finished.

Becca stared at the three girls and asked the first one, "What are you children doing here?"

The second child raised her chin and commanded, "iMala, don't answer her."

The third child, iDana, frowned. "You are not safe here and need to leave."

The lone adult still gawked. *What did the Vencume say? Blue design? They're wearing blue smocks.* "You're wearing blue smocks!"

The first child, iMala, cocked her head to one side. "We're wearing blue smocks....?"

"Did you make those golden ships we saw?" Becca asked.

iMala the first answered gleefully, brushing her hair from her face. "Oh? You saw them? Aren't they wonderful? That was a fun project."

The second child nodded and grinned. "We made them. It's a variant on preexistent Vencume design, but we changed the thrust array for greater maneuverability. And of course, we had to alter the interior a great deal. No Vencume pilot, but they can't handle that kind of acceleration anyway because of their bone structure. Well, their lack of bone structure, actually. The Vencume have a cartilage framework as a direct result of—"

"iLyssa!" iDana the third interrupted. "This isn't a biology lesson. We still have to get her out of here and fix the lift."

Becca was still staring. "Did you design the A.I.?"

"No, the pilots fly them," iLyssa said. "They call themselves the Golden Swans."

iDana shook her head. "Pretentious and showy...."

The three circled Becca and started to move towards the lift; they were herding her now.

Becca pushed back. "No! Stop! I demand to know what human children are doing on a Vencume ship!"

"And *we*," iLyssa said, "demand to know what a Human *adult* is doing in *our* area of the ship!"

"You're clones! You're clones of Evie. Are the others clones as well? Was that why she laughed when she saw the—"

The girls resumed the slow shove to the lift. "It's not *safe* here," iDana said. "You have to *go*."

Becca may have been bigger than any of them, but not all three. She felt tears in her eyes. "Is Evie really Evie?"

"Why would you ask that?" iMala asked.

The shoving stopped. They had reached the door.

"Because," Becca tried to explain, choking back tears. "She was my best friend on this trip and I don't know if she died or what happened to her and she won't tell me and I miss my friend and I have to know and I worry and I'm the ship's doctor and it's my job to take care of the well-being of the crew and she's crew and I have to look after her and take care of her and I miss my friend and I'm confused and scared and I'm lost and I

don't know what's going on and I don't know how to talk to her and please, oh, please, if she's just a copy then I have to help her be what she's supposed to be and teach her what it means to be Evie, but if she's really still my friend then I have to work to heal and help her through the hurt and help her get over what the Tzikzik did to her and—"

"We hate them," iLyssa hissed. "They're a faulty design and need to be destroyed."

All three girls had stern, cold faces.

They look like little wolves. Becca shivered. "You had said, 'the Reds, *or worse...*' What was that worse you were talking about?"

The lift door opened behind her and Becca jumped.

"This is where we leave you," iLyssa explained. "You won't be able to come back this way."

Becca rubbed her face. "What about Evie?"

iDana stood directly in front of Becca and gestured that she bend down, face-to-face. Becca leaned into the child.

"If you have a question, you should ask her," the girl said.

And with that, they shoved her backwards into the lift.

* * * * *

Becca finally found the right level and stormed down the hallway. *If Evie isn't Evie, then that's that. Golden swans! Russian blues!* A thought shuddered through her. *What if the Vencume aren't taking us to Peg-51 at all? They're going to turn us all into ghouls!*

She found what might have been Evie in the physical therapy room, staring at its hands. The chair was resting on its base, the legs tucked underneath.

"I've seen the children," Becca stated. "Who are you really?"

The ghostly figure didn't even turn, but replied with a whisper. "How could you ask me that?"

"I've seen your hands," Becca said. "You're not Evie. Evie had scars on her hands."

The maybe-Evie's mouth frowned and looked at its hands a moment longer. "Did it ever occur to you that they don't have any scars because they're new?"

"What?"

"They're new," Evie said. "So are the arms. The legs, too. And the eyes and teeth. A lot of it is...new. They didn't have much left to work with."

Becca gasped and covered her mouth. She wanted to vomit. She wanted to scream. She wanted to run away.

"What's that look?" Evie asked. "I'm not some kind of horrible, disfigured monster."

"Just some Frankenstein—"

"Frankenstein was the doctor!" Evie snapped, then sighed. "It's why I need the walker. I don't have the coordination or strength yet. I have no calluses on my feet." As a demonstration, she peeled off one of her white slippers. The skin was smooth and soft, like a baby's.

Becca reached out to touch it. "That's incredible."

Evie put the slipper back on. "I never thought I'd have to prove who I am by showing someone my freakish feet. It's OK. I wouldn't believe it myself." She let out a raking sigh. "So...the children, they're my repayment to the Vencume. They needed an army and they were impressed with what Human DNA can produce. Your input on how a Human body works was also pretty helpful, so you can say you've paid your way."

"I thought I was helping you..." Becca sniffled.

Evie went on: "There are four versions: designers, pilots, infantry, and...I...I'm going to guess you saw the designers."

Becca nodded. "Three gray-haired girls in blue smocks."

"You're lucky," Evie said.

"They recognized me."

Evie seemed surprised by that. "I haven't mentioned you." She was lost in thought for a moment. "I guess there *was* a chance of—"

"What do I tell the others?" Becca pleaded.

"You tell them *nothing* about the girls." Evie grabbed her arm. "I can't stress that enough. I shouldn't even be telling *you* about this. We're going to get to Peg-51 and pretend that none of this happened. It was just a dark little moment in everyone's life and things are going to go on like they were before. My head-cast will be off by then and I'm working on callusing up my feet, so we'll say nothing more of it. You stick with the Wainwrights and they'll take good care of you."

Becca nodded. "What are you going to do now?"

The legs on the walker sprang to life and Evie rose off the ground. "I need to talk to some children and find out what's going on."

* * * * *

While Becca was returning to the crew's quarters, she ran into Max in the hallway.

"Did you see Gordon on your way back?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Aren't you going to ask me about Evie?"

"I'm not worried about the Chief," he said. "She can take care of herself if he tries anything. I'm more worried about him hurting a Vencume. We don't know how strong they are, and I'm remembering that she hurt one that time with the pod. He slipped out when we were coming back from seeing those ships. If he really feels threatened, he might start an inter-species incident."

"I haven't seen him," Becca said. *And if he's lucky, he won't run into "the reds...or worse."*

They walked back to the quarters and saw Franz coming from the other direction.

"At least you found someone," he said to them. He nodded at Becca. "What did you find out?"

Becca sighed. "It's her. It is Evie."

Stella and Judith were waiting at the table. "No word?" Stella asked.

Franz and Max both shook their heads.

"Maybe the Capitan will have better luck," Franz said.

Stella turned her attention to Becca. "Rebecca, what did you find?"

"We don't need to worry about Evie," Becca said, taking a seat at the table. "I mean, we don't have to worry about if it's her or not. It is, but...It's going to take her a while to recover from her...injuries."

"And her scarless hands?" Stella asked. "You received an acceptable answer for that?"

Paul entered and sat at the table next to his mother. "Capitan is letting the Vencume know about Gordon. They didn't seem too worried."

"How can they not be worried?" Max asked. "What if he—?"

Paul held up his hand. "They aren't worried. This is their ship. I'm pretty sure they have to means to handle it."

"They couldn't even handle whatever took out that other ship!" Max was pacing the room. "And we *still* don't know what did that! That took out *our* ship as well, and we're a lot tougher than the Vencume."

Becca gasped. *But the Vencume just made some of us. The Vencume can make a Human now, so why would they worry?*

"That's right, we're tougher than them and they're fighting something we don't know about it," Max said. "And that almost took *us* out. So, just how are they supposed to take care of Gordon if they run into him? He's going to hurt one of them, maybe *kill* one, and we're all going to be responsible."

"Sit down, Ruths," Capitan Wainwright said to Max, entering the room. "If they say they have it handled, they have it handled."

Max melted into a chair with a barely audible "sir".

The captain had a sad, tired look on his face and gestured that everyone should sit. "It's time I let you know what happened to Gaines on that ship. What I'm pretty sure Dr. Tabib has recently discovered.

"The Vencume recovered their own escape pod, the one we were going to return when we got to Peg-51. What they found inside wasn't pretty and we agree it was meant as a warning—to both Vencume and Humans.

The Tzikzik wanted everyone to know what they could do and that we weren't going to be good allies in this fight and, sadly, Gaines was the means to send that message.

“But what Dr. Tabib said about how the Vencume core their dead was absolutely right. They *do* clone new bodies. They clone the parts that are needed.”

“They found the Chief's core,” Max said.

“They found more than that,” Becca said, “but, yes. The arms and legs are new, according to Evie. And the eyes. They found what was left and made parts to match the genetic code.”

“What she had been born with,” Stella said with a far-away look. “Not what she after—”

“Before the accident,” Becca finished. “They basically...reset her.”

Captain Wainwright nodded. “The Vencume wanted to apologize for bringing us into the conflict. They are trying to make things right.”

But they're also figuring out how to use us as allies anyway, Becca thought. *With or without our consent.*

“You have a look, Dr. Tabib,” the captain said. “Was there something more to the story?”

Becca shook her head. “I was just thinking about how valuable that kind of technology would be back home. A person might...never need die.”

Judith started to count on her fingers. “This trip might be profitable after all.”

Her mother shot her a nasty look.

“Vencume repeat,” Franz muttered.

Stella turned her attention to him. “What?”

“An old saying,” Franz said. “Something I've always heard. 'Vencume repeat.'”

Paul was nervously chewing his left thumb. “Is that a Pegger saying?”

“Hardly,” said a voice from the doorway. Evie strode into the tiny room, delicately picking her way past the seated crew members. “My grandmother used to say it.”

Stella suddenly stood. “Show me your hands.”

The engineer sat for a moment, trying to interpret the looks on the others. Maybe she glowered at Becca; it was hard to tell. She held out her hands.

Stella took Evie's hands and pushed back the sleeves. Her eyes welled. “I would not have believed it.”

“I told them.” Captain Wainwright approached Evie carefully. “It hurt, didn't it?”

Max started to stand. “It's OK, Chief. They kept the important parts.”

“This is a miracle,” Stella intoned, still holding Evie's hands. “You survived. You've been reborn.”

Evie pulled her hands back.

“This will change everything,” said Judith. “Just think what this means for us. People who have—”

“No.” Evie turned to her. “They don't want it.”

“You'll be able to see correctly!” Judith exclaimed. “You'll walk normally!”

“Immortality,” Franz said. “There are a lot of people who would pay dearly for that.”

“It's not immortality,” Evie hissed. She held up her hands in angry fists, then pointed at her head. “What about what's up here? They can't remake that. They can't erase what's up here. I still have to deal with *that*. I still have to remember what happened, *how* it happened, how that...” She paused. “It's not worth it.”

“You didn't happen to see Gordon, did you?” Max asked. “He's gone missing.”

Evie turned to Max and his sudden change of subject. “I...yes. I kicked him over a railing a few minutes ago.”

“You *what*?” Becca stood. “Did you kill him?”

“No...” Evie stared at her hands. “There's a section that stops spin for two minutes every twenty-three minutes. I've been using the zero-gee for exercise. I saw him during that and...kicked him over a railing.”

“How can you kick someone 'over' a railing if it's zero-gee?” Max asked.

“Well, once the spin restarts, you just...gently fall to the bottom,” Evie explained. “It happened to me once, so he'll be fine.”

“What was he doing?” Judith asked. “Was he just following you?”

Evie shrugged. “I don't know.”

Captain Wainwright rested a hand on Evie's shoulder. “Can you show us where this happened?”

Evie nodded.

"Right then." Franz stood and dusted off his pants. "Let's go collect him."

* * * * *

Evie was in the lead. "We'll get there just in time." She checked her watch. "I'll go down and find him."

They passed through one door, another, another, and came to a long bridge over a deep chasm.

"I would have thought he'd made it out by now," Evie said, and Becca noted a tinge of fear in her voice. "Maybe he hit his head or something."

"I won't blame you if something happened to him," Wainwright said. "I don't know what the Vencume will say, besides that they picked up eight people."

"They may not want anyone to know what they can do yet," Evie said. She commanded the walker to grip the railing. "One more minute."

The spin stopped and Evie slipped out of her walker. She and Becca pushed to the bottom. There was nothing there.

"Gaines!" Wainwright shouted.

The two women got to the bridge just as the spin was restarting. Evie crumpled and Franz helped her back to the walker.

Evie gestured for the others to keep back.

There were two children on the bridge with them, hiding in the shade of a doorway. Two children with black hair. Large, dark eyes. Two little girls. Two little shadows.

"Gaines?" Captain Wainwright asked. "Do you understand this?"

"They listen to me." Evie was already releasing the walker from the railing. "Ulan...Uma...did you find something?"

"Toy," one girl said.

Becca hid behind Evie's walker. "What are they?"

"Did you break the toy?" Evie was asking. "Where is it now?"

"Ours," the other girl said.

"No," Evie took on a stern tone. "It's not yours. You have to give it back."

The first grinned wide. "Shoulders pop pop."

"Knees pop pop," the second said.

The twins held each other tight. They giggled.

"Did you share your toy?" Evie asked. "Did you give it to the others?"

One of the dark twins grinned wide. "They left."

"Bored," the second girl pouted.

"Gaines..." Captain Wainwright had a slight edge to his voice. "How many of...*them*...are there?"

"Of *these*," Evie sighed, "just the two."

Franz started to run.

The twins sprang, twisting and turning in cartwheels. They leapt past Wainwright and Becca, vaulting over Evie and her walker. One caught Franz's arm and neatly dislocated the shoulder. The other kicked his knee out.

He howled.

"Pop pop." The twins landed and examined their handiwork.

Evie rushed to Franz, the twins spinning away. "Stop!" Evie yelled. Becca did her best to stay close to the walker. "No no! Bad! These are MY TOYS. You don't break my toys!"

"Bored," one twin smirked.

"Others left," the second frowned. "All alone."

Evie whispered to Becca, "Roll his shoulder back, quick," and turned back to the twins. "You broke your toy. No more toys. You got that? You can't break them, see? You break a toy and I'll take it from you, understand?"

Franz was panting. "What have you done?"

"You go to your room!" Evie was shouting. "I'll talk to you later!"

"No fair," one twin hissed.

The two girls back-flipped and cartwheeled away.

Becca got Franz's shoulder rolled back into place. She helped him up and he leaned against Evie's walker.

"You got regular little hellions," he spat. "You know that?"

* * * * *

"The Vencume have an empire," Evie was explaining on the way back. "They control a wide area made up of a number of systems. There's been an uprising of sorts and they needed a method to control it."

"So, you gave them the model for an army." Becca panted beside her. "You're going to help them keep those factions in line."

"Let those without sin throw the first stone," Evie said. "Or do I have to remind you that your stunning anatomy lesson told them everything they needed to know about improving the design?"

"She thought she was helping you," Wainwright offered.

"Don't remind me," Becca said. "Who were those horrible children?"

"Thankfully, there's only two of *them*." Evie's mouth frowned. "I don't think they turned out the way the Vencume expected. Those are raw copies from the glove they stole off our ship."

"*That's* why I couldn't find it." Franz winced and held his knee. He was riding in Evie's lap on the walker.

"We can assume that Gorsky is dead." Wainwright said.

"Or worse," Evie added. "There's always worse."

Franz held his knee. "No thanks to your little brood."

* * * * *

By the time they made it back to the quarters, the others were all smiles.

"They found the *Tong Dizhou*!" Judith was practically dancing.

"David," Stella said to her husband, "we have our ship back. None of the cargo was lost."

Becca helped Franz off of Evie's walker. "The ship's been returned?"

"A Vencume was just here," Max explained. "It said they found our ship and brought it back."

"Vencume can haul a freighter?" Franz asked.

"You don't believe them?" Paul asked. "The Vencume can do anything."

"They just told us." Stella beamed. "Oh, Franz. What happened to your knee?"

Evie stiffened. "I know where they'll be."

Captain Wainwright was chewing his bottom lip. "Dr. Tabib," he said, pointing at Becca, "go with her. We'll keep looking for Gordon."

* * * * *

Becca and Evie went down the lift. Evie was rocking back and forth in the walker and muttering a string of numbers to herself.

The two women went to a large bay. Four chattering Vencume ran long hands over several Human-looking children who had collected there: two blond girls in golden flight-suits and three redheads in blood-red armor. Becca turned on her translator.

*Red test very good. Yellow test very good. Other *Tzikzik* destroyed. Ship returned. Test good.*

"I'm glad you're glad," Evie said. "This should pay back any debts we may have incurred."

Very good design. Red design much strong. Yellow design much fast.

"aRlene, oRiana," Evie asked two of the girls. "I heard you got the ship back. Did you have any trouble?"

One redhead grinned. "aLtsoba was injured, but it's being attended to."

A Vencume was running long fingers over another redheaded girl. Her left hand was covered in blood, but the Vencume was applying a spray to it. The girl made a fist and held out her hand to show the others it was fixed.

Red design much strong. Vencume fix broken red Human.

"Evie..." Becca stepped back. "Who are these?"

The engineer gestured to the children. "Allow me to introduce a debt repaid. Their two teams have recovered the *Tong Dizhou*."

One redhead grinned with sharpened teeth at Becca. "That is the Doctor."

"Yes." Evie smiled, albeit a little strained. "You should respect her."

"All Humans hold a place of high esteem," sang a blonde.

The Vencume continued to chitter. It was turning a light pink color.

Red design good. Much strong. More red design. Yellow design much fast. More yellow design.

"I'm glad you're glad," Evie said stiffly.

"How many of them are there?" Becca asked.

"Total?" Evie's mouth formed a slight moue. "Seven red, five yellow, three blue, and the twins."

Becca gasped. "Don't you think that's overcompensating a bit?"

The Vencume chittered on:

Human now take Human ship. Vencume tow to Pegasai-51. Human leave Vencume ship.

"Becca," Evie whispered. "You're the best doctor for this job. You know I'm good for it."

"What?" Becca whispered back, "You're not staying, are you?"

Evie nodded. "I have to. I lost my identity chip on the *Tong Dizhou* when my right arm got torn off, so it's not like I can travel anymore. The Shipping Authority would never hear of it."

"You're insane."

The engineer smiled and whispered, "A regular basket-case."

Becca glared back at her. "The Wainwrights still need me."

"They have one grandson," Evie said, "and they have a whole family to help them. I'm on my own. I need you, Becca. *We* need you."

"Who does?"

"They do, Becca," Evie said. "My army."

BLUE

Chip

The station in orbit over Pegasai-51 glittered like an oasis when the crew from the *Tong Dizhou* finally saw it. The three small Vencume ships that had towed the freighter released their lines and let the Shipping Authority tugs take over. The excitement was palatable as the wreckage was coaxed into port.

A cacophony of sound met the crew as they unloaded from the ship: the bustle and clang of loadmasters moving out cargo containers, the yells of the portmen. On these inner rings, there was little centrifugal force, thus making the unloading of ship containers that much easier.

For a crew used to the pull of spin, however, unloading was always a little more complicated and they clumsily attached themselves to the guide-lines out of the ship.

Evie, of course, had no trouble at all and moved as gracefully as the portmen that manned the inner rings. She was out of her walker and walking in heavily padded boots. The goggle-mask she had worn had been removed—the skull had set correctly—and she now wore dark glasses to protect her pale new eyes. For all her misadventure, she looked no worse than any other traveler—save two tiny, dot-like scars at the outer edges of her eyes and a head of short, shock-white hair.

“I'm glad you decided to come with us,” Becca said.

“Should arouse less suspicion,” Evie answered. “We're still missing Gordon and there will be questions enough about that.”

Captain Wainwright floated uneasily at the front and shouted back, “Gaines, I need you to go to the salvagers and get the ship ready to broken down.”

“Oh, David!” Stella exclaimed. “Scrap the ship?”

“You've seen the damage,” he said. “It's going to cost too much to repair it. We might as well just start over.”

Judith was just behind her mother on the line. “We'll still have credit with the Shipping Authority for the engine, so it's not like we're starting all over again.”

“It's just a drop at that point, right?” Max asked from behind his fiancée.

“I suppose,” said Stella. “We'll still have to let the family know.”

“Hardly a problem for a Trechantiris.” Franz chuckled.

Stella turned back with a glower. “Just because we make the ships doesn't mean we can magic one out of thin air.”

“We still have to handle the paper-work,” Judith complained.

“Oh, what a nuisance!” Stella said. “And I need to go reserve our short-stay quarters. Jason and the *Jiang Gong* won't arrive for another ten days.”

The crew was at the end of the guide-line and floated uneasily into a lift. Evie came in upside-down and suspended almost mockingly in a corner.

“Don't worry about me,” Franz said. “I'm going grass-side.”

The lift was moving down to an outer ring. Becca looked over at the upside-down Evie. The engineer grinned back. *She's showing off.*

“Get some dwell-time with family?” Judith asked.

He nodded. “Well, that, and I think I'm done with the spacing game.”

“You're quitting?” Stella asked, surprised. “I thought that—”

“I got what I came for,” Franz explained. “A well-padded account, a collection of stories, and a knee that will hurt before it rains. No, I'm done.”

Evie was turning a tight somersault in the lift as the pull got stronger. “Look, I'm sorry that—”

Franz chuckled. “It's not your fault, girlie. I'm just done. I'm going down to the dome and the pull and my involvement from now on will be adding 'yours sincerely' at the bottom of a burst.”

“There's just one last order of business,” said Captain Wainwright.

“Final inventory?” Franz asked.

The captain pulled Franz in for a tight hug: the manly kind that requires hearty back-slap. “Stay safe,” he said. “That's an order.”

“Aye aye, Captain,” Franz answered. He gave Evie a mock-punch to one arm. “Keep your spin.”

She nodded. “I will.”

The lift made it to the outer ring and the crew departed.

Max watched as Franz walked away to the shuttle depot, humming to himself. "There goes one short, furry man."

Judith gave Max an elbow to the ribs. "Is that the nicest thing you can say? Not everyone can come from a paradise planet like yours."

"Cancri-55 isn't paradise," Max said. "It rains all the time and smells like fish."

"How many rooms am I reserving?" Stella asked. "Rebecca, you're still coming, yes?"

Becca had been here once before, five birthdays ago, and she found it as dinky and back-water a station now as it had been then. "Well, my choices are being holed up in a dome or holed up on the station," Becca said. "The inhabited area of the planet has just entered its winter season so I might as well save myself the shuttle fare."

"There's still excitement here," Paul said. "The loading docks... the trading floor."

Becca shrugged. "This is *not* what I would call an exciting place. Not like the other stations."

Paul smiled. "What, a rotating population of three-thousand not cosmopolitan enough?"

"It *is* kinda dinky," Evie said.

"But it's Human," Judith answered.

"Yes," Evie said, adjusting her dark glasses. "It is that."

By the time the crew was settled in their quarters, a crew from the salvage company had gone over the ship. The data-banks were still good (so the scheduled data delivery would still take place). Sensors and engine parts would be sent to the repair and maintenance shops. Some would be refurbished and sold directly to other ships to be carried as spares.

Later that day, Evie was going through the condition-sheet with the salvage crew, her last bit of business for Captain Wainwright. Becca was there to monitor Evie's condition. The engineer would tire if standing for too long and she still suffered headaches. Bright lights and loud noises gave Evie dizzy spells and she would clench her jaw somewhat over-enthusiastically; an uncontrollable action that resulted in a stiff form of speech.

"Engines good...Hull was bad; you had what, seven holes in that thing?" the salvager asked. "Nice patch-job, by the way, but not something I'd hang my life on. Mmm...sensors *mostly* good; looks like you guys took a real beating. Oh! Where'd you get that cooking thingamabopper in the galley?"

"I made it," Evie said.

He nodded. "You should patent it."

"So I've been told."

The salvager went over his pad. "Your comm system's still in good shape. I bet we can adapt that for one of the schools grass-side."

"Using a ship's comm system?" Becca asked.

"You've got twelve comms and a hubber. That's a whole classroom right there," he explained.

"Cheaper than shipping out a new system specially made," Evie added. "You're forgetting how far out this is, Becca."

"It's not *that* far," the salvager protested. "Just can't produce like the others. Too cold."

"Historical significance be damned," Evie sighed.

"This is where they met the Vencume first time, see?" His pride had been wounded. "Where the portmen met them and got the borrowed-time field."

Evie leaned over to Becca. "It's a minor point of trade between us and the Vencume. Most of the stuff that goes to the others is meant for *them*, not us. Not so, here."

The salvager was still trying to explain why Pegasai-51 was important. "This is where they found the squiddies and turned back. Not even the Vencume seem to remember that. This is where it all started."

"And, like any eldest child," Evie said, "was swiftly forgotten when something brighter came dancing onto the scene."

The salvager frowned and changed the subject. "What happened to that engine control room? We found some blood."

"Ship's cat," snapped Evie. "Poor Jones didn't make it out when the thing depressurized."

The salvage man squinted at a manifest. "No cat listed."

Evie adjusted her dark glasses. "Bastard snuck on when we were loading. Didn't even know it was there until we were twelve days out. It's true; black cats are bad luck."

"I can't stand the sneaky things," the man spat. "They get into everything."

Becca noticed that Evie was clenching her jaw. *She'll wear her teeth down at this rate.*

Evie placed her hand over her mouth and asked to be excused.

The salvage man laughed and jabbed a thumb at a window behind him. "Some people can't handle the spin here. New folks always want to hurl when the planet first comes into view."

"I imagine so," Becca agreed. "I better go check on her."

Evie had rushed to a washroom to splash cold water on her face. Becca found her standing in front of a mirror, without her glasses, massaging her wet cheeks.

"A *cat*?" Becca asked. "You think a cat is going to explain that? What kind of silly lie is that?"

"What was I supposed to say?" Evie stared at Becca through the mirror. "Sorry, bud, that's my blood. Let me know if you find any teeth or a finger when you're cleaning it out."

Becca shrugged. "Why not say you had cut yourself or it was some injury you got when—"

Evie rolled up her sleeves to reveal the flawless skin on her arms.

No, of course she can't say it was one of her injuries.

"No one will question a cat." Evie returned to massaging her cheeks. "A cat's just a cat. Why bother running tests on it? They'll just clean it out."

"I thought the girls got everything when you went over there with them," Becca said. "When you went to evaluate the wreckage with the twins and designers."

"Ulan and Uma went in for the bulky stuff." Evie was staring hard in the mirror at her new blue eyes. "They get off on that kind of thing. I'm sure they were tickled pink for a chance to be in Mommy's arms." She let out a laugh that sounded like a gag. "They cleaned it, but we should have at least run a hose through. Someone's going to find something: some rotting tongue or a smeared eye. I'm not ready for questions like that. I want to forget about it, not relive the whole affair when the Shipping Authority starts poking around."

Becca wet a towel in the sink. "You're clenching your jaw again. We're going to have to get you a bite-guard if you keep this up. No wonder you have headaches."

"Max should be doing this." Evie took the towel and wrapped her face in it. "He's marrying into the family. He should be handling their affairs."

"Captain trusts you," Becca said.

"He should trust his own son-in-law to get a fair deal." Evie's voice was muffled through the towel. "I can't do this."

"You've scrapped a ship before," Becca said. "You know how it's done. Anyway, you didn't take him with you to check the wreckage, why should he help you scrap it?"

"Max should be here to see how it's done." Evie unwrapped her head and looped the towel behind her neck. "I'm too nervous to do this right. I feel like they're staring at me." She slipped her dark glasses back on, stared at herself in the mirror, and self-consciously scratched at her right palm. "I *know* they are. Let's get out of here. I want to dye my hair."

Becca stood back. "What about the salvagers?"

"No one has signed off on anything," Evie said, throwing the towel in the sink. "It's just haggling for money at this point. Let Wainwrights and Wainwrights-to-be handle that part."

* * * * *

“Oh, you look lovely,” Stella said when she saw Evie's newly-dyed hair. “You can hardly tell. It looks like you just got a hair-cut.”

Stella and Judith were sitting at a table in their short-stay quarters, going over pads of forms and settling accounts. The captain, Max, and Paul had left to finish up with the salvagers.

Judith smiled. “That looks good. How are the eyes?”

“Still blue.” Evie raised a hand to her dark glasses. “I'm sure they'll darken over time.”

“It looks like we might actually come out OK on this one.” Stella pointed to a form. “Profit from this run puts us well into the green.”

“The Queue was very understanding,” Judith added, mentioning the Shipping Authority's presence on the station. “There's been an alert put out to all ships on the route. I guess the Vencume will have an ally in that fight.”

“Oh!” Stella waved her hands. “We've all been asked to go down there. The Authority wants everyone to get their chips updated.”

“There's some kind of new requirement,” Judith said.

“What kind of update?” Evie asked nervously.

Judith turned back to her forms. “I have no idea. It's just a few questions. Maybe it has something to do with the Tzikzik. All the ships coming in have to be retrofitted with a new refrigeration unit as well.”

Becca glanced at Evie, who was clenching her jaw again.

“What kind of refrigeration unit?” Evie started to pace. “We already have those. I've never been on a ship that didn't have a refrigeration unit.” She stopped to look at her right palm.

“The Vencume already saw to your chip,” Judith said. “No one has mentioned what happened with you to anyone. We just said you were holed up in the wreckage until it was recovered.”

“We aren't going to tell anyone about your recovery,” Stella assured in calm, measured tones. “We know you don't want to be studied or have to relive it.”

“What about Franz?” Evie was on the edge of panic. “He quit the business kinda suddenly, don't you think? Now he's going to settle down and retire. You don't think he might have sold someone some information?”

Stella frowned. “I don't think that Franz is the type to—“

“How do you know?” Evie snapped. She was scratching her right palm furiously. “We don't know what's going on in his head. Why *wouldn't* he say something? Or do you not remember how he pointed out how much people would pay for that kind of technology?”

Becca interjected. “Evie, I'm sure there's a perfectly reasonable explanation.”

Evie's jaw was in full clench and her hands were fists. “The collective noun for coincidences is *conspiracy*. Something about it is not right.”

Stella tried to calm Evie down. “The chip worked so far with the salvagers, so there shouldn't be any issue at the Queue. And your new hair, ah, you look your old self.”

Evie ripped off her dark glasses and pointed at her pale blue eyes. “How about now? Is that my old self? How's that?”

“Why don't you go lie down?” Becca asked. “I'll give you something for your jaw.”

“I have something,” Evie snapped and readjusted her glasses. “I'll be next door.” She stormed out and down the hall to the room she was sharing with Becca.

“She's decided to not come with us?” Stella asked. “I suppose we're a reminder of...what happened...”

Judith shuffled forms. “Have the Vencume found Gordon yet?”

Becca shook her head. “No one has said anything. I'm sure he'll turn up.” *Whatever is left of him, at least.* Becca still didn't have the heart to tell the two Wainwright women about the run-in with the twins and what had been said. “They'll return him to the Shipping Authority once they find him. The Vencume seemed terribly interested in locating him once the captain told them about...the lifeboat.”

“He should be in jail,” Stella hissed. “After what he put Evelyn through.”

“Yeah,” Becca agreed. *He'd probably prefer a cell, considering...*

Judith turned back to her forms. “We only had him on board because of some lawyer-friend's—“

“It was a family favor,” Stella said. “There's another reason for you to go home for a while. You need to learn a little about politics.”

“Mom...” Judith whined. “Who cares about politics on a ship?”

Stella crossed her arms. “You’ll *learn* to care about it. It puts cargo on a ship. It gives a ship a destination. It gets cargo *off* a ship.”

“It wears a funny hat and makes long speeches.” Judith waved her hands.

“I think it’s past-due you spent some quality time with your grandfather.”

Judith turned to Becca. “You don’t have to deal with this sort of thing, do you?”

Becca shook her head. “My family was never important enough.”

* * * * *

When Becca got back to the room, Evie was taking another ridiculously hot shower. Steam billowed out from under the door.

Evie came out after fifteen minutes, bright red and wet, like a freshly boiled lobster. Becca could just make out the hair-fine scars across Evie’s shoulders, running alongside the spaghetti-straps of the black top she wore.

“I thought it was going to be easy,” Evie said, toweling her head. Dye was coming off in dark smudges. “That was naïve of me.” She draped the towel over her head and shuffled to her bed. “*I am not an animal...*” She flopped on the bed. “They’re going to try to turn me into some kind of exhibit; I know it.”

“You’re reading too much into this.” Becca was digging through one of her bags for some sedatives. “You’re going to worry yourself sick. Here, take this.”

Evie peaked out from under the stained towel. “What is it?”

Becca placed the tiny pill in Evie’s flawless left hand. “It’s a muscle relaxant. Your jaw is acting up again. I can see it from across the room. That’s going to arouse more suspicion than anything.”

Evie pulled the tiny pill under the towel, amoeba-like.

“Please,” Becca begged. “Actually *take* it.”

The towel shuffled a bit before Evie threw the splotted mess at the wall. “I just want to disappear again.”

“I’m sure you will,” Becca said. “One way or another.”

* * * * *

There had been some question about Evie’s identity-chip before they reached the station.

It was the gray-haired and orange-eyed iLyssa who had come up with a solution. “We know that the chip will oxidize quickly if exposed to atmosphere” she had explained, “and that’s good. A nice safety feature to prevent identity theft.”

“Like the kind we’re committing now,” her sister iDana had chimed in.

“It’s not really identity theft,” the third child, iMala had stated. “We’re just moving the chip from your hand to your hand.”

“So you’re going to put it in a vacuum?” Becca had asked.

“No.” iLyssa snorted derisively. “The chip also senses pressure changes, if it’s been made right.”

“You can’t put her hand in a vacuum anyway.” iDana scowled. “It would pop.”

iMala was setting up a tank; three thick, plastic cuffs stuck out of the ends and side. “We’re going to flood the tank with a non-reactive gas.”

“Radon is nice and heavy, but expensive,” iDana added.

“We’re using helium,” iLyssa had explained. “But we have to keep it at a pretty high pressure, so it may be a little unpleasant.”

“It should be a quick procedure,” iMala finished.

Becca had watched the triplets dance happily through the lab. They moved as one unit, each finishing the task the one before had started; each finishing the thought the other had started. Small orange eyes flashed knowing glances and chipper voices sing-sang their way through the set-up. Their pleasure in tackling the complicated task was confidence-inspiring.

iLyssa had placed some kind of gun in the tank and was clamping down the seal. “We used the scar on Doctor-Doctor's hand as a guide for the device.”

iMala brushed Becca's arm with her long fingers. “Maybe Doctor-Doctor would like to perform the procedure?”

“Doctor-Doctor fixes hands,” the other two chanted, invoking their pet-name for Becca.

“No,” Becca had protested. “I'm good. I trust you guys.” She turned to Evie. “Are you going to be OK with all this? You want a general anesthesia?”

Evie forced a grin. “I've seen the inside of my hand before.”

“Not like this, you haven't.” iDana opened a Vencume core unit and pulled out a disembodied and mangled right arm.

Pegger

In the short-stay quarters, Evie finally fell asleep. *That pill should keep her out a while. She just needs sleep. Too bad we have to get it from a sedative.*

Becca slipped out and made her way to the relay depot. She had a letter that needed to be sent out with the next burst. As expensive as it was, she had promised her cousins she would let them know once she was safely at Pegasai-51.

Even with the signs, she got lost on the way and so the trip took a little longer than expected.

The relay depot was manned by a black-haired Pegger man. He took the data-stik in short, rough hands and asked for the destination.

“You a' letting home know you a' one piece,” he rattled.

Becca nodded and placed her hand over the chip-reader so her account could be debited. *Praise be that Franz got over that annoying accent.*

The Pegger rubbed one of his ears and scratched idly at the thick hair under his jaw. “Expensive. Not many correspondence on a burst. Must be important, this recipient.”

Becca shook her head. “Not like that. Just important to me.”

He transferred the data to his own store. “You travel with Vencume, I hear. With a' engineer. Engineers a' important. They see things.”

Becca nodded and watched the short man as he double-checked the data.

“You travel with Gains?” he asked.

Becca nodded again.

The Pegger printed off her receipt. “You tell her she a' messages waiting? She important? Lots a' messages.”

“I'll let her know,” Becca said.

“What kind doctor a' you?” he asked.

Becca traced the pattern on the counter with her finger. “Ship's doctor. General practitioner.”

“Practitioner...” He flashed his gray, dull teeth. “Magician. They say. That's 'practitioner' word.”

“No.” Becca shook her head. “I'm not a magician.”

“No, *you* not.” He laughed. “That word, 'practitioner', that's magician word.” He handed her the data-stik and the receipt for the transaction. “Words got meaning. You should learn them.”

* * * * *

When Becca got back, Evie was sitting at a desk, staring into a bright lamp. “You were gone when I woke up. I was all alone again.”

How is she awake already? She should have been unconscious for hours. “Did you think I had left you?” Becca asked. “I had to send off a letter to my cousins.”

“I didn't know what to think.” Evie continued to stare. “How much did it cost?”

Becca held out the receipt. “It cost....*ffff*...It cost a lot. It was a promise. I said I would let them know when I had arrived.”

“Your cousins? That letter you were working on?”

“Yeah.” Becca sat on a bed. “They said you had messages waiting. Your family?”

Evie shrugged.

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to darken my eyes,” Evie answered, unblinking. “I know that it usually takes a baby's eyes a couple years to change color.”

“Some babies' eyes never change,” Becca noted. “And anyway, they don't change due to light. No wonder you have headaches, staring into lamps like that. You're going to blind yourself.”

Evie blinked and stopped to rub her right eye. “This is not my normal color. I had brown eyes. They've started to change already; I just need to force the process along.”

“Say, we should go get a bite to eat,” Becca offered. “I saw a place on the way back from the relay depot. It was good five years ago.”

Evie turned off the lamp. “Yeah, that might be good. Get my mind off stuff.”

* * * * *

It was Pegger stand-and-eat, with an unpronounceable name, where Becca had a dish that tasted like corn noodles with an onion sauce and Evie had dumplings. The Pegger woman who ran it had salt-and-pepper hair and reminded Becca of the three designers on the Vencume ship. Granted, the woman had broader shoulders, but she had the same sing-songy voice.

“I have to figure out how to get back to them,” Evie said between bites as they strolled away from the stand. “It's not protocol for Humans to ride with Vencume, so going to the inner ring might raise some eyebrows.”

Becca nodded. “Vencume don't have eyebrows.”

“Humans do,” Evie corrected.

“You should register for passage out,” Becca changed the subject. “I'm sure someone needs an engineer. You have an impressive resume.”

“Might be a good cover for now,” Evie agreed.

“I thought it was you!” A woman had come up to them, short with kinky black hair, but not a Pegger. “Evelyn Gaines? Evie? You remember me?”

Evie looked up from her food. “You must have me confused with someone else.”

The woman put her hands on her hips. “Rosemary Gekkei? You don't remember me? I remember you. You came in on the tanker *Shui Meng* from Libra-8. That was...what? Four years ago?”

“I'm sorry.” Evie pushed up her dark glasses with the back of her wrist. “You must be thinking of my sister.”

Rosemary looked a little deflated. “Your sister is Evie? You sound just like her.” She played with the hem of her jacket. “I was sure you were Evie. I saw her come in. I thought maybe she'd gotten that limp fixed. You look just like her. Your twin?”

Evie shook her head. “Older sister. Six years. Sorry for it.”

Becca's hands were full, so she held out an elbow. “Dr. Rebecca Tabib. Rosemary, you said?”

Rosemary smiled and shook Becca's elbow with two fingers. She held her hand out to Evie. “I did not get your name.”

Evie nodded but didn't shake hands. “Gwennie Gaines.” Her jaw was clenching.

“You look so much like your sister,” Rosemary said. “Taller, maybe. But you sound just like her.”

“How odd to remember a voice after four years,” Becca said.

Rosemary frowned. “I must not have remembered it correctly.”

Evie had stopped eating and stared at her food. “Ah, yes. Pity that.”

“But of course, *you* aren't Evie.” Rosemary narrowed her eyes. “Evie's not the kind to forget her old friends because she's *pretty* now.”

Becca nodded. “No, from what...Gwennie has told me, Evie's not like that at all.”

“How lucky you are,” Rosemary continued, “that you should be here. Your sister just came in on what was left of the *Tong Dizhou*. They were attacked, you know, by some new species.”

“I had not heard that,” Evie said stiffly.

Rosemary blinked for a second. “It's all the talk now. Looks like the Vencume have some kind of enemy. The *Tong Dizhou* took on an escape pod and was attacked for it. That's the chatter, anyhow.” She turned to Becca. “You were on the *Dizhou*. How is Evie?”

Becca swallowed hard. “She's going out on the *Jiang Gong* with me. She's resting. Told me to meet her sister.”

Rosemary nodded. “The sister who had not heard that her sister was in port.”

Evie's jaw was stiff and jutted out. “Please, try to understand...”

“I understand *perfectly*,” Rosemary huffed. “We're not cosmopolitan enough for you. You got yourself a new look and new friends. I can take a hint.” She left angrily.

Evie watched her storm off. “We need to go.”

“*You* need to go,” Becca hissed. “Why not say who you are? Why the subterfuge?”

Evie threw the last of her dumplings away in a near-by chute. “You have to know who Rosemary is. You have to *understand* her.” She shook her head. “It's complicated. Everything is complicated.”

Rumors

They made their way back through one of the gardens on the station. All stations had a garden or two, for help with carbon-dioxide, as well as to keep people who spent years on a ship near sane. This one was dedicated to dessert plants, so they had to navigate past cacti and scrub.

Becca stared up at the artificially painted sky and thought about how cheap-looking it all was.

“Really, what's the deal with Rosemary?” she finally asked.

Evie rubbed the back of her head. “We were friends.”

“Just friends?”

“We had a relationship of sorts.” Evie sighed. “How's that?”

“Vague.” Becca frowned. “Probably a little dishonest.”

“It was only a couple weeks. I think she expected more than I was willing to give.”

“Not your type?” Becca grinned and stopped to look at a delicate pink flower on one of the taller cactus.

Evie was frowning. “Why do you think of me that way? I don't toss people aside like that.”

“You could have been nicer to her. If you didn't want to get her hopes up—“

“Evie!” a man across the garden shouted and waved. He ran up to them. “Hey, Evie! Wow! I would not have recognized you. Rosemary said you were in port.”

Evie adjusted her dark glasses. “Hi, Chris. How's it going?”

The lanky, dark-haired man held out a hand to Becca. “Chris Kaplan.” He smiled. “I flew with Evie to Cancri-55 once. That was some ride, huh?”

Evie nodded and smiled softly.

Becca shook hands with Chris. “Are you the one who...?”

He laughed. “Oh. Nononono....What was that guy's name?”

“Mark.” Evie chuckled. “Mark 'missed-my-mark' March.”

Chris put an arm around Evie, still holding Becca's hand. “You've been telling stories.”

Becca extracted her hand.

“This is Rebecca Tabib.” Evie nodded at Becca. “*Doctor* Rebecca Tabib.”

“Oh hey, a doctor?” Chris slipped an arm around Becca's shoulders and gave her a rough squeeze. “You do great work. I hardly recognized our little Gargoyle Gaines here.”

Becca laughed a little. “That's not my work.”

Chris released Becca and took Evie's shoulders. “Turn around, woman. Let me see you!” He whistled. “Man, oh, man. You look fabulous. How much did that cost?”

Evie grinned sheepishly. “An arm and a leg.”

Becca had a brief coughing fit.

“What are you doing with yourself these days?” Evie asked Chris.

He thumbed his bangs away from his eyes. “I work for the Authority now. Head of dock operations. It's good pay and I might move up to a larger station some day. Oh hey, hold on a moment.” He dashed off across the garden.

“You lied to Rosemary,” Becca observed. “But you're OK with this guy? Another one of your 'relationships'?”

Evie turned to her with a wide smile. “Shut up, Becca.”

Chris returned with two other men in tow. He introduced Becca to George and Robert, friends of his and old crew-mates of Evie's. George worked on the trading floor for a grain company where he had served as second-mate. Robert was on a three-day lay-over on his way to Cygnus-16 and the two other men had decided to have a party in celebration of his arrival. Evie was a bonus.

It was decided that they would have the impromptu party at Chris' home on the station, considering he was the head of dock operations now and had the most room.

George produced a bottle and waved it in front of Robert. “What's that? What's in the bottle, boy? You want what's in the bottle?”

“Aw, what's in the bottle?” Robert whined.

Chris and Evie called together. “You should have called for delivery!”

It was some in-joke that Becca was not part of yet. She felt uncomfortable in this setting. “Do you guys always drink like this?” she asked.

Evie laughed. “We're not just building a team; we're building a tolerance.”

Chris brought out glasses and George started to pour drinks. Evie sang:

One's for a posting, two for a berth.

Three's for some sorrow, four for some mirth.

Five is for plenty, and six for a dearth.

Becca accepted a glass.

Evie held out hers. “For those before and those yet to come.”

They all did a shot. Becca gagged. It tasted salty and smoky. “What is this?”

“Bitlong vodka.” George grinned and revealed a tiny strip of soy-meat suspended in the bottle. It had been dried once, but in the bottle, it looked pale and misshapen. It was disgusting.

“They make the best Bloody Marys.” Robert grinned.

“*Mary Mary*,” Chris sang to himself. “We should call Rosemary.”

“Six for a dearth!” George shouted and poured fresh shots. “This one's for the Shipping Authority. God bless 'em.”

“May they never encounter anything they can't regulate!” Robert knocked his back.

Chris wiped his mouth. “Don't talk about my boss like that.” He turned to Becca. “Are you an organ donor?”

The question was so bizarre, so...*personal*...Becca suddenly felt afraid. *What are these guys going to do to us? Why am I drinking with them?* “What kind of a question is that?”

“That's the new 'in' thing,” Robert explained. “Everyone gets asked that now. New regulations.”

“*Organ donation?*” Evie asked incredulously. “They've finally figured out how much we're worth. Pour me another. They can't have my liver.”

George continued, “You even have to have a new fridge on the ship...in case someone *dies*...”

Becca glanced over at Evie. “Told ya.” She gave her a little jab on the arm.

Evie was smiling broadly.

“It's ridiculous.” George poured fresh shots. “How many people die on a flight, anyway?”

Robert took the bottle. “I bet it's because we're going to go to war.”

“Because of this lovely lady!” Chris gave Evie a bear hug. “And your wonderful misadventure!”

“Ah!” Evie gave a mock-scream. “No break-a me. I'm delicate!”

“What were they like?” George asked.

Evie put down her glass and wiggled her hands in front of her face. “They were terrible bug-eyed monsters! Oh, it was horrible. The eyes....THE EYES!”

Becca laughed. “You're drunk.”

“Heh.” Evie picked her glass back up and her face darkened. “Hardly. That's going to take a lot more.”

“Gargoyle Gaines can hold her liquor.” Chris grinned. “We’ll have to come up with a new nickname for you.”

“Gorgeous Gaines,” Robert suggested.

“Do you still doodle?” George asked Evie. “I remember you used to doodle all the time. Drawings of ships—”

“Oh yeah...” Evie smiled. “I have a whole book of them back in my quarters. Even got to see a working model once.”

“You could never fly one of those.” Chris poked her in the arm. “I’ve seen those things. You put too much pressure on the pilot. He’d black out in a second.”

“Well, there’s your problem.” Evie grinned. “You keep putting men in my ships. Why should I redesign my ship when you can redesign the pilot? You’re limiting it by putting some dumb oaf in there.”

“Like Mark ‘Missed my Mark’?” Becca offered.

George and Robert started to laugh hysterically.

“You don’t think there’s really going to be some kind of war, do you?” Becca asked.

Robert fondled the bottle. “Well, we don’t know. We’ve never known that much about the Vencume, so we have no idea what kind of enemies they may have. Evie, you were with them for a while. What can you tell us about them?”

Becca knocked back another drink. “They spin when they walk.” The taste of dried meat was growing on her.

“You mean that shuffle they do?” Robert asked, pouring Evie another drink and letting Becca pour her own.

“They do that when they’re moving slowly.” Evie imitated the action with her hand on the table. “That’s more for precision motion. If they want to move quickly, they’ll rotate from one foot to the other.”

“They have smooth, soft skin,” Becca added.

“You’ve actually touched one?” George gawked. “No suit?”

Evie shook her head. “They don’t need suits. We don’t either. After dealing with them for so long, any chance of that sort of mishap has passed.”

Chris nodded. “The portmen said something about that. They seemed a little concerned that the Vencume insisted on no suits. The Authority is pissed.”

“We’ve been living in fear of them all this time,” Evie said. “There’s no reason for it.”

George leaned up next to Evie and put an arm around her. “Did you miss us?”

Evie squirmed a bit under his arm. “I kept myself busy; you know me.”

Chris removed George’s arm from around Evie, took the bottle from Robert, and poured her another drink. He put the bottle down in front of Becca, who poured her own again. “How many flights have you been on since we last saw you?” he asked.

“Oh, lots,” Evie answered.

George leaned in again. “How much is that?”

She grinned. “Eight bookoos in a lot.”

George grinned back. “Sixteen lots in scad.”

The two laughed and said in unison, “Four scads in a buttload!”

“That’s antiquated,” Robert chuckled a bit next to Becca. “Ten standard lots in a standard scad...”

Becca poured herself another drink.

Chris picked up the bottle and poured the last bit into his glass. “Uh-oh, we’re down to the strip.” The soggy piece of soy-meat was clinging to the inside of the bottle.

Becca looked up hazily at the bottle. *Did I do that?*

George shuffled up to the bottle on his knees. “We have to get it. My god, how do we get it?”

“Float it out,” Evie said.

“Smash the bottle,” Robert said.

“I’m telling you,” Evie insisted, “just float it out. Pour something in there so it will rise to the top.”

Chris had the bottle upside down and was furiously pounding on the bottom. “It’s stuck in there pretty good.”

Becca rubbed a temple. “Why is that so important?”

“Get some chopsticks,” George directed. “You can get it out that way.”

Chris fetched a chopstick and tried to peel the strip away from the side of the bottle.

“*Vesta, Diana, Minerva...*” Evie swore and reached for the bottle. “Why won't you listen to me? I'm telling you how to get it out. I'm a flippin' engineer; I know what I'm talking about.”

Chris was still vainly trying to use the chopstick “If I can just...I almost had it!”

Robert crossed his arms. “You're too drunk to do it.”

“Try a bit of wire,” George said. “Just bend it into a hook and...”

Evie grabbed the bottle, ran to a sink, and ran water in the bottle until the strip of bitlong floated to the top. She fished it out easily with her long fingers and took a bite from it. “Ha-cha! Just as potent as ever!”

George punched Chris in the arm. “You've been shown up by a girl.”

Evie sauntered back to the others with a little extra wiggle in her hips, twirling the half-bitten strip. “Who wants the rest?”

Chris turned to the other two men. “It's my apartment.”

George shoved past him, “It's my bottle.”

Evie held the strip up high over her head. “It's my call.”

Robert knelt before her. “Have I ever told you how beautiful you are?”

She scowled. “No. Never. Not until now.” Then she smiled. “Becca's new to all this. It's hers.”

Becca flopped her head back. “What?”

Evie held the piece of soy meat over Becca's head. “The boys have been very rude and ignored you all night. Here.”

The soggy bitlong slipped easily down Becca's throat. It was the most disgusting thing she had ever eaten and it hit her stomach like molten rock. A night of drinking tried to force its way up.

“If you're going to be like that...” Chris sulked. “Maybe I *should* call Rosemary.”

Evie frowned. “Becca was on that ship with me. She was attacked, too.”

“We've *all* been on a ship with you.” George snorted.

“Yeah!” Robert put his hands on his hips. “What ever happened to the Gaines constant?”

“The *what?*” Evie asked.

Chris put a hand on Robert's shoulder and shook his head. “*Don't do it.*”

Robert brushed off his friend's hand. “There's this chick, see? And she's not that great looking. But she's one of the guys, right? She's a constant, *see?* And you can talk about other girls with her and it's OK and she'll drink you under the table but it's OK because you're never gonna try anything with her because...because...”

“Because it would be like one of the *guys*,” George finished.

The room went uncomfortably quiet.

Chris shuffled around and looked at his feet. “Nice going.”

Robert punched Chris in the arm. “You're not the leader! You don't get dibs!”

Evie stood opposite them, alone.

George held out his hands in a peacemaking gesture. “Sorry, Evie...we're just a little high-strung with all this war-talk. We heard what had happened to you but we didn't know that...” He gestured to her. “...That you would...You look great. You should know that.”

Evie stood with balled fists. Her jaw clenched. “Thank-you,” she said stiffly.

George continued. “I don't mean that in a bad way. Please. We all still like you, don't get me wrong. We know that Rosemary was...I mean...She must be pretty busted up.”

“That was a mistake,” Evie said through tight teeth.

“Aw, don't say that,” George whined. “It was good to see you so happy. We all want to...you should be happy. Jeeze, you're smart and you're funny and you're a good person. You know that. Don't be like...you know.”

Evie took a step forward. “Like what?”

Becca giggled to herself and said in a mocking, high-pitched voice, “She has a *lovely* personality.”

Chris slumped into a chair. Robert looked at his feet.

George was still holding his arms out. “Don't take it the wrong way.”

Evie went to help Becca up. “I don't know if there is a *right* way to take it.”

Chris rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I have to get up early."
"Party's over," said Robert.
Becca stood unsteadily. "They're right," she slurred. "You do look great."
"Don't *you* start," Evie hissed.
George helped them to the door. "Evie, please. Don't be a stranger, OK?"
She glared at him, then the rest of the room. "Only if you don't treat me like one."

* * * * *

The next morning, Becca had a throbbing headache. Her mouth was dry, her stomach upset. Everything ached.

"Gooooooood morning," Evie sang. "And how are yooooooooou today?"

"I never want to taste what was that stuff last night?" Becca croaked.

"Bitlong vodka," Evie said.

Becca rolled under her sheets. "You're in a despicably good mood."

"I am!" Evie posed for a moment in the middle of the room. "I just...*ha-ha*, I feel better. Oh, it's good to catch up with old friends. I haven't seen those guys in ages. Good times."

Becca smiled, even though her face hurt. *She'll forget about the Vencume. She'll forget about the children.* "You're OK with what happened last night?"

"Those guys," Evie tisked. "They were just drunk. They'll get over it." She did a little dance in the middle of the room:

*Years separate us, lives, light-years
Yet still there runs a common thread
We've all had our laughs and tears
And they're all glad that I'm not dead.*

"I have some shopping to do," Evie said, sitting to lace up her boots. "You coming?"

Becca threw a pillow at her. "No. I don't want to move. I don't want to go out there. It smells. I can't take smells right now."

"Well, OK." Evie smiled and put on her dark glasses. "I'm going to stop by the Queue on the way back, go ahead and get that chip thing taken care of. You need anything while I'm out?"

"Get me a new head," Becca moaned.

"You know..." Evie laughed. "I just might. I'm the right woman to ask."

* * * * *

Becca woke up three hours later and took a shower. The extra sleep had helped a little, but now her stomach ached. She needed to eat something. Evie had not returned from her trip yet.

She stopped by the relay depot to see if her letter had been sent out yet. The data-bank would have to be full before the cost for burst transmission could be justified.

The Pegger at the desk told her they had reached capacity just that afternoon. "Usually, take a couple days. But we a' two bursts after yours. One was secure. Lot a' chatter today. When's Gains gonna come get her messages?"

Becca left the depot feeling unsettled.

After getting lost a couple of times, Becca decided to stop for something to eat. Lunch was cold soba noodles and tea.

She was turning back to the short-stay quarters when she heard her name.

"Becca?" A man's voice.

She turned around. "Franz?"

He stood in front of her, looking disheveled. "Have you been to the Queue yet?"

“No, I was going to go on the way back. Why are you still on station? I thought you’d left already.”

“They won’t let me.” He sighed. “I had to put everything on hold.”

“They won’t...” Becca looked up. “Why not? What’s going on?”

“They asked me questions.” He looked at his hands. “Questions I can’t answer...”

She felt her throat go dry. “What’s going on? What happened?”

“There’s a problem,” he said. “The Vencume are buying strange things they don’t usually buy. The portmen reported it first. The Shipping Authority tried asking after it, but the Vencume are going silent.”

“What kinds of things?”

He smiled. “Oh, the kinds of things an army of little girls might find useful.”

Becca looked around. “You haven’t said anything about...I mean...*we* aren’t saying anything about that, are we?”

“I’m not ready for those kinds of questions,” he answered. “I just want to go home.”

“So, why are they keeping you here?”

Franz leaned in close. “The whole station is out of communication with the planet, did you know that? Everyone’s talking about us going to war. That’s why they don’t want anyone going down there...to warn them...to start a panic. Can you imagine it? A war! And with who? Maybe the Vencume...”

Becca shook her head. “You mean with the Tzikzik. Why would we go against the Vencume?”

“This used to be their planet, didn’t it?” He held out his hands and gestured around. “Maybe they want it back? Don’t you think they finally have the means? Meanwhile, the Vencume are pulling out of the station. In two days’ time there won’t be a squid left!”

“It’s for the Tzikzik,” Becca insisted. “We already decided that. That’s what Evie said. That army is to fight the Tzikzik, not us.”

Franz sucked air between his teeth. “Have you ever seen a Tzikzik?”

“I can’t believe it.” She shook her head. “There must be some mistake. It’s the Tzikzik, not the Vencume. I can’t believe that because of one ship...because we were attacked—”

“Oh, no!” Franz chuckled. “There’s been other Tzikzik attacks. Always on the border zones with the Vencume Empire. We’re the lucky ones. We survived.”

“No one I talked to last night said anything like that,” Becca objected. “Are you sure this isn’t just rumor mongering?”

The stout man laughed. “All the young people here are Shipping Authority! Those snaps don’t know what’s going on. You have to ask the right people! You have to know who to talk to.”

She looked at her feet. “What have the Wainwrights said?”

Franz stiffened. “Haven’t talked to the family. They’re in too good with everyone.”

* * * * *

Becca got back to the short-stay quarters as soon as she could. She didn’t even bother with the room she shared with Evie, but went directly to the Wainwrights’ room and knocked on the door.

A woman’s voice shouted through the door. “A’ you reporter?”

“Stella! It’s me, Becca. Open up!”

The door opened and a strange woman answered—a Pegger. “Who a’ you?”

Becca checked the door number, thinking she had made a mistake. “I thought the Wainwrights were staying here.”

“They left,” the woman explained. “You on the *Tong Dizhou*?”

Becca nodded.

The woman sucked in air between her teeth, it was obviously a Pegger gesture. “Authority came; I heard ‘em. They looking for you.”

“Where are Stella and Judith and—”

“They left. Authority moved ‘em.” She poked her head out the door and looked down the hall. “They asked a’ you and that...white-haired woman who came a’ the ship.”

“Is this about updating our chips?” Becca asked.

The woman shook her head. "They came here, the Authority. Go ask 'em."

She shut the door.

Becca went to her shared room to talk to Evie, but Evie wasn't there. None of Evie's things were there. *They must have moved her as well.* But, Becca noticed her own things were still there. *Are they not going to move me? Maybe I'm supposed to check in with them first.* She decided to freshen up before going to the Queue. *I'm sure they want to get us in some more secure location so no reporters can spread any panic. Rumor mongering is still an offense....*

Cat

True to its name, there was a line at the Queue. Becca took a position and advanced at such an interminably slow pace, she thought there might have been a borrowed-time field in the office.

When she finally got to the main window, she was instructed to place her hand on a scanner.

"Just keep your hand still, don't move," the girl behind the counter instructed. "We'll just read it and update it here." She tapped her comm. "Oh, not again..."

"Is there a problem?" Becca asked.

"It's been like this all day," the girl complained. "Something's going on with the data-banks and everything is slow." She sighed. "Well, I can ask you some questions and we'll just put them in when it comes up. Are you an organ donor?"

Becca stifled a laugh. "Yes."

"Do you currently maintain a religious belief that would preclude cremation of a body or the draining of whole blood?"

Becca shook her head. "No."

"Do you or anyone in your family..." She stopped. "Oh, here we go. It's up and...*Oh.*"

"Oh?"

The girl behind the counter smiled weakly. "You're Dr. Tabib from the *Tong Dizhou.*"

Becca nodded. "Yes?"

A guard came in from a back room and gestured for Becca to follow him.

Becca turned to the girl behind the counter.

"I can't update your chip," the girl protested. "They want to do an interview. They'll update it afterwards."

Becca was led into a room where two Shipping Authority representatives sat behind a desk. The woman placed a recorder between them. The man stood and smiled. "If you'll take a seat and state your name for the record."

"Dr. Rebecca Safiye Tabib."

The woman slid a small scanner forward. "Place your hands on the scanner, palm down, in their natural position."

Becca put down her hands and the device flashed.

"Very good," the woman said.

The man had set up another device that looked like a pair of binoculars. "If you'll look in here, please? There will be a flash of light. Try not to squint or blink. Look straight ahead."

Becca pressed her eyes into the scanner. The light came on for two seconds. Leaning back, the afterimage floated over the desk. She rubbed her eyes.

The woman was holding an imager. "If you'll look this way? Straight forward. Do not smile." A picture was taken. "And now if you could smile for us. Please show your teeth."

Becca obliged.

"We're just going to ask a few questions about what happened to your ship." The man turned to his notes. "The Vencume have given us their version of the events, from when you picked up their escape pod and loaned them a lifeboat."

"That was very diplomatic of you." The woman nodded.

The man was reading notes now. "The Wainwrights have given us information about the premature lifeboat launch...after your ship came under attack."

“You left the *Tong Dizhou* on the lifeboat,” the woman noted. “When was that?”

Becca thought it over in her head. “About thirty days ago. It was hard to keep time. I think we were in the lifeboat for five days before the Vencume picked us up.”

“And when was the alleged Ms. Gaines picked up?” the man asked. “How soon after you were recovered did the Vencume bring her aboard?”

The alleged Ms. Gaines? “A day? Maybe two. Again, it was hard to keep time.”

“The other members of your crew stated that she returned to the wreckage of the *Tong Dizhou* about four days ago,” the woman read a pad, “in the company of two Vencume. They restored the wreckage to some operability. Why was the junior engineer, Max Ruths, not taken on this trip?”

Becca shifted in her seat. “You would have to ask the captain.”

The man checked his pad. “Were you aware that the data-bank of the ship was accessed by an external storage device?”

“I’m sure Evie was just checking the integrity.”

“By copying over the entire contents?”

Becca shrugged. “I’m a doctor, not a cybernetics expert.”

The woman pointed to some line on her pad. “The blackboxes record that Ms. Gaines did not leave the ship until four days ago. They also report pulse was lost shortly after the launch of the lifeboat. How do you account for that?”

“The system must have gone down,” Becca suggested. “Maybe it recorded it incorrectly.”

The woman raised her eyebrows. “On *all* boxes?”

“Again,” Becca stammered. “I’m not the expert.”

“No,” the man said. “You are the ship’s doctor. We have an incident report here, after you brought in a Vencume escape pod. There was an explosion, of which we have video from the ship. Would you like us to play it?”

Becca shook her head.

“After that explosion, Ms. Gains reports a piece of shrapnel in her left hand. You removed this and applied sutures. Do you remember performing this procedure?”

Becca nodded.

On the screen behind them, a blank palm-scan appeared. The woman gestured to it. “Would you please show us from where the shrapnel was removed?”

Becca stood and pointed to a section on the left hand. “It was here. The piece was ten centimeters by two.”

“May I say, Dr. Tabib,” the man said, “that you do remarkable work. You can hardly tell it happened.”

Becca stared at the scan and suddenly recognized Evie’s flawless new hands. The room got cold. She stumbled back to her chair.

“You should be working as a plastic surgeon.” The woman now stood and gestured to the right hand. “It seems that the alleged Ms. Gains has also lost a scar that ran across three of her fingers and her palm. Maybe we should compare?”

A second pair of hands appeared and the two images merged. The second pair had a dark red line across the right palm, ending halfway down.

“You could use them for before-and-after shots,” the man joked. “If you decide to put your obvious talents to more profitable use.”

The woman sat back down. “Let’s look at another pair of before-and-after shots.”

Now the screen called up two head-shots of Evie. The one with long, black, greasy hair and brown eyes had two marks on the bridge of her nose, where her clunky glasses rubbed. The second shot was more recent, with dark blue eyes and two tiny dot-like scars under the eyes.

“Evie...” Becca whispered.

“Yes,” the man agreed. “One of them is. But we were wondering if you could tell us who this second individual was.”

The two scans melded: a near perfect match.

The woman now pointed at the image. “This other person is slightly thinner, easily explained away by the time on the wreckage, but the jaw and brow have shifted, you see?”

The image flickered from one to the other. “She was injured.” Becca was reminded of the model on the Vencume ship: the morphing and clacking skeleton. “The Vencume helped patch her up.”

The man leaned forward. “What were the nature of her injuries? As the ship’s doctor, I’m sure you could give us a detailed report.”

Becca nodded and shut her eyes, trying to remember. “Her hips...were...fractured. Ah, skull fracture...eyes were burned...”

“She suffered these injuries and yet came out with her arms and legs unscathed?” The man laughed. “You can’t think of a better explanation?”

Another image appeared on the screen. Becca recognized it immediately as iLyssa, with her neat pony-tail and smug grin. It was a still-capture, the designer leaning over the lens, her arm stretched over to something next to the imager.

The woman pointed to it. “Who is this individual?”

Becca coughed. “It looks like Evie.”

“Doesn’t it, though?” The woman stared at the image. “However, Ms. Gaines’ chip reported her being on the other side of the ship when this was recorded.”

“Who attacked your ship?” The man was changing the subject.

“The...*Tzikzik*.” Becca struggled with the name. “The Vencume we had picked up were running from them, after evacuating their own ship.”

Now the woman was scrolling through her pad. “What does a ‘Tzikzik’ look like?”

Becca felt her stomach drop. “I’m...I’m sorry?”

The man smiled. “You were forced to evacuate your ship, leaving Ms. Gaines behind. Everyone reports that the ship was under attack by something called...’Tzikzik’. What do they look like?”

“I...I never saw them.” Becca was sweating. “Second mate Judith Wainwright woke me and we rushed to the lifeboat. The evacuation had started already. I never even saw the ship when we were in the lifeboat. Everyone was...distracted.”

“No one said what they looked like?” the woman asked.

“The alleged Ms. Gaines was injured and later recovered from the wreckage, by the Vencume.” The man wasn’t reading his notes, but staring intently at Becca. “She was then brought to you, aboard a Vencume ship. Did she or any Vencume ever tell you what a ‘Tzikzik’ was?”

Becca shook her head and looked at the floor. “The captain said they looked like Vencume. The ship, anyway.”

The two Shipping Authority representatives shifted their pads and looked over notes.

“What was the cat’s name?” the woman asked.

This caught Becca off-guard. “Cat?”

“The ship’s cat,” the man read his notes. “It was also left behind and was allegedly in the ship’s main engine control room when it depressurized.”

“Uh...” Becca paused, “Jim.”

The man read a note. “When you were at the salvagers, they were told the cat’s name was Jones.”

The woman read her own notes. “The alleged Ms. Gaines later said the cat’s name was John. As she put it, ‘Like Long John Silver.’ How many names did the cat have?”

“I guess the cat had several names.” Becca sighed. “We all had a name for the cat. They’re hard animals to properly name.”

The man smiled. “The alleged Ms. Gaines decided to give us a poetry lesson instead of answering the question.”

“Why do you keep calling her that?” Becca asked. “She’s not *alleged* at all. That’s Evie.”

“The individual *says* she is Ms. Gaines,” the woman answered sternly, “but retinal scans say otherwise. The images do not match. The hands do not match. The only thing that *does* match is the chip.”

“We’re still waiting on DNA,” the man added.

“Have you ever seen a Vencume core unit?” the woman asked. “Do you know how they are used?”

“The Vencume we picked up had a core with them,” Becca answered. “One of their crew-members had died.”

“Do you understand its use?” the woman pressed.

Becca shook her head. "Not fully."

The man called up the image of the gray-haired designer again. "The Vencume have some kind of stem-tech, don't they?"

Becca nodded.

"Don't you think it's interesting how much this individual looks like Ms. Gaines?"

"The...the eyes are smaller," Becca noted.

The man nodded in agreement. "So they are." He turned around. "Did you know that Ms. Gaines was a wealthy woman?"

Becca shrugged. "This was my first trip with her. She used to joke she was 'good for it', you know?"

"But in order to access it..." The woman had called up the two palm-scans. "...She would need her chip. Thanks to today's technology, it is *all* she would need."

"How much did she offer you?" the man asked suddenly.

"What?" Becca felt blind-sided by the question. "Offer me? For what?"

"To move the chip," the woman said.

"I...I didn't move it," Becca stammered.

The man stood up and started to pace the room. "But you were there when it was moved, weren't you?"

"No! Nobody moved anything."

"I'd like to play you something," the woman said, pulling out a second recorder.

It was Evie's voice, tired and strained. Becca could imagine the jaw clenched shut. The other voices were her two questioners.

Female questioner: What color was the cat?

Evie: All colors.

Male questioner: So he was like a rag-doll or a calico, was he?

Evie: Yes.

Female questioner: But you told the salvage team the cat was black.

Evie: He had black bits. (cough)

Male questioner: Maybe the cat was invisible. He seems hard to describe.

Female questioner: And he never appears on any video from the ship.

Male questioner: What color was the cat?

Evie: (chuckle) In the dark, all cats are gray.

Female questioner: We are not here for a philosophy lecture.

Male questioner: Let us assume, for argument's sake, that there was no cat.

Female questioner: What happened, then, in your main engine control room?

Evie: (laugh) What fantasy would you like me to concoct?

Male questioner: We're not asking for a fantasy, only the truth.

Female questioner: (angrily) Preferably, one that explains these fantastic systems faults that records your chip's loss of pulse, its inability to record your location correctly, or its failure to even record something as momentous as a loss of pressure in the main engine control room.

Male questioner: (with raised voice) How do you explain the blood in your main engine control room?

There was a long pause. Becca heard a sigh, maybe a little sob.

Evie: (muffled, maybe her face in her hands?) It's my blood.

Male questioner: Would you repeat that, please?

Evie: (sigh) It's my blood. (Evie's voice was calm and clear. The jaw had obviously unclenched.) It happened when my arms and legs were torn off. Maybe when I lost my lower jaw or when they ripped out my eyes. Might be a combination of events. I think I blacked out. (Another hollow chuckle.) Luckily, I come from hardy stock and we were able to glue everything back in place.

The woman turned the recorder off.

Becca looked at the two representatives. "How long did you grill her?"

The woman waved her hand. "Inconsequential."

“Dr. Tabib...” The man leaned forward, fingers crossed in front of him. “Why do you think this individual would have said what she said?”

Becca stared at his interlaced fingers. “Desperation. Fear. Exhaustion.” She shrugged. “Why does anyone do anything?”

He smiled. “But you can’t shed any light on this, can you?”

Becca stiffened. “I was on a lifeboat. I wasn’t there. I’ve never been to the main engine control room on any ship.”

Now the woman smiled. “You’re been very helpful, Dr. Tabib. We’ll let you know if you need anything else.”

The man stood and led her back to the door. “One of our people will see you to where you are staying.”

* * * * *

A man in a smart uniform from the Shipping Authority took Becca back to the short-stay quarters.

“Why did you take Evie's things?” she asked.

“The suspect's stolen articles have been brought in as evidence,” the curt man replied.

Becca looked around the room. It seemed colder than before. “I don't think that—“

“You will stay here,” the man informed her, “until we call for you. Your cooperation is appreciated.”

“Please.” Becca took his sleeve. “It really is Evie. I know it might not look that way, but it really is her. You have to understand.”

He looked her up and down with hard eyes. “It's not my place to say.”

“I know people,” Becca pleaded. “There's a...Chris...Chris Kaplan. He's the...head of dock operations. You can ask him. He knows Evie. He'll testify that it's her.”

Again, the man in uniform looked her up and down. “You will stay *here*. We will call for you if you are needed.”

Becca shook her head. “I don't understand. There is a perfectly reasonable explanation for what's happened. You have to believe me.”

“Ma'am,” he answered. “We're at war now and everyone has to do their part. I'm sure you understand.” He smiled weakly. “For the good of your species, please, just cooperate. For Human kind.”

He left. Becca lay on the bed. *So that's it. We actually are at war now.*

She suddenly felt very, very small.

* * * * *

Becca tried to read, but was too distracted. It was Francis Bacon again. She had decided to give it another go but the words kept melding together. While trying to decipher it, she saw a line she thought she remembered...something Max had said on the Vencume ship:

All depends on keeping the eye steadily fixed upon the facts of nature, and so receiving their images simply as they are; for God forbid that we should give out a dream of our own imagination for a pattern of the world; rather may He graciously grant to us to write an apocalypse or true vision of the footsteps of the Creator imprinted on his creatures.¹

Maybe Max was right. Maybe Evie was religious.

Becca tried to read some more but hunger made it even harder to concentrate. *Surely, I'm allowed to go get something to eat?* Thinking about it only made her hungrier. After pacing in the room for a while, she decided to take a nap.

She tossed and turned for a couple hours, but the growl from her stomach got louder.

It was no good ignoring it now. She went out. There was a stand-and-eat not far from the quarters and she could bring it back to the room.

1 Francis Bacon “Novum Organum“

If anyone else had made the trip, it only would have taken five minutes. Because it was Becca, she got hopelessly lost. It may have been hunger or nerves, but she was deep into an unfamiliar area on the station before she turned herself around in the right direction.

A familiar voice behind her shouted out, "Hey, Rebecca!"

Becca juggled what she had in her arms. "I can't stay and talk. I just popped out for something to eat." She turned to see a short woman with kinky hair in a Shipping Authority uniform behind her.

Major Rosemary Gekkei nodded and took Becca's arm. "You know, when we say to stay in your quarters, we mean it." Her uniform bore the insignia of the security division.

Becca's legs went weak. She dropped everything she was carrying.

Rosemary continued, smiling. "I was actually on my way to collect you, but your chip reported you'd left the room."

"My...my chip?"

"Oh really, Dr. Tabib." Rosemary produced a set of cuffs and twisted Becca's arms behind her. "We have to keep track of so many people; did you think we didn't have a system in place?"

"Are you taking me to the Queue?" Becca asked weakly.

"No, Dr. Tabib." Rosemary smiled. "I'm taking you to jail."

Any humiliation Becca felt during that long walk was overshadowed by confusion and fear.

"You haven't said why you're arresting me," she protested. "What did I do wrong?"

Rosemary ignored the question. "When I saw Evie four years ago, I hadn't really decided on a career-path yet. Isn't it funny what can happen in four years? Here I am: head of security for the station."

"You have the wrong idea," Becca pleaded.

"Oh, there's the occasional drunk and disorderly conduct," Rosemary mused. "And that always happens in a port. It's not an easy job; we're so far away from everything. You'd think this place would be more built up, considering its historical significance. You know this is where Humans first met Vencume? Yeah, our means of travel comes from this place but everyone treats it like a little back-water hell-hole. And now, what's happening? This will be the first line drawn in a great conflict."

Becca stumbled at the quick pace. "If this is about Evie..."

"I wish it was that easy." Rosemary laughed. "You can't imagine how excited I was when I saw the manifest for the ship. And then, watching you all get off, I kept waiting to see her. I didn't know it was her...hard to recognize with that white hair. But once you'd dyed it...well. You know, I really thought it was her. I guess..." Becca heard a break in Rosemary's voice. "...I guess she is dead."

Becca stopped and turned to Rosemary. "She really is Evie. I'm so sorry for what happened."

Rosemary narrowed her eyes, lowered her eyebrows, and pursed her lips. It was as if her entire face had been closed by an invisible and indignant draw-string. "*What..happened?*"

"Between you and Evie," Becca said.

"We were friends." Rosemary shook her head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Becca stammered. "But Evie said that you...that she—"

Now, Rosemary laughed. "Oh, you people. You've got some pretty lousy intel. I've been happily married for a couple years now. You're pretty bad at this whole spying thing, aren't you?"

Becca was stripped and put into a gray uniform. A prisoner's block was attached to her right hand: only her thumb and the tips of her fingers poked out. She would not be able to use that hand while the block was in place; it prevented her from bending her fingers. Becca had to pose for new images, holding up the block: a visual record of her arrest. The charges had been obstruction of justice, falsification of evidence, misprision of felony, accessory to identity theft, accessory to conspiracy, accessory to espionage, and accessory to felony murder.

After processing, they led her to a cell. There was a bed, without sheets, and a suction tube. It reminded Becca of her stay on the Vencume ship. She was still hungry.

Once the initial shock wore off, Becca started to sob. She curled up on the bed and hid her head under her arms. *Even if the Vencume did come forward, it wouldn't do any good now.* She sniffled and rubbed her nose on her left sleeve. *They must have arrested the Wainwrights as well.*

Somehow, the thought of the entire crew being brought in was comforting. *I'm not alone. They're here with me, maybe next door.*

She placed a hand on the wall and wished the others good luck.

Some hours later, someone gave her a meal, similar to a zero-gee ration. She ate ravenously. After that, she was able to sleep.

When Becca woke up, she accidentally hit herself in the head with the prisoner's block. She had nothing to staunch the bleeding, so she had to hold her right arm to the wound she'd given herself. There was no water to clean with and the blood dried to the side of her face. She rubbed it off and watched the flakes collect on the floor of her cell.

Becca was given another meal. She had no idea how long she had been there. Her questions about what would happen went unanswered and the guard who gave her the meal did not ask about her injury. *That sort of thing must happen often.*

To pass the time, Becca imagined she was back home, making chicken with white sauce. She ran her hands through the motions, boiling the chicken, pulling the onion from the water and draining the meat and removing the bones. After that, cutting up zucchini and scallions. She imagined sautéing the scallions and mixing in milk, slowly adding the mixture to a pan with the chicken and zucchini, shredding the cheese (real cheese!) and placing the pan in the oven. It was comfort food, even if only imaginary.

She took a nap; there was another meal. No one came to collect the empty bags but she wasn't sure if she was supposed to push them down the suction tube. The cell had no windows and the lights never went out. *Either a good deal of time has passed or they're feeding me at irregular intervals.*

Becca started to cook another dish in her head. The barley was bubbling on the stove and she added chickpeas, kidney beans, apricots, and raisins. After reducing to a simmer, she stirred in sugar and vanilla, finally scooping out a helping and sprinkling chopped walnuts on it. *By the time I get out, I'll have cooked a five-course dinner.*

Becca's imaginary kitchen was interrupted when a guard came in and cuffed her hands behind her back. She was taken from the cell and down a hall to a room similar to the one in the Queue where she had first been questioned.

Her interrogator was the woman who had questioned her earlier at the Queue, an Officer Hao Li. The stern woman started asking questions before the guard had even finished cuffing Becca to the chair. "Do you understand why you are here?"

"I've heard the charges against me," Becca said. "But it's all a misunderstanding..."

"You're here partially due to your own testimony," Officer Hao stated. "Would you like to revise it?"

Becca nodded.

"Where should we start? In the lifeboat?" This was less of a question and more of a command.

"We were there for five days. Junior pilot Gordon Gorsky had launched prematurely but we were still on route to Pegasai-51. The Vencume ship that had picked up our other lifeboat, the one we gave the Vencume, found us and brought us on board."

"Ms. Gaines was not with you on the lifeboat?"

"No, due to the premature launch, she had been left in the bay."

"Why did she leave the lifeboat?" Officer Hao asked.

"The bay doors were not opening. She used the loadmaster to get them opened."

Her interrogator made a note. "And that was the last time you saw her?"

"We didn't see her again until the Vencume recovered her from their escape pod."

Officer Hao stopped taking notes and gave Becca a hard stare. "You're saying that the individual was recovered in a *Vencume* lifeboat?"

"Well, we had it on board the *Tong Dizhou*," Becca explained. "From when we had picked up the other Vencume. That was why we were short one. We were just going to turn it over when we got here."

Officer Hao Li made several notes and massaged her left temple. "What does a..." checking her notes... "Tzikzik look like? Do you know anything about them?"

"Captain Wainwright had said that the ship that attacked us looked like a Vencume ship. That's all I know. I never saw the actual being."

"This word...Tzikzik..." Hao Li said it mockingly. "Ms. Gaines says, on the video we collected from the ship, that it was a word the translator could not pick up. What led the crew to believe it was another race of beings?"

"Well, uh..." Becca fished for an explanation. "Evie asked them. She asked what it was. They said it was another race."

"On the video, the Vencume specifically state that *Tzikzik* is *not* civil-kind."

Becca softly touched the bump on her head. "I...I don't know. But the Vencume had said..."

Officer Hao leaned forward. "They said...?"

"Later, when they recovered the *Tong Dizhou*, they said that the Tzikzik had been destroyed."

Hao Li raised her eyebrows and leaned back. She stood and left the room.

The guard did not come in and un-cuff Becca and she wondered if they would just leave her there.

After a while, Hao Li came back into the room and sat down. "Dr. Tabib, you said that the Vencume said they had destroyed the Tzikzik when they recovered the freighter. We do not have that confirmed by any other testimony. When was that said?"

"We: Evie, Franz, the captain and I...we had gone looking for Gordon. When we got back, we were told that the Vencume had recovered the ship. Evie and I went down and that's when the Vencume there said the other Tzikzik had been destroyed."

"Other Tzikzik?" Officer Hao asked.

Becca had to pause and think about it. "No, maybe just Tzikzik. No 'other'. I'm—"

Officer Hao held a hand up. "Never mind. What happened to junior pilot Gordon Gorsky?"

"Evie said she had kicked him over a railing."

"You did not see this happen?"

"No." Becca shook her head. "But we went back to where it happened and couldn't find him."

"You went back to where the suspect *said* it happened..."

"There was a section of the Vencume ship that stopped spin and she said it happened there. We had no reason to not believe her."

Hao Li turned back to her notes.

"It is her," Becca insisted. "I know it might not look that way but it is her. Maybe the hands aren't the same, but the Tzikzik had taken them or...something happened to them...But the Vencume made new ones. They cloned new ones for her and then...well, fingerprints aren't determined by genetics. Neither are retinal scans. Did the DNA come back? That shows it's her, doesn't it?"

Officer Hao didn't look at her. "Why did the suspect introduce herself as 'Gwennie' Gaines?"

"Rosemary and Evie have some sort of history," Becca answered. "I don't know the details."

"But you played along with this deception?" Officer Hao's eyes narrowed.

"I figured it was for a good reason." Becca shrugged. "Evie's been on so many flights, I'm sure she knows lots of people from everywhere. There must be a few she doesn't want to—"

"Later that day," Hao Li said, "you were in the residence of a Chris Kaplan. Did the suspect introduce herself as 'Gwennie' at that time?"

"No."

"Do you know who Gwendolyn Gaines was?"

Becca shrugged a little. "Her sister?"

Officer Hao Li stood. "That will be all for now." She picked up her notes and left the room.

A while later, the guard came back, un-cuffed Becca from her chair, and led her back to her cell.

They took her from the cell several more times after that. Becca answered all the questions honestly, but her interrogator never seemed satisfied. From what Becca could tell, the Shipping Authority thought that Evie had been planted as some kind of spy and wanted to confirm that. *It stands to reason, I guess. I suppose that with a doctor and an engineer, you'd know everything about Humans you needed to know.*

The empty bags from her meals that were piling up against the wall were starting to smell, but she was afraid to try to force one down the tube. *I can't risk breaking it. No one will fix it.* If they had been planet-side, she assumed it would attract insects. *I wonder where the spores for mold come from...*

She had not showered the entire time and she knew she reeked. *They're trying to break me down. Make me pliable. What kind of resistance did they expect? I'm not some kind of hardened criminal.* She looked at her sleeves: one crusted from a night of sobbing, the other stiff with dried blood. *Well, maybe I am a little hardened.* It had itched at first, keeping her awake, but after a while she got used to it.

One night, after what must have been the thirty-sixth meal, Becca lay on the cot, staring half-mindedly at the bare light that never went out. She had finished cooking several imaginary meals and now sat at a table in her mind, surrounded by her family. She composed another letter in her head and made a promise to herself that she would send it if given the opportunity:

Dearest Sefer,

I hope you got my last letter and that it finds you and Fatma well. I was told that it was sent out on a burst rather quickly after I dropped it off. It would seem that there has been a lot of talk of us going to war since our arrival here. If you have heard anything about this, I am sure you have also received word of my current predicament. As you may have collected from my last letter, there is much I did not say.

I told you about Evie Gaines, our chief engineer. There is a lot I did not mention because I know that the Shipping Authority monitors all communications sent on bursts, but now it seems a moot point.

The Vencume have a cloning technology and they've adapted it to Humans. I know that this is something we have never explored fully because of the telomere problem, but if that has been overcome, it may have other uses. The questions of organ donation will be absolved.

Tell your mother she was wrong about the portmen. You had always said a man is made by the land he sets foot on. I feel uprooted now and hope that soon I will be able to get a good dose of dirt, sunshine, and water. I wish I could come home right now and have this chip removed from my hand. I cannot continue this career any further.

Make sure that Huri is attending her studies. I know that her mother cannot be there for her, but--

Becca's imaginary letter was interrupted.

Flowers

A guard came in and cuffed Becca's wrists. "The Authority needs your assistance."

"Is this about Evie?" Becca asked.

"You have a history with the suspect," he explained, "and we believe that you may be able to get the answers we require."

The guard led Becca out of the cell and down the hall to the interrogation rooms.

Evie was laying on a bed in a four-point restraint. Her hair was white again, so Becca assumed that either the dye had washed out or the Authority had stripped it. Evie's half-open and red-rimmed eyes were glassed over and fixed on some spot on the ceiling. If her chest hadn't moved with shallow breaths, Becca would have sworn she was dead.

"Why is she restrained?" Becca asked.

"The suspect is a suicide risk," the guard answered.

The Authority had installed a feeding tube up one of Evie's nostrils. There was also a catheter; the line ran out of one of her pant-legs to a bag that hung at the foot of the bed. Becca noticed a little blood

suspended in the collected urine. An IV machine sat next to the bed, clicking out a measured flow into Evie's right hand.

"What are you giving her?" Becca asked.

A Shipping Authority doctor turned the machine off. "The suspect was sedated," the doctor explained, "to prevent self-injury."

The guard led Becca to a chair by the bed and cuffed her blocked wrist to it.

"You can't just dope a person out like that," Becca protested. "You already have her restrained."

"And she's on a high-enough dose to kill a human," the doctor answered. "The Vencume must be making them tough. We're not risking it."

The guard handed Becca a pad with questions on it. "You will interrogate the suspect."

Evie blinked, slowly. It was like watching video at half-speed.

"Evie..." Becca started.

"The suspect has been confirmed as *not* being Ms. Gaines," the guard said brusquely. "You are to ask the suspect what has been done with Ms. Gaines' body."

Becca handed the guard the pad of questions back. "I can't do this." *But you don't want to go back to the cell, do you?* "Please, let me ask her what happened on the freighter. I can do that. Just let me ask what happened there."

The guard took the pad from Becca and produced a recorder that was placed on the bed.

Becca turned back to the unresponsive figure on the bed. "Evie..."

Evie gasped...then swallowed. Her voice was barely a whisper. "Do I still have arms?"

Becca took one of Evie's hands in her free left hand. "Yes, you still have arms. Can you feel me?"

"I can't rub my eyes..." Her voice trailed off and she blinked again, slowly. "I thought I was in the tank again, but..."

"But?" Becca asked.

"In the tank...I knew I would get out."

"What is this tank?" The guard scowled at Becca.

Becca looked at him pleadingly and turned back to Evie. "Evie..." Becca gave her hand a light squeeze. "This is very important. I need you to answer some questions. They've asked me to ask you some questions. Can you do that for me?"

"They ask so many questions..." Evie shut her eyes. "I answer them, but they don't like them."

"I know. Let's try to get through this, OK?"

Evie sniffled. "My throat is sore. I can't...I can't breathe through my nose."

"Let's just do this, please? Then we can all go home."

"Then *you* can go home." Evie opened her eyes and looked at Becca. "They hit you. I'm sorry you got dragged into this."

Becca touched the bump on her head. "They...they didn't do that. We need to know...what happened in the main engine control room. Do you remember that? The lifeboat left and then what did you do?"

"I ran." Evie shut her eyes. "I got into a suit. All the air was rushing out. I had to crank open the door. I made it through the sections, pulling the shutters after me."

"OK, good. You were sealing off the ship. You closed the sections behind you and you made it to the back of the ship, to the main engine control room. What happened there?"

Evie opened her eyes. "I killed all the fuel to the port engine. I had to turn the ship so you could get away."

Becca looked up at the guard. He nodded.

"OK, so you got the ship turned." Becca gave Evie's hand another squeeze. "Then what?"

Evie shut her eyes and moaned. She started to mumble a string of numbers.

"What's that?" the guard asked. "Is that code?" He rushed forward, moving the recorder closer to Evie's face. "The suspect has done this before. What are these numbers?"

Becca wanted to move his arm back, but was afraid to touch him. "It's a calming exercise. I've seen her do it before." She turned back to Evie. "You're in the main engine control room. You've turned the ship. You see the Tzikzik..."

"They're Vencume. They're not Vencume...I don't know what they are."

Becca looked at the guard. He did not respond. Becca turned back to Evie. "Please, say that again."

"I hold out my hand," Evie answered, "and I see it leave me. They take it. They wrap around it and pull. My arm is gone. It only hurts a little at first. I reach for it. They take my other arm." Evie snapped her eyes open. "They're not in suits. Angry, clacking...I can see their skin, bright red. Covered in...spiky...I don't know what they are!"

The guard leaned in with the recorder, holding it close to Evie's face.

Evie continued. "They have the helmet off of my suit. I try to kick away. I can't kick away. They have my head..." She pulled against the restraints. "I'm not that! Stop saying I'm that!"

The Authority doctor turned the IV machine back on. It clicked out a dose.

Evie arched her back and screamed. "Let me out! I have to get away! Get them away!"

The guard pushed past Becca and pressed Evie down by her shoulders.

The IV machine clicked out another dose.

"Gwennie!" Evie's eyes searched the room wildly. "Mom! Dad! I'm sorry! Save me!"

Becca tried to stand, still cuffed to the chair, and it clanged to the floor, dragging her down. "I'm here, Evie. We're OK. You're not on the ship, you're OK. We're safe...we're safe..."

The IV machine clicked again. The guard stood back from Evie and put Becca back in her chair. He picked the recorder up from where it had been knocked to the floor and checked to see that it was still working.

The Shipping Authority doctor made an adjustment to the IV machine and it clicked again.

Evie's eyes fluttered a bit. The dose was taking affect.

Becca wiped her eyes. "Let's skip this part. Let's forget about this part and move forward."

"I can't see," Evie whimpered.

"Let's go past all this," Becca insisted. "Let's get to the tank. You're in the tank."

Evie smiled a little. "I'm floating. It's warm and dark."

The guard pointed angrily at the pad.

Becca nodded meekly and continued. "You're in the tank. The Vencume put you there. I was there, listening. They did something."

"I can hear them," Evie said dreamily. "I want to talk to them. I can hear them chittering. I want to tell them something. They say they're sorry."

Becca leaned forward. "They're sorry?"

Evie swallowed and started to make a strange noise, almost like...

The guard picked up the recorder. "Let it be noted that at this point, the suspect began to speak the Vencume language."

Becca turned to Evie. "They say they are sorry. Why are they sorry?"

Evie stopped chittering. "I understand them. I can hear them in my head. They've put something in my head. I can make out different voices. They say they're sorry they stole my glove. They say they like me. They ask for my help."

"Help with what?" the guard demanded.

"I tell them I can't do anything." Evie opened her eyes again. "One says they've found my core. They promise to take care of the crew. They've found the crew. They want to help but they need my help. They don't want anyone else to be hurt. They took my glove, but they don't know what to do with what they grew."

"They tried to clone something from your glove?" Becca asked.

Evie's eyes had glassed over. She wasn't seeing the room. "I can feel them in my head. They're pulling something out of my head. It doesn't hurt. I try to talk to them. I can hear myself and it's not words. They say they need a copy of what's in my head. They're downloading me."

The guard stiffened. "The suspect is explaining an advanced interrogation technique in possession of the Vencume."

"They ask me to wiggle my fingers," Evie continued. "I tell them I don't have any. I can feel one touching my thumb. Other one is pulling on my toes. They ask me to wiggle them. They say they grew them."

"They put on new limbs," Becca tried to clarify, "that they had grown from your glove. They made new arms and legs for you."

Evie shut her eyes and smiled. “Like it never happened. I'm happy.”

The guard now looked at the pad of questions he had brought with him. “Who is the gray-haired individual we saw on the *Tong Dizhou*?”

Evie whispered, “The Vencume are stuck. They haven't had any breakthroughs in generations. They've stopped evolving. They've stagnated. They're so old...”

“Are the Vencume immortal?” the guard asked.

Evie laughed. The guard glared at Becca.

“Evie,” Becca asked, “are the Vencume immortal?”

“They're dying.” Evie frowned. “They're been using those cores for so long. They just make themselves over and over. They've been trying to make themselves different. They love Humans, did you know that? They're fascinated by us. They thought the portmen were another race. The Peggars... We have simple brains. They love us....” She started to chitter again.

“The suspect will refrain from using the Vencume language,” the guard said sternly.

Evie laughed a little to herself. “You don't understand them.”

“We're going to be at *war* with them,” the guard snapped. “They're already pulling out of our stations. They're going to leave their little *spy* behind.”

Becca quickly turned to him. *At war with the Vencume? He must be mistaken...*

Evie shut her eyes and smiled. “There isn't going to be any war. You're just trying to get people afraid so you can control them. The Authority is dying as well. You don't want to evolve.”

The Shipping Authority doctor made another adjustment to the IV machine.

“You're going to shut me up.” Evie sighed. “Afraid of what might happen if my head is clear for more than five minutes. How can I hate you when you're so pitiful?” She shut her eyes again and drifted off into a drug-induced sleep.

The guard turned the recorder off and un-cuffed Becca from the chair.

“What are you going to do with her?” Becca asked.

“Either the suspect will be sent to the Shipping Authority's main office,” the guard answered, cuffing Becca's hands, “or the suspect's remains will. Major Gekki will decide.”

Becca swallowed hard. “What are you going to do with me?”

The guard smiled but did not answer.

* * * * *

They did not take Becca from the cell after that, but she was still fed. Another twelve meals had passed; Becca still had the empty bags from the rations in the cell with her. She had arranged them in neat rows of three.

Becca assumed that they were low protein meals; she was finding it harder and harder to think each day. Half-way down the orderly collection was the day the *Jiang Gong* had arrived. *I wonder if they let the Wainwrights go already. There's no way the family would let the Shipping Authority keep them. I bet Stella's family got involved. Don't they make the ships? That would be an interesting conflict to watch.*

Really, being on a ship all that time isn't that much different from being in jail, but you get to eat better meals and clean up and you have company. Aren't we all prisoners of the Shipping Authority? She looked at the block on her right hand and tried to not remind herself that her palm itched. Isn't the chip a form of block? The block is just obvious. They have us all, subtly. What does this dumb thing do, anyhow?

Becca lay on her cot, trying to imagine the garden she eventually wanted to plant. She pictured the yard, with fruit trees near the back, next to the wind-fence. Stone fruit would do best there: plums and cherries, maybe peaches. On the fence itself, she would plant honey-suckle and jasmine. Maybe, in a planter, she would have moon-flowers and four-o'clocks in varying colors. Aster daisies and cosmos would fill in the patches and a fine layer of violets could even it out. In her imagination, she was watering the garden—standing barefoot on the sun-warmed flagstones.

As she lay there, with her arm over her eyes, she could practically smell it. It didn't smell like dried blood or scared sweat or bare metal or the rot of nearly empty ration-bags. Night was falling and the moonflowers had opened...the light scent almost overpowered by the sweet four-o'clocks....

Becca opened her eyes. It was dark in the cell...the first time the lights had been off since she had arrived. *Maybe they're done with sleep deprivation and we're moving on to more advanced methods.*

There was a muffled sound, like a *whoomp*, and the door to her cell opened. She could barely make out who had entered: short, thin, holding something. It looked like they were using some kind of breathing apparatus.

They moved silently.

"Door, pop pop," a thin voice whispered.

A second figure came in close behind. "Guard, pop pop."

Becca's heart leapt to her throat. *It can't be!*

The first figure turned on a hand-held light that threw a red glow through the room. Becca could almost make out the cruel smile in the gloom.

"Gotcha."

The twins! Becca opened her mouth to scream, but one twin pounced on her, knocking her back on the cot.

The girl held a gloved hand over Becca's mouth. "Hush-a-bye hush-a-bye, sneak sneak sneak..."

"Steal out the doc through a leak leak leak..." the other finished.

Evie's dark twins let Becca up slowly and handed her a tank and mask.

"Ulan, Uma..." Becca whispered. "What are you doing here?"

"Lyssamaladana sent us," Ulan said, slurring the names of her designer sisters together.

"Don't want to chase you," Uma explained. "Don't want to chase another ship."

"Lazy," Ulan hissed and pulled Becca to her feet.

"Reds are waiting." Uma poked her head out the door and looked down the hallway.

Ulan pushed the tank and mask against Becca, urging her to put it on. "Sweet sleepy gas."

Becca put the mask on but it was difficult because the prisoner's block still made her right hand useless.

They made their way down the dark hallway, stepping over the occasional slumped body. Ulan was leading and made a point to step on the unconscious figures. One groaned.

The three of them were steps away from the exit. A girl in red armor and a mask was waiting just inside the door. Becca knew that under that helmet was a head of bright red hair. Another girl in a similar uniform poked her head in and waved a hand to hurry.

Becca crossed the doorway.

She thought someone had fired at them. All she knew was there was a popping sound and a blinding pain shot through her right arm and thigh. Something clunked to the floor.

"Oops," Ulan said.

Uma bent over to pick something up off the ground. "Hand pop pop." She was holding Becca's prisoner's block; the thumb and fingers still peeking out.

"Oh god," Becca cried. "Oh god..."

"Leave it," one of the redheaded girls growled at Uma. "We don't have time for this." She grabbed Becca and ripped at her uniform, tearing off a strip and hastily knotting a tourniquet on her arm.

"That's going to leave a trail," the other redhead complained.

The four bustled Becca out and towards a shaft where they had removed a grate. Becca continued to whimper. The pain was unimaginable.

"Yeah..." One of the redheads nodded. "That hurts a lot."

"She can't climb in that condition," the other said.

They shoved her into the shaft and pushed her up the ladder: one redhead in the lead, the other three girls behind. Becca felt light-headed and was sweating profusely; her heartbeat was getting faster and weaker.

The climb actually got easier as they went up; they were moving through to the inner rings. Becca looked up and saw a light above them. Her vision was going blurry. She felt like throwing up. By the time they reached the top of the ladder, they were nearly weightless.

Ulan pushed past them in the shaft-way and poked her head out the opening.

The inner ring was abandoned. A klaxon was blaring, so Becca hazily guessed that the girls had pulled an alarm to force an evacuation of the area. She recognized it as an unloading dock of some sort, similar to the one where they had arrived.

The four girls continued to push towards one of the open docks. Someone behind them shouted to stop.

The girls stopped and turned. A figure in a Shipping Authority Security uniform was there, holding a gun. It wore a helmet with a breathing apparatus.

Becca peeled off her mask and vomited. The mess floated in front of her like a liquid vine.

It was a muffled woman's voice in the helmet. "You will stop and return the prisoner!"

Ulan removed her mask and moved to a crouch against a nearby pillar. "Tricky trap."

"The prisoner's block has been activated. I will detonate if you do not return the prisoner!"

Uma held out the block still containing Becca's mangled hand. "This block?" She hurled it at the figure. It was a neat overhand throw that neatly connected with the authority's helmet.

"I told you to leave that!" a redhead yelled.

Ulan giggled. "Head pop pop."

The throw had turned Uma upside-down and she came out of the spin throwing her mask and tank.

Ulan launched. She hurtled through the air and connected with the authority's helmet, wrenching it off. By the time she had landed on the wall opposite, she had put the helmet on her own head. It muffled her laugh.

The girls were suddenly shock still. None of them seemed able to move. The figure in uniform was righting herself. Ulan had not broken her neck.

One redhead started to sing, slightly out-of-tune:

*I'm going to say this honestly;
You know I haven't lied.
It's sad how much you adore me,
Ignoring all the guys.*

The second redhead joined in:

*I know there are no flowers here;
The skies are never blue.
But if you find some roses, dear,
Please, keep them just for you.*

The figure in the uniform raised her head. It was Rosemary.

*Someday, someone will worship you
Don't know who that will be.
So, go and find your skies of blue
And don't wait here for me....*

Becca shook her head. "But she's not even—"
And then she passed out.

Lost and Found

She awoke in a bed. The stump where her right hand had been was neatly bandaged.

iLyssa was leaning up against the wall with crossed arms. “aCadia told me what happened,” the girl said. “Terribly sorry about that.”

Becca stared at the stump.

iLyssa continued. “We'll get you repaired in no time. iDana figured out a way to replicate fingerprints, so we can use your left hand as a model. iMala thinks that the print-scan is stored on the chip, so hopefully we can find a copy of that in what we've copied over from the station's data-banks. You'll be OK.”

“I saw...” Becca started but broke down crying.

“Once it's in place, you won't notice any difference,” the girl said cheerily.

“I can never go back,” Becca wailed. “They'll never let me go home. I'll never see my family again.”

“Oh, that's not true,” iLyssa said. “It's going to take a while, but you'll be able to go home once all this is done. This is just a little hiccup.” She approached the bed and rested a hand on Becca's shoulder. “Come on. It's not that bad. We've seen worse. We've got you a new one and it'll look just like the old one....honest.”

Becca was still sobbing, clutching the stump against her chest. “I don't...” she said in choking breaths, “I don't want any clones.”

“We won't.” iLyssa nodded. “Again, we're sorry about the block. We thought that maybe it was some sort of electro-magnet or a beacon, but Evie had never been arrested before, so we had no idea what the block actually did. If we had known—”

“Where is Evie?” Becca asked.

iLyssa frowned. “We're working on that.”

Becca sniffled a bit and rubbed her eyes. “She's not on the ship?”

iDana came into the room and nodded at her sister.

“It looks like we might have a fix on them,” iLyssa said. “I hate to leave you like this, but we need to oversee this operation. The Vencume will get you fixed up.”

“Where are you going?” Becca asked.

iLyssa followed her sister out of the room. “We're going to get Evie.”

Becca stumbled out of the bed. Her legs were weak. *How long have I been lying there?* She had to be careful to not rest the stump against anything, but held it protectively, like a new-born. It felt like her right thumb had been bent back and the entire forearm ached.

A Vencume spun into the room, chittering. It held her arms and did not direct her back to the bed (as she thought it would), but helped lead her out of the room. It did not wear a translator.

They moved down the passage: the Vencume doing its slow shuffle, Becca occasionally leaning on it. “I don't care if you smell like seaweed,” Becca said softly. “You're so soft and smooth.”

At the end of the passage, was a dark room with vaguely Human-shaped chair. The Vencume led her to this and, gently pressing and chittering, instructed her to lie down. As Becca did so, another Vencume took a hold of her head and started to probe her scalp with delicate fingers. Another took her right arm and started to unwrap the stump. A fourth had a covered tray.

“Aren't you going to give me some kind of anesthesia?” she asked, looking at the tray and figuring it contained surgical instruments. “I mean, if you're going to do some sort of re-attachment...there are nerve endings...you have to—”

She tried to sit up, but they pressed her back into place, surprisingly strong. The Vencume was still probing at her head. Becca felt her phantom hand unclench.

They had unwrapped the stump and one Vencume started to probe at the jagged edge with long fingers that were turning black. Becca felt nothing. Her body was going numb. Her eyes did not focus correctly.

“How do you do that?” she asked. Her words were a little slurred. *My face is going numb.* She raised her left hand to her lips and brushed them. The Vencume that had been probing at her head stopped and moved to her right arm, pushing back the sleeve and pressing points along her arm with long black fingers.

They uncovered the tray. There was a right hand laying on it with blood vessels, tendons, and nerves running out the end. The first Vencume was chittering and removing a few shattered wrist bones

from her stump, cleaning the ends of the radius and ulna and exposing the cartilage. As it opened the end of her arm, Becca watched it bloom like a savory rose.

The Vencume massaging her arm was holding pressure on choice points. There was hardly any blood. She tried to sit up to get a better look at the process, but the Vencume pressed her back.

Now, the Vencume started to knit the blood vessels together. They cut off ends from the stump and pieced it together, long tentacle fingers turning yellow and moving rapidly. Becca had never seen them move so quickly or so precisely. The few tools they used in the process fit over the ends of their fingers, like thimbles. *Do they make their fingers fatter to hold on?* Tools slipped on and off so quickly. They knitted the ligaments across her wrist bones to the end of her arm.

The Vencume holding her arm pressed points and ends of tendons peeked out from her opened arm. *He's relaxing the muscles...* The Vencume took the ends and stitched them to the parts in her new hand. Becca watched them press her arm while the fingers bended and straightened.

Now, they were attaching the nerves. She started to feel a dull buzzing sensation at the end of her arm. It slowly turned into a burning.

"That hurts," she said. The fingers on her new hand clutched suddenly. She was making a fist and the pain shot up her arm. She could feel the opened wrist.

The Vencume holding her arm started to apply pressure again. It turned her head away so she couldn't see her hand. She felt one grip her thumb. The Vencume chittered. Her thumb was pressed again.

What was it that Evie had said? "They asked me to wiggle my fingers." Becca wiggled her thumb. The Vencume chittered excitedly. One squeezed her forefinger. She wiggled it. The Vencume fell silent and there was some activity before they pressed her finger again. She wiggled it. They chittered, pleased. This went on as they attached the nerves. *They're making sure it's the right ones.*

They let her turn her head back. The wrist was still open but the hand was attached. Now, they pressed various points on her palm and chittered. She felt the dull buzzing sensation again as the Vencume holding her arm released the pressure points. They started to apply a spray, holding flaps of skin down. Where there was too much skin from her arm, they cut it away, matching the new hand.

Becca made a fist and wiggled her fingers. The action was a little clumsy.

The Vencume stopped massaging her arm. The buzzing sensation turned into a burning pain. She held the arm and cried out in pain. The area where it had been attached stung to the bone. The Vencume massaged her head again and everything went fuzzy.

On the way back to her room, they passed the three designers. The girls were chatting amongst themselves: iDana frowning and shaking her head, iLyssa trying to explain something in the air with her hands. The trio was followed by four redheads carrying what looked like a casket.

Did they kill Evie? Becca tried to focus on the procession.

"Ah, Doctor-Doctor," iLyssa said as she approached Becca. "Good, good...as good as new..."

The casket was being carried down the corridor, the mop-headed iMala leading it now. The two Vencume that had been helping Becca spun away after it.

iDana stepped away from it to join iLyssa next to Becca. She turned Becca away from the procession and formed a symbol with her hand. "Make this shape."

Becca tried, but it took a couple tries. She was distracted and groggy and kept watching the diminishing parade.

"Well..." iLyssa patted Becca on the arm. "It's not perfect. We'd have to get in your head for that."

"Might have to anyway." iDana shook her head. "Considering..."

Becca was still looking down the hallway where the casket had been carried. "What was all that? Is Evie OK?" She leaned against the wall and blinked heavily.

iDana took Becca's arm and led her in the opposite direction. "It's another minor set-back. Don't worry about it."

"I do worry about it." Becca shook her off clumsily. *The Vencume can't bring back the dead, can they? Did the Shipping Authority execute her? What if there was brain damage?*

iLyssa started to pull Becca down the hall. "Hey, you're going to be here a while. Don't you think it would be a good idea if you could understand the Vencume? Won't that be grand?"

Becca's head snapped around. "What?"

The two girls were now leading her to the end of the hall. "Translators are OK, I suppose, but wouldn't it be better if you could *really* understand them?" iLyssa asked.

iDana nodded. "So much gets lost in translation and the subtlety of the language really is spectacular."

"You want to help Evie, don't you?" iLyssa smiled. "You could be of much more use if everyone understood you."

The two girls chattered between themselves.

"Just think of all you're missing," iDana cooed.

They had reached a lift. iDana worked the controls while iLyssa continued to convince Becca.

"Don't you want to know how to find your way around here?" iLyssa said. "You know that all the walls are marked, right? We can't change your eyes, but you might pick up a little on what the symbols mean."

"It's the same process that was used on us." iDana nodded. "One moment, nothing; the next moment, you *know* something. You *understand* it."

"Don't you want to see it?" iLyssa asked. "Don't you want to see one of the Vencume gifts?"

They got off the lift and walked (well, Becca stumbled) to a room that was similar to the one where they had re-attached the hand. A Vencume waited by the chair, chittering. The two girls chattered in response and pushed Becca into the chair.

"What did you mean," Becca asked, "by *gift*?" Her arm hurt, but the chair was comfortable. The Vencume started to massage her head. She felt her scalp going numb again.

iLyssa held Becca's new right hand. "The Vencume love Humans. They have a lot they want to share. They want a partnership with us."

"Us?" Becca asked. "How Human are you, really?" Her words were slurring a bit.

"We're as Human as Evie." iDana frowned. "We're just a little tweaked."

There was a pressure at the top of Becca's skull. It only lasted a second. She tried to sit up but the Vencume held her head still.

"A deal with the devil..." Becca said hazily.

"Pandora was punishment for Prometheus." iLyssa was staring right into Becca's eyes. "The flood came after fathers of the Nephilim gave magic to man. The children of the earth always pay a price for the knowledge of the heavens."

"Humans have punished themselves long enough," iDana said.

iLyssa was still staring, unblinking, into Becca's eyes. "Think of all the suffering that has come from ignorance. Think of the wars waged by the illiterate masses. Think about how the Shipping Authority hurt you because they did not understand."

iDana clasped her hands and shut her eyes. "It will come to you...like a visitation."

The room was suddenly filled with a bright light. Becca's eyes watered. Her ears rang.

"For those before and those yet to come," Evie says. She is holding two shot-glasses and hands one to Becca.

"What is this?" Becca takes the glass. There is a buzzing sound, like static or rain.

Evie holds out a bottle. There is a creature suspended inside that looks like a star-fish or a sea anemone. "It's good; you'll like it." She pours a shot.

Becca holds the glass. "Did the Shipping Authority execute you? I saw a casket."

Evie pours her own shot and knocks it back. "It's a little addictive. Once you get a thirst for knowledge, you want more and more. But, I must confess, I have vast contemplative ends. My curiosity is rooted in my own vain glory. It is so fixed in my mind as cannot be removed."

The bottle is suddenly empty and the soggy creature sticks to one side. It looks like a Vencume. Evie shakes the bottle. "How will we get it out?"

Becca is still holding her full shot-glass. "We could float it out. Just pour something inside and it will rise to the surface."

"What a good idea," Evie says. She leans over the bottle and cries. The tears come in great gushes and fill the bottle half-way. "It's only partially there," she says finally. "Maybe you can help."

Becca hands Evie her shot and takes the bottle. Her tears come just as furiously and soon the bottle is full. The creature in the bottle floats easily to the surface.

“Well done.” Evie takes the bottle and hands Becca the shot-glass back. “You’ve earned it.” Becca takes the shot.

“The process now has reached a conclusion,” a strange voice said. “And yet some confusions may still linger.”

“How do you feel?” iLyssa asked. There was something strange about the way she asked it.

Becca sat up and touched her head gingerly. “I feel fine. My head is...”

iLyssa laughed. “That’s it! You’ve got it!”

“That wasn’t hard at all!” iDana joined in.

The space between what Becca was actually hearing with her ears and what she heard in her head snapped shut like a thunderclap.

“I’m *chittering*...” she trailed off.

“In time, one will be more obvious than the other,” the Vencume said. Its voice was somewhere between a contralto and tenor. “Sleep is essential for Human information allocation. These things lay uneasy in the mind and must be put to rest.”

“I *am* tired,” Becca said. The Vencume chittering tasted like old rice on her tongue.

“What a better way of learning,” iLyssa said. “So little time wasted.”

Becca felt dizzy.

The two sisters brought her to her feet, practically dancing.

“Think of all the things you know!” iLyssa stated. “Isn’t that a better way to live?”

They led Becca down the hallways to the lift.

“Now we all understand each other,” iLyssa said. “There won’t be any misunderstandings.”

Becca poked at odd ends in her new mind.

They had reached her room. iDana smoothed out bed and indicated Becca should lie down. “*The man with two languages has two souls,*” she intoned.

iLyssa smiled. “From now on, you will dream in color.”

Noah's Pudding

In her dream, Becca is at the beach and it has started to rain. The entire family runs from the bonfire they had built and huddles under a salt-stained pier. It isn't cold, so everyone laughs at the sudden downpour. Once the rain lets up, they return to the bonfire site to collect their belongings. A few embers from the fire are still going, but she knows the party is over because there's no dry fuel.

She woke up, her bladder full.

Walking into the hallway, Becca noticed a shimmering symbol on the wall that said LAVATORY in her mind. She followed it to a room with the all-too familiar suction tube. Becca was pleased there was no pile of empty ration bags lying next to it.

She showered afterwards, enjoying the high-pressure water and warmth. The swelling where her right hand had been attached was minimal.

Back in the hallway, Becca spied another symbol that said FOOD. She followed this one to a large room filled with tables of Evie.

Here was a five-fold redheaded Evie. They arm-wrestled and punched each other.

There were another five laughing and singing points of a golden-starred Evie.

To one side, was the trio of gray and scheming Evie.

There was the dark and contemplative Evie, staring into mirror eyes, each daring the other to blink first.

And at the center of it all, like a lamp surrounded by prisms and mirrors, was the source of it all: the original pale and white Evie. She smiled broadly and held out her hands. “Welcome back to the world of the living!”

The children stopped and cheered.

Two more redheads came out of a side room—a kitchen—carrying a large pot and stack of bowls that they set in front of Evie

Becca made her way to the table and sat down. “I didn't realize that there were so many of them.”

“Well, you don't usually see them all in one place at one time.” Evie ladled out a bowl. “But everyone wanted to try your Noah's pudding and we wanted to celebrate.”

Bowls were ladled out and passed around. The room busied itself with eating.

Becca looked at the bowl in front of her and stirred the contents of rice, chickpeas, beans, apricots, raisins, and almonds. “How do you know about Noah's pudding?”

“You're actually a very good cook,” Evie said, nodding between bites. “I never would have thought to put apricots and kidney beans in the same dish, but it works. It works.”

“How do you know about Noah's pudding?” Becca asked again.

The redheads stopped eating and listened.

“Don't be so suspicious.” Evie took another spoonful. “Enjoy good food when it's in front of you.”

The blondes sat and watched.

“This is...” Becca's eyes were watering, “...This is a very special dish. I never told you about it.” She continued to stare at the bowl.

Evie looked up at her. “Say, you don't seem terribly hungry. Maybe you and I should go for a walk.”

“Maybe,” Becca said stiffly, “you could just tell me the *truth* for once and stop pretending I'm too *stupid* to understand it all.”

“Right,” Evie stood. “Come on. Let's go.” She took Becca by the arm and led her out into the hallway.

“How can you not remember it?” Evie hissed. “Were you asleep? How much did you pull down?”

“You made a copy of me; I know it.” Becca was shaking mad. “You just went in and took what you wanted. I can't explain to you how...*violated* I feel. I don't want people poking around in my head, least of all not without my permission.”

“*Vesta, Diana, Minerva...*” Evie swore. “What were you doing when they connected you? Didn't you know what was going on?”

They stopped and looked away from each other. Becca's eyes were full of tears and her fists quavered by her sides. Evie's jaw was clenched and she was rubbing her right eye.

“They had just finished...” Becca rubbed her right wrist.

“You were still half-way under.” Evie finally sighed. “So you maybe got the language.”

Becca rubbed her nose with a sleeve. “I saw you there.”

Evie laughed a little. “Well, yeah, I'm in there. Parts of me are in there. Parts of me are running around and blowing things up.”

“iDana said it would come like a visitation.”

They turned a corner to an observation deck. Evie looked under the rolling sections of the ship with her hands clasped behind her back. “You were connected to a data-bank that contains the whole of Vencume knowledge. Can you imagine it? Everyone of their race is in there.”

With a doctor and an engineer, you'd probably know everything about Humans you wanted to know.

“What's that look?” Evie asked.

“Aren't we going to war with the Vencume?”

Evie frowned. “Why the hell would we go to war with the Vencume?”

“Well,” Becca explained, “the Shipping Authority seems to think we are.”

“Well,” Evie countered, “the Shipping Authority is stupid. 'Going to war with the Vencume.' That's like a kindergarten going to war with an old folks' home.”

“But, if they think that, then...”

“They aren't the final authority on everything.” Evie scowled.

Another thought snuck up on Becca. “Did the Authority execute you? I saw a casket.”

“They tried.” Evie rubbed her right eye. “They really gave me a lot, you know? Like putting down a dog. I guess it was humane. Either that, or they figured I'd just die in the box. They weren't expecting any kind of rescue. I was somewhere else. I don't...I can take it. I was in surgery a lot as a kid. I'm used to it.”

* * * * *

Back in the mess hall, Uma and Ulan were eating the Noah's pudding straight from the tureen. The three gray sisters watched from a distance, shaking their heads. The others had left already.

Evie came in and shooed the twins away, only just managing to get at least a bowlful for Becca. The twins giggled and skipped out of the room, carrying a bowl away with them.

“Why do we keep them?” iDana asked. “They're a liability.”

“They're a pure form,” Evie said, not even looking at the trio. “You're a variant.”

“More like an improvement,” iLyssa said, with a toss of her hair.

“Why didn't you try to stop them?” Evie asked.

iMala hugged herself. “Didn't want a fight...”

Becca took her bowl and ate a spoonful. It was wonderful and tasted like home.

Evie was sitting stock still, watching Becca eat. “I understand that you three ordered the jail-break.”

“We felt that we should,” iLyssa stated. “You had been moved out already and they were preparing orders for her execution and removal. We felt a need to bring her aboard and I *think*,” the child stressed the word, “that we made the right call on that one.”

Becca stopped eating. *My execution?*

“And who did you send on that errand?” Evie asked.

iMala answered. “Uma and Ulan.”

“And why did you send them for such an important errand if you felt they were such a liability?”

iDana stood forward. “Well, they got her hand blown off. We had to go through the additional bother and expense of—“

“Of something that you had not planned for,” Evie finished.

“We got the hand back,” iMala said, sheepishly.

“You were also dishonest with Becca about the data-bank,” Evie chided. “You took advantage of someone coming out of surgery.”

“She didn't have to come with us,” iDana whispered.

Evie looked at the trio. “Do you know what a bully is?”

In response, iLyssa had formed small fists. iMala looked at the floor. iDana held her hand over her right eye.

Becca could not eat during this. *It's always embarrassing to watch someone getting punished or reprimanded, no matter the setting.*

“Girls, listen,” Evie said softly. “I *am* angry—don't get me wrong—but I understand the mistake. You don't understand how we feel about privacy yet. This is the sort of thing that you have to take into account when you deal with people who haven't had your...advantages. We learn slowly and grow slowly and everything we have in our heads is hard-earned.”

“It's stupid and inefficient,” iLyssa interrupted.

“That may be the case,” Evie continued. “But imagine spending years on a thing. I know it's hard to do that, but please, *years*. Slowly accumulating the knowledge and skills necessary to do...whatever. When someone comes along and does it in a few minutes, when they take that from you, it makes you feel like you wasted your time and they're just leeching off you.”

“But it *is* a waste of time,” iLyssa said. “Our method is much better.”

“And what is that knowledge worth?” Evie asked.

“The knowledge is worth its usefulness,” iDana offered.

“Think about those ships you designed,” Evie said. “How much of that was yours and how much did I give you? Can you say you really designed them or that you just used what I had figured out?”

“But we finalized it,” iLyssa said, trying to justify their claim to the ships.

Evie gestured at iDana. “You discovered a way to replicate fingerprints...Now, what if the Vencume made more designers and pulled that information out of your head? They could say that the new ones made that system, couldn't they?”

“That's not fair,” iDana said.

“So, you see my point,” Evie said finally.

iMala nodded. “The knowledge is divided by the effort in receivership, or E sub R. But you have to multiply that by the eventual work that the knowledge can yield, or E sub W, divided by the--”

Evie waved a hand. “No matter how you add it up, you owe Becca an apology.”

iMala was still counting on her fingers. “But that actually leads to product over effort which is a scalable and non-dimensional coefficient of the value of the—“

“Just say you're sorry!” Evie shouted.

iLyssa stood forward and bowed. “We must offer our sincerest apologies for any misrepresentation of the data-bank process and the knowledge that was obtained by any subterfuge on our part.”

Evie nodded and turned back to Becca. “That's better. Thank you.”

Becca nodded at the three girls. “Thank you.”

iLyssa's eyes flashed with hatred.

* * * * *

Now that Becca understood the Vencume language, she understood how to use the shifting display that had vexed Max so long ago. She had been poking around and found a store of poems. Becca had never thought of the Vencume as having poetry, but it had been a pleasant discovery.

*the water rises in us
generation upon generation has built this bridge
we are here today as we were yesterday
reaching its level, the water lays still*

A Vencume came into the room, smooth and pale blue. “Doctor, you drink so slowly from such a small cup. Did you not swim in our ocean?”

Becca ran her hand over the display and quoted a poet she remembered from her childhood:

*The mind is an ocean. I and so many worlds are rolling there
Our body is a cup, soon it will fill and sink...
Not even one bubble will show where it went down²*

The Vencume seemed pleased by this response. “Humans have great thirst, but do not recognize it.”

Becca imagined it smiling. It gestured that she should stand.

They moved to the observation deck. The Vencume shuffled alongside her.

“You move as one through the desert,” it said. “Your sensors are high and sense far.”

“Maybe,” Becca answered. “Our ancestors lived in tall grass and had to watch for predators.”

If a Vencume could nod, it would have. The color shifted slightly to a bright blue.

“Engineer has had similar thoughts,” the Vencume said. “Our new Tzikzik do not appreciate the drama that has brought them forth. Impatience burns in them and is not easily quenched.”

There, that word: *Tzikzik*. Becca understood it now: *a genetic experiment in cloning and manipulation for improvement*. The tweaked clones of Evie were a type of Tzikzik. The ship that had attacked the *Tong Dizhou* so long ago was a Tzikzik the Vencume had made of themselves: something strong, jealous, and less contemplative. The Vencume did not consider them civil-kind because they were artificial.

“The immediacy of the Human mind leads down strange paths,” the Vencume continued. “The panic of the now forces a scrabbling nature.”

2 This is from Maulana Jelaluddin Rumi, the 13th century Sufi poet.

“When we talked to you through the translators,” Becca said, “you would say ‘understanding’ all the time. Why don’t you do that now?”

The Vencume ran a yellow hand over Becca’s arm. “We are in understanding now. There is no need for verification.”

Becca looked out under the rolling sections of the ship. “How old are the Vencume?” she asked.

“We swim through nothing now,” the Vencume answered. “Our river does not flow and it evaporates under the heat of many suns.”

That's not really an answer, Becca thought.

“We have used the tanks so long we cannot call ourselves by generation,” the Vencume said. “None remember how it was before, yet the same intellects are there. Our rivers are muddied.”

So, they must have developed the cloning technology long ago. And that data-bank! Are they even individuals anymore?

The Vencume was shifting color again, this time to a pale green. “The new Tzikzik must prepare for their performance. From this, all things come. We will return to the ocean and await final judgment.”

“So we’re going to the Vencume home-world?”

“We are going to our meeting place. Many ships will join us there.”

Becca felt tears welling up. “How long will it take?”

The Vencume shifted to a deep violet that Becca interpreted as a frown. “There is Human immediacy. Do you fear reduction before you are returned to your origin?”

She shook her head. “No, I fear the death of others before I see them again.”

It blue-shifted to a nod. “You have no ocean. Your losses persist.”

“We have family units.” Becca tried to explain. “They mean a great deal to us.”

“Your offspring are your immortality.”

“It's not even about immortality,” she said. “It's about a sense of place. You know you belong there.”

“You sense so far,” the Vencume said, running a hand over her. “All places are far to you. Your tomorrows are impossible and you cast other sensors forward.”

“Maybe it's because we have such short lives. We know where we want to die.”

The Vencume turned bright pink and Becca thought she heard it laugh.

“You have come too far to turn back now,” it finally said. “Half a journey would be worth less than no journey at all.”

Becca mulled it over. Another question came to mind. “How do you mature the clones so quickly?”

The Vencume eased back to a pale blue. “We use the same ‘borrowed time’ principle that allows for interstellar travel.”

iMala came onto the observation deck. “Doctor-Doctor! iSkandar! If ever two minds were to meet...”

“iSkandar?” Becca asked. *She must mean the Vencume.*

“Well...” The child grinned. “The name 'aLexander' means a helper of mankind, but we couldn't give him an active or aggressive name, so he gets the intelligent and inquisitive one. 'iSkandar' is the Persian form.”

“Gentle Blue,” the Vencume ran a yellow hand over iMala. “You seek to name everything in your path.”

iMala took the Vencume's hand and rubbed her face in it. The Vencume turned a vivid magenta.

“Made you blush.” The girl grinned again.

“How do you know...*iSkandar*...is a 'he'?” Becca asked.

iMala was still playing with the Vencume's hand. “They don't have genders like that.”

“Where are your sisters?” Becca asked. “I thought you went everywhere with them.”

“We're not the twins.” iMala frowned and brushed her hair from her face. “iLyssa said she was working on something and iDana was helping. I came to find you.”

Becca stiffened a bit. “To find me? Or to find...iSkandar?”

“To find you,” iMala said. She ran up and gave Becca a hug.

Taken off-guard, Becca was slow to hug back. When she eventually did, the child only squeezed tighter.

“Evie has never hugged us,” iMala said, muffled. “She wasn't hugged much as a child. I thought that you weren't supposed to hug children, but you proved otherwise.”

Becca gave iMala a tight squeeze. “Children should be hugged.”

iMala broke the hug and gave iSkandar a squeeze. “You get one, too.”

iSkandar ran long fingers over her. “Human affection mimics our fear response. You seek reassurance.”

iMala held tightly. “You make crummy parents: you and Evie. You both hate yourselves too much.”

iSkandar turned a mottled purple and wiggled long digits nervously. “Gentle Blue, this gesture is unsettling.”

She let go and ran from the room.

“There is much of Engineer in them,” iSkandar said.

Becca nodded. “Kind of unavoidable, that. After all, she was the model for your army.”

YELLOW

Roots

The vessel was minuscule, not much larger than lifeboat. It moved purposefully along, ignorant of any series of hazards that may have conspired against it.

The first sign of danger was a faint glitter, thirty degrees above it and coming in on the five. It may have been an anomaly: some star that flickered through a passing gas-cloud, or the light refracted off another ship that had passed this way once before (or would pass this way some years future). But that the glittering object changed vector—and grew larger—quickly dismissed that theory. As the proximity sensors went off, the individual piloting the vessel took evasive maneuvers: stalling the engine, firing retros, jumping forward....

The glittering object got larger. Now that it was in visual range, it was obvious that the object was actually five small, star-shaped ships. The engines circling the rear-assemblies sputtered rapidly as the attacking acrobats spun around each other. They fanned out, like the fingertips of some giant grasping hand.

The individual manning the weapons array of the vessel started to fire; but even with a computer-assisted system, it couldn't hit the spinning and circling targets. Across the radio, came the sound of singing: five notes in quick succession, scaling over each other, in rounds...they dodged the clumsily fired bolts with ease and started to dive, osprey-like, towards the vessel. A harmonic rose in pitch as the glittering ships opened fire...

Becca pushed tight fists against her stomach as the vessel fell to pieces. The singing over the radio had stopped.

“Even at half their size...” iDana noted. She started to pack up her remote-control gear from the observation deck.

iMala helped her sister collect the equipment. “I'd say that was pretty good.”

iLyssa nodded and turned to her hand-held receiver: “oDele, how was the lag on the sensors when you fired?”

“Wasn't bad,” a bright, cheery voice answered. “Didn't drag the burn too much.”

Another voice came in. “We'll adjust the tune so the instrument can play it.”

“Try coming in at bay twenty-eight,” iLyssa directed. “I want to see if we can do a half-spin recovery.”

“Let's wait on that,” iDana said, shaking her head. “The full-spin deployment was a success, but there's no hurry on recovery. Come in at bay thirty-four. We're still at dead-spin there.”

“Let's go see what the recorders said,” iLyssa said, marching out of the observation deck.

iDana huffed the controller for the remote target vessel onto her back and brushed past Becca. The designer narrowed her eyes a bit as she passed, irritated that Becca was there.

“You didn't ask for any clarification this time,” iMala said, running a hand down Becca's arm. “Does Doctor-Doctor suddenly understand everything?”

“Your sisters get annoyed anytime I ask questions,” Becca explained. “I'm just trying to stay out of the way.”

* * * * *

A week prior, the three designers were talking to the pilots about some adjustment they wanted to make to the ships. Two redheads had also stopped to watch this.

iLyssa was explaining a new type of weapon that fired small metal rods through a magnetic tube. “This will not cause as much recoil as a traditional rail-style weapon,” she said, demonstrating, “but it may cause a minor lag in the control system when you use it because of the draw on the dynamo.” She fired a small bolt across the room into a target; it was silent except for a faint hum from the device and the *pfft* of the bolt going through the air. “This system will be much better than the internal combustion versions you have now, but we need to run some tests on the power use.”

Becca was sitting cross-legged on a ramp. iLyssa had already shut her down when she asked about the magnetic system and seemed intensely annoyed that she had to stop to answer any questions about it at all. The girls present seemed to understand the mechanics enough to not ask any of the questions Becca had.

The twins came in and sat on either side of Becca and leaned against her.

Ulan took one arm and wrapped it around her. "Tick tock."

Uma took the other arm. "Mock doc."

"Grains," said Ulan.

"Beans," answered Uma.

Ulan smiled. "Fruits."

Uma giggled. "Nuts."

"Get them out of here!" iDana yelled. "You're such a *distraction*. All three of you, OUT!"

Becca started to stand, but the twins pulled her back down.

"New gun," Ulan hissed. "Share."

iDana suddenly clamped her hand to her right eye. She pointed at two redheads. "aNevay, aLima, seal the perimeter."

"I guess they're lucky we're here," aNevay joked with her sister.

The two redheads started to stomp over and Becca was intimidated by these squat children with thick arms and narrow-set eyes.

"We're trying to do something," aLima said. "Either shut-up or get lost."

"You don't like guns anyway," aNevay snapped. "Go find something better to do." She reached out to grab Ulan.

Ulan tucked into a neat roll and knocked aNevay over. When they stood, Ulan was holding the redhead's arm in a lock.

Becca stood quickly. "Let her go! We don't need to fight over this."

Evie came into the bay. "What's all this shouting?"

iDana pointed at the twins. "We're trying to demonstrate our new system and they keep interrupting."

"Ulan, let her go," Evie commanded. "Uma, you and your sister come with me."

Ulan threw aNevay from her and dropped to a combative crouch.

aNevay hissed with annoyance and rolled her shoulder. "We have enough trouble as is," she said balling a fist. "You give me five minutes..."

Evie crossed her arms. "You've had five seconds and came out the worse."

iMala held out her hands in a peace-offering gesture. "You favor them because they're the most like you. We may be minor adjustments, but we need time to ourselves without these distractions. This is important and we'd like to get through the testing phase as soon as possible."

Evie stiffened a bit. "OK, we're leaving. Go on with your tests."

"Take Doctor-Doctor with you," iDana added. "This doesn't concern her."

Becca looked at Evie, whose jaw was clenching.

"We uprooted Becca and brought her with us," Evie said. "At this point, everything concerns her."

"We brought her here so they wouldn't kill her," iDana stated.

iLyssa nodded. "And you need a friend to keep you busy."

Ulan had run up to Evie and held her hand. Uma hid behind Becca.

"We might look like just children to you," iLyssa said. "But you're forgetting that we have everything from your head and all your lessons. *Plus*," she stressed, "we have Vencume knowledge and *their* lessons."

"We have long trip ahead of us," iMala added, "and we have to get these things perfected before it's all over and done with. The Vencume have certain expectations and we plan on meeting them."

"We plan on *exceeding* them," iDana finished.

* * * * *

Evie was in an ancillary lab working on a larger version of her mechanical mantis automaton. She was wearing a pair of thick safety glasses and had a small screwdriver in her mouth. The mantis rocked back and forth on four legs.

"How's it coming along?" Becca asked.

Evie pushed back her safety glasses and rubbed the back of her head. “It’s OK. It just feels so primitive.” Her hair was getting longer and dark roots were coming in; it had an odd, mottled look.

Becca circled around to the workbench. “It looks fine to me. What’s so primitive about it?”

“Watch out.” Evie held out a hand towards Becca to back her away from the device and hurled herself at the mantis, shoving it over onto its side. The mantis wriggled for a moment, using its long arms to prop itself back up.

“You fixed the arms,” Becca said.

“Yeah.” Evie grinned. “That always bothered me. What good is it if it needs a minder?”

“Does it learn?”

“It’s only using a basic set of commands,” Evie explained. “I just have to pare it down to the essentials. Simplicity is elegance....”

Becca nodded. “I suppose this thing needs you more and that’s why you spend time with it. The girls don’t seem to need you much.”

“They’re very independent.” Evie grabbed one of the mantis’ arms and gave it a tug. The device scrambled to catch itself. “I guess that’s a bit of my own childhood in there. I probably wouldn’t have asked anyone for anything if things had been...normal.”

“I’m sure your parents still loved you,” Becca offered.

“I don’t think it really had anything to do with love after a while.” Evie kicked out one of the mantis’ legs. Again, the device scrambled to catch itself and threw out an arm. Evie tisked and kicked out another leg. It caught itself without using its arms the second time. “I wasn’t really there for them, you know?”

“But they were always there for *you*—” Becca’s voice broke a little.

Evie reached underneath the mantis and turned it off. “You want to talk to me about something?”

“How long do you think we’ll be out here?” Becca asked.

“Why?”

Becca’s eyes watered a bit. “I know you don’t have anyone back home, but I...” She broke down sobbing.

“Hey hey hey...” Evie whipped off her safety-goggles and ran to Becca’s side. “What’s all this about? What’s wrong? Why are you crying?”

“I have to get back,” Becca said between raking breaths. “I never should have come out here. I don’t want to miss her growing up.”

“Don’t want to miss *who* growing up?”

Becca rubbed at her eyes with her sleeve. “My daughter, Huri. She’s only nine-years-old, but... When her father died...”

Evie frowned and pulled back a bit. “I didn’t know you were married.”

“I was.” Becca pressed her sleeve against her eyes. “Huri was only three when he finally....succumbed. After so long, we were practically bankrupt. I took up these flights because...You can’t raise a child properly with that kind of debt.”

“What kind of debt?” Evie asked.

“It’s a lot,” Becca answered.

“Well...” Evie shrugged. “How much is that? I mean, I might be able to—”

“They froze our accounts!” Becca yelled. “There’s nothing you can do!”

The two stared at the floor for a while.

“Say,” Evie said. “Why don’t you write her a letter?”

Becca scowled. “Evie, that’s not funny.”

“I’m serious,” Evie explained. “You spent all that time writing a letter to your cousin. Why not send a letter to your daughter? The Vencume can send it.”

“Are you serious?” Becca frowned. “I don’t see anyone being too open on passing along a Vencume message to a nine-year-old child.”

Evie’s eyes lit up. “Why not? Isn’t that proof that you’re you? Look, Becca, it’s not just you saying...whatever it is you want to say...it’s politics, right? I mean, you could write several letters. I’ll help! I’ll write a couple—one to the Wainwrights and one to the Shipping Authority—and we can say, ‘Look,

there's no war. We're just a couple of kooky chicks in space kicking around on an alien space-craft but we're still Human, right?' Tell me what's wrong with that plan.”

“The words 'kooky chicks', for one.”

“Listen...” Evie was in a scheming mode now. “Write a letter to your daughter. Sure, the Shipping Authority will read it first, but who cares? That's what we'll do. We'll tell everybody everything and maybe by the time we get back, it will all be OK.”

“How can we send a message from here? The Vencume don't understand our language...”

“Maybe not,” Evie countered. “But they can take images of things and send that. The designers have lots of paper for their sketches. Will that work?”

Becca nodded and smiled a little to herself. *It's preposterous, but so is everything else that's happened up to this point.*

* * * * *

It had taken a while for Becca to write the letter; her right hand did not move as smoothly as she had expected and the fine motor skills involved in writing weren't there. She eventually worked out the text in square, compensating letters. Did the Shipping Authority have any examples of her prior handwriting? Surely, that would be something they would try to use against her. Nonetheless...

My most precious Huri,

I remember the day you were born. I was so happy, but at the same time, I was scared. You were a tiny, naked, little life that was solely dependent on me and I knew I could not let you down. On that day, I experienced what it was like to love someone completely and unconditionally. And, from the moment of your birth—even before you were born, when I talked to you in the womb, or when I first felt you roll over inside me—I've always loved you without conditions. I knew then, that no matter what would happen to us in life, I would always love you. I still do.

I remember your first day of school; you were so excited, but you didn't cry. I did, however, because my baby girl was growing up. I was so proud of you and I still am. I know I couldn't protect you from getting hurt as you grow, because that is part of growing up. Even as an adult, you will find pain in life. Please, take those lessons and be a better person.

When I left you with Popo Sefer and Nana Fatma, you cried and begged me to look at you. I couldn't turn my head and let you see my tears. Daughters have to know their mothers are strong, but my heart ached more than when you waved bye-bye to Daddy on that bright, sunny day. Do you remember the flowers everyone brought? You were so happy around those bright colors, while we adults were dressed in black and dabbed our eyes. There wasn't a cloud in the sky that day, but everything was gray for me except you. Any pain I felt leaving the cemetery then was nothing compared to the day I had to leave you behind and the regret gnaws at my heart.

When you are older, you'll understand. I don't want you to grow up angry at me. Everything I did was for you. I miss you more than life itself and you are always in my dreams. Take as many pictures as you can so if I get back I can watch you grow up. I look forward to your tales.

You are a lucky girl that we have such a good family and I am a lucky woman to have had you in my life. People might say terrible things about me, but please know that what I did was in your best interests. When I realized I could not be there and provide for you at the same time, I was torn in half. I have always wanted you to have choices and I blame myself for not being a good example on that front. I want you to be able to be yourself in the world. Be clever, be strong, be graceful. Above all, be a kind and loving person. If you grow up happy and well-adjusted, then I know that everything I have given up is not in vain.

*My heart is aching, my family is waiting, my love for you will never die,
Your Mother*

Becca had just finished the letter and was wiping her eyes when Evie stuck her head in. “How's it going?” Evie waved some papers she had with her. “I finished mine, so whenever you're ready.”

“It's done.” Becca held up the three sheets.

Evie glanced at the papers. “You really are a doctor. You have terrible handwriting.”

* * * * *

After handing their letters to the Vencume, Evie went to work on her mantis some more.

Becca went to the mess hall and ran into the pilots. These were round, golden girls with large eyes and small hands and feet; their minuscule extremities only made their well-padded torsos look the rounder. Becca remembered Evie in her silly, yellow jumpsuit; however, the duck-like quality the limping engineer had was not present in these girls.

She had not interacted with them much, but had learned to tell them apart; only occasionally did she confuse their names. oFira had the darkest hair; oRiana, the lightest. oLathe was a little taller; oVida was a little rounder. oDele had the strongest voice and was usually the first to speak.

The five girls were practicing some song and the harmony rose and fell. As Becca entered the room, oDele made eye-contact with her and sang a little off-key.

“Hi, Becca,” oDele sang.

The others stopped and turned to her before turning to stare down Becca.

“Hello...oDele,” Becca answered. “You girls trying out some new maneuvers?”

oDele smiled at the others. “She remembered my name.”

“But she had to think about it,” someone responded.

“One of the bolts from the test almost hit me,” oFria said, actually answering Becca's question. “We have to space ourselves out a bit more.”

oVida cocked her head to one side. “Were you coming here for something to eat? That's not for a while yet.”

Becca shrugged. “No, I was looking for something to...everyone here is healthy, so what's a doctor to do?”

oRiana laughed. “She's bored.”

“Let's take her to the garden,” oLathe suggested.

The others laughed and jumped, *just like human girls their age...*

“What garden?” Becca asked.

oLathe took her hand. “The Vencume have a couple gardens on the ship, for food and oxygen. Well, the one for *us* makes oxygen....”

“Should we use the pod or the bridge?” oFria asked.

“The bridge! The bridge!” the others called.

They left the mess-hall and went to the long walkway where Evie had said she kicked Gordon over the railing. Half-way across, the lights flickered and the spin stopped.

“Why...does this *do* this?” Becca scrambled in the sudden loss of gravity.

oDele laughed. “The section with the garden doesn't always spin at the same rate. This section stops to catch up with it.”

“Or to slow down,” someone answered.

Becca was getting used to zero-gee maneuvers but she still kicked too hard or found herself spinning out of control. The pilots, meanwhile, had no trouble at all; but then, they danced when they walked and sang when they spoke. Everything about them had a lush grace to it. As the group glided across the bridge, the girls laughed at Becca's awkward attempts to swim across.

“It's not like in water,” one girl pointed out. “You're not going to get that kind of resistance.”

“Quit fighting it,” oLathe said (at least Becca thought it was her; it was hard to gauge their height when they weren't standing on a solid surface). “You have to offer as little resistance as possible when you're moving,” the blonde continued.

One of her sisters glided past; the pale hair marked her as oRiana. "If you can find a natural air-current, like a vent, that helps too."

"She'll never be comfortable in the air," a blonde voice behind her observed.

The lights came back up and spin resumed; Becca happy to feel the weight in her feet again. They walked the rest of the way across the bridge where oLathe pressed her hand against a small panel next to a door and...

Becca squinted in the sudden light. Once her eyes adjusted, she saw a large room with planters and trees and a pond and *Oh! This is what they should have had on the station!* The ceiling was incredibly high and studded with huge, bright floodlights. Trees stretched up to the light. Becca felt its warmth on her face.

"Hi, aNnora!" oDele called out to a redhead kneeling by one of the planters. "Can we leave Becca with you while we practice?"

aNnora looked up at the towheaded quintuplets. "Do I have a choice?"

oFira skipped over to her fiery sister. "Just be a dear. The poor woman is bored out of her mind and looking for something to do. You can use another set of hands."

The redhead nodded and rubbed a square jaw. "And you golden girls want her out of the way while you practice being the star of the show."

oFira frowned for a moment, then smiled broadly. "That is *so* kind of you. I'm *so* glad that you're such a team-player."

Becca remembered the popular girls' clique in school and was suddenly embarrassed.

The kneeling aNnora shrugged. "And I am *so* happy that you would trust me enough to leave me such a *huge* responsibility. You must think *so* much of me." She hissed every S.

"I *knew* we could trust you." oFria tapped aNnora on the nose with a pointed finger and did a half-pirouette.

"You'll be OK here." oVida nodded to Becca. "We have to get back to practice."

The pilots danced away to the door, giggling amongst themselves.

I've just been dumped. They're treating me like pretty-girl's friend.

aNnora was transferring seedlings from a pallet to a prepared bed and her square hands and broad shoulders worked in a smooth pattern. Becca was nervous being left alone with her.

"Do you need some help?" Becca asked hopefully. *Maybe if we're busy, she won't attack me.*

The sharp-toothed girl shrugged and gestured next to her. "If you like."

Becca knelt next to her and took a seedling. Sitting closer to the child, she saw that the teeth were not sharp at all, but small and widely spaced. "Where did these come from?"

"Those are beans," aNnora said in her gruff voice. "iLyssa brought some on board and the Vencume multiplied them."

"Did these come from the *Tong Dizhou*?"

aNnora shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe? I was told that the ones from the ship wouldn't give us any viable seeds. Like they had been neutered?"

Becca nodded. *If they were designed new seeds, the company that made them wouldn't want them to make anything but foodstuff. If you keep the farmers from replanting, they have to buy more.*

"I think the Vencume did something to them," the redhead continued. "We'll save some from this crop and make more."

"Aren't you like a new seed?" Becca asked.

The girl brushed back her hair. "No. We're intact. Ulan already had her period."

"Oh..." Becca nodded. "You know about that."

aNnora nodded. "We're neotenic for now."

The Vencume want to keep them as children. This is still an experiment for them.

"It's distracting," aNnora went on. "We're taking injections for it."

They worked in silence and finished one bed. aNnora stood and got another pallet.

"Which are those?" Becca asked.

The girl looked at the seedlings. "I think these are squash."

They started planting the next bed. It was a mindless endeavor with a Zen quality to it. Becca was happy to handle something alive and dependent again.

“Do you all work in the garden?” Becca finally asked.

The girl shook her head. “The pilots don't. They tire too easily.”

“But all the redheads do?”

A shrug. “We've always done it.” She gestured to the bright lights overhead. “The Vencume can't; they dry out or something. They work their own garden, but Vencume can't stay in the dry like this and some plants don't do well with hydroponics; they don't get the same immune factors unless they have soil.”

Becca dug away some thick loam. “Where did this dirt come from?”

aNnora laughed. “Living things produce a lot of waste.”

“I heard you were in here!” Evie came in with the twins closely behind her.

The twins were chasing and tickling each other.

“They discovered tickling today,” Evie explained. “They can't get enough of it. I've already told them not to—“

As if on cue, Uma started to tickle aNnora.

The redhead jumped up, swinging. “Knock it off!”

Ulan slipped in behind aNnora and gave her a tickle on the neck.

“Hey!” Becca held out a hand. “Personal space, OK?”

The twins ran off behind a planter with high-pitched squeals of hyena-like laughter. Evie watched the girls and sang to herself:

Tickle so and force a laugh

It causes less harm; less than half.

Halting action easily

Without a broken arm or knee.

aNnora rolled her shoulders and knelt back down next to the pallet of seedlings.

If one of them does that again

I'll do far worse than “tickle“ them.

Evie looked past the redhead at Becca. “I wanted to let you know that our letters have been sent. No response back, but it might help to put a human face on this little diplomatic tiff.”

Becca continued the planting process with aNnora. “That's good. We'll see.”

“I ran into the pilots on my way here.” Evie smiled. “They told me you were here. Listen, when you come to...restricted areas like this...make sure you use your right hand, not the left.”

Becca looked at her hands for a moment. “What would happen if I use the left?”

“It won't work,” Evie explained. “It's missing the mitochondria or something.”

“They didn't grow a clone for this, did they?” Becca asked, turning her hand over.

“Oh, no!” Evie laughed. “Not for just that. You wouldn't grow a whole one for parts; you'd start with a framework and build up from there.”

The twins ran out and started to tickle Evie. She laughed loudly and returned the favor before they ran off.

“You're gaining it all back.” Becca pointed at Evie's mid-section; a band of bright white belly stuck out.

Evie pulled her top down. “I can't help it. I'm predisposed to packing it on. I have a slow metabolism or something.”

Well, that much is true. She always did have a slow heart-rate and low blood-pressure. But still...
“That's not healthy, Evie. You have to get some exercise. Maybe there's a wave-tank or—“

“I never want to be in a tank again,” Evie said gravely.

Becca held out her hands defensively. “No, no, no tank. I'm sorry...I...I forgot.”

“How could you *forget?*” Evie scowled.

“I'm only thinking of your health...”

“Maybe,” Evie growled (her jaw was clenching), “*maybe* that extra weight was what kept me alive, *huh?* Did you think about that? How long were you on that lifeboat, *huh?* How well do you think I was doing at feeding myself *when I didn't have any hands?*”

“Evie, I'm sorry,” Becca said. *She's gone off a little suddenly.* “I'm sorry it happened, but that was the past and--”

“It's not the kind of thing you just get over!” Evie yelled. She turned quickly on her heel and crossed her arms.

aNnora stood up and dusted her hands on her thighs. “I'm done and I'm leaving. This isn't my fight.” The redhead marched to the door and let herself out.

Becca watched the child leave and looked at Evie's back. She could tell by the sound that Evie was holding back tears; the engineer would breathe hard and rakingly through her nose. Her shoulders had risen to her ears.

“Evie,” Becca started, “I don't think I'll ever understand what you went through. I'm proud of you for being able to walk upright after something like that. I'd probably still be curled into a little ball and screaming. I always knew you were smart, and kind, but I never knew how strong you were until all this happened. You've been through so much, and not just on the *Tong Dizhou*, but before that and after that. Back at Peg-51, everyone talked about how great you looked and you seemed so happy...like you finally had a little self-confidence. I'd like to think that—“

“If I recall, you *did* curl into a little ball and scream.”

Becca stopped. “That isn't fair.”

Evie turned around with red eyes and jaw clenched. “*Nothing* is fair.”

Pilots

Becca was in the kitchen attached to the mess-hall, preparing a dinner with the redheaded aLima and aRlene. The girls reminded Becca of the Pegger steward, Franz, with their broad hands, short legs, and heads of thick, red hair. They even had gruff voices—oddly deep for their age.

One of Evie's cooking devices was in the kitchen, along with the regular induction-style plates that used a magnetic field to heat steel pots and pans. The fact that there were pots and pans of any kind made Becca wonder if that was what the Vencume had been bought that had upset the portmen back at Pegasai-51.

The three of them were making dolmas of various kinds: zucchini, aubergine, tomato, and pepper. aLima enjoyed coring the vegetables and aRlene was fluffing a pot of rice. Becca was mincing an onion and some parsley.

aRlene watched Becca and rubbed her eyes. “How can you stand that onion? It's like a weapon.”

“Maybe.” Becca laughed. Cooking put her at ease. “It's so good to have a garden. It's nice to have fresh things to eat.”

“Putting the garden in advancement helps,” aRlene said.

Becca stopped her chopping. “Advancement?”

“We take it out of field,” aLima explained. “Just to send it ahead a few months. Like how they grew us.”

“Oh...” Becca nodded, understanding the effect but not the mechanics. “So, you have a constant crop in circulation. That must make things much easier.”

“The Vencume developed it,” aLima said as she finished coring the last tomato and set the bowl of seeds to one side. These would be saved for re-planting.

aRlene had finished preparing the rice and took the pot off the plate.

“I don't remember seeing any rice in the garden,” Becca said.

“Vencume can grow that themselves,” aRlene answered.

Becca examined the prepared vegetables. “Do you think this will be enough for everyone?”

“We'll get by,” aLima said. “We don't have to eat or sleep much.”

The rice had cooled and they mixed in the onion and parsley with their hands. Once it was at a consistency that satisfied Becca, they started to stuff the cored vegetables. “We'll steam these,” Becca explained. “It won't take long.”

“What if there's stuffing left over?” aLima asked.

“Well!” Becca grinned. “We’ll just have to eat it.”

The girls laughed.

“Doctor-Doctor!” iDana yelled from the mess-hall. “Come out here!”

Becca wiped her hands and left the kitchen.

iDana was pacing, her hand pressed firmly over her right eye. “You!” she said when she saw Becca. “We have a situation.” She paused. “Who’s in the kitchen with you?”

Becca thumbed over her shoulder. “aRlene and aLima. We were getting dinner together.”

iDana waved her hands in the air. “That can wait. aRlene! aLima! Get suited up!”

aLima poked her head out. “What’s going on?”

“The Shipping Authority is here!” iDana yelled. “They’ve been chasing us this whole time. Now, go get ready!”

Becca watched the two redheads run into the corridor. “The Shipping Authority? Why would they—“

“Your sappy sentimentality led them right to us!” iDana snapped. “This is all your fault. You and your stupid letters home!”

“But we only wanted to let them know what was going on,” Becca protested.

iDana pointed a firm finger. “And they traced the signal. They found our location!” She grabbed Becca’s sleeve and started to pull her out of mess-hall.

Becca obliged.

“Wouldn’t the Vencume be dealing with this?” Becca asked as they entered a lift.

“The *Vencume*!” iDana made a sound like she was clearing her throat or gagging. “They’re too busy navel-gazing or whatever it is they do. We have radio contact and we’ve set-up an *ad hoc* bridge. We’re handling this.”

Evie was already waiting on the “bridge“. Becca recognized it as the room where she had given the Vencume the Human anatomy lesson. The three-dimensional display sat in the center and iMala was making some adjustment to it. iLyssa was attaching a lead to a speaker.

“Where were you?” Evie asked. “Playing Space-Mom?”

“At least someone is,” Becca answered.

The display clattered to life, the tiny balls clicking into position to form a rough human figure. Only the front of it was well defined; the back was a vague blob.

“We have to make do.” iLyssa waved dismissively at the image. “The Vencume can see, but not that well, so they don’t really have anything like we’re...like *you’re* used to.”

“This is Captain Deng Xueshen of the destroyer *ZhengYang*.” The mouth of the figure moved but the voice came from the speaker two meters away. “You have an escaped prisoner on your ship and we are requesting her return.”

iDana held an imager up to focus on the tiny bridge. “I’m turning this on,” she said, adjusting the lens. “Let’s see what they think.”

Becca watched the figure move its head to one side, looking at something. The eyebrows shot up.

iLyssa approached iDana carefully with her hands behind her back. “You will cease your pursuit of this craft and its inhabitants,” she stated. “This is a peaceful ship and you are well into Vencume territory.”

The clattering display shifted as another figure came into view.

“Let us see her.” A female voice.

iDana passed iLyssa and focused the imager on Becca.

Becca held up her hands. “I’ll answer any questions to the best of my ability, but please call off your attack.”

“We want to see Dr. Tabib,” the woman said.

“I *am* Dr. Tabib,” Becca protested. “See? I...I still have the mark...here...” She held back her hair to show a tiny scar on her forehead. “I hit myself with the block when you brought me in. It scarred. It was never looked after, so it--”

She stopped. *I have both of my hands. I lost a hand when...*

“The Vencume have stem-tech,” Becca rapidly explained. “They grew or built a new one...the hand. We mustn’t go to war with them. This has all been a big misunderstanding.”

The woman on the display was frowning. “We want the prisoner returned to us. We also request the body of—“

“I’m not dead,” Evie said. “I’m sorry for everything that happened, but you should have understood it was me. You could have checked my medical history. You assumed I wasn’t who I said I was and I’m sorry.”

Captain Deng raised a hand on the display. His voice had a slight edge of fear to it. “We want the...*prisoners*...returned. If you put them aboard a lifeboat, we’ll pick it up. If you do not comply in the next fifteen minutes, we will deploy our fighters.”

iLyssa crossed her arms. “If you deploy your fighters, we’ll deploy ours. And ours are better than yours.”

“We don’t want a fight,” iMala said. “We have a schedule we’re trying to keep. Please, just let us go. You can have them later when we’re done.”

There was some minor discussion between the two Shipping Authority figures. The woman’s hand was out of view, possibly covering a microphone with her hand. Becca just made out her saying “I outrank you,” when Captain Deng furrowed his brow.

Finally the woman turned to them. “You have fifteen minutes.”

The display clattered to a flat pool. The signal had been cut.

iDana frowned. “We need a proper video system; I don’t think that the hand-held really did anyone any justice.”

iMala nodded. “We’re losing a lot of non-verbal communication. Forcing a 2-D image into 3-D doesn’t work.”

“Very off-putting,” iLyssa agreed. She pulled a hand-held receiver from one of her smock-pockets. “oDele, go ahead and do a full spin launch. I think we’re going to have to prove something to these people.”

Evie took Becca’s sleeve. “You’ll want to see this.”

The two women went down the hall to an observation deck. Past the stern of the ship was a Shipping Authority vessel. Evie pointed to a bay door that was opening three sections down.

They were rotating at the same rate, so the launch was never obscured. The five golden attack-fighters flung out of the bay in an easy arc; and, after turning around each other a few times, they circled the Shipping Authority vessel.

Becca and Evie went back to the bridge.

“Get them on the line,” iLyssa said. “They need to know we aren’t kidding.”

iDana nodded. There was a faint singing coming over the radio.

“Are you getting this?” iLyssa asked. “We’ve launched our fighters and it will be another couple of minutes before you can launch yours. Are you going to turn around now?”

Silence.

“I need to know you can hear me,” iLyssa said tersely, “and that you aren’t just ignoring us.”

A man’s voice came over. “We hear you.”

“We don’t want to attack you,” iMala said. “But we really do need for you to stop chasing us. Please stop.”

“Call off your fighters,” the man answered. Becca assumed it was Captain Deng.

“Once we see you turn around,” iLyssa said, “we’ll bring them back. This is not negotiable.”

iMala switched the clattering display to a view of the Shipping Authority vessel. It stood on a thin stalk and five antenna-like spines came off it, each terminating in a model of one of the fighters.

“We’re installing a proper display once all this is over,” iDana growled. “This is ridiculous.”

“Call off your fighters,” Captain Deng demanded over the radio. “We are not moving until they are gone.”

“Turn around and go home,” iLyssa snapped back. “If you halt a bay for launch, they will open fire. You have ten minutes. We’re not going to sit around in a stupid stand-off!”

Becca heard an alarm come across the radio as the display exploded into many fine spikes coming from the Shipping Authority ship, The melody of the fighters over the radio altered as the models started to turn on the ends of their stalks.

“Is there a fault in the--” Evie started.

“They've opened fire on us,” iDana stated.

Becca watched the display. “Why can't we hear--?”

“There's no sound in space,” iLyssa snapped and turned back to her hand-held receiver. “Halt your fire! You understand? You can't hit them. We're going to open fire if you don't.”

The singing over the radio changed to a new harmonic. Now, the fighters grew thin spines that reached back to the large mass of the vessel.

“It can't handle this kind of image.” iDana tiskied. “We're going to loose the picture.”

The display rattled, tiny metal balls rushing from point to point. There was a burning smell.

“Turn it off!” iLyssa ordered. “We'll continue this on the observation deck.” She marched out of the room.

They piled out of the ad hoc bridge to the observation deck. The battle rose and set under the ship.

iLyssa was yelling into the receiver. “Cease firing on us! They will tear you apart!”

Again, the battle rose over one side of the ship with the spinning sections waving between them. It looked like a war on some distant shore.

iLyssa waved her arms. “How am I supposed to direct this if I can't see what the hell is going on?”

The singing on the radio fell in descending scales over the receiver.

iLyssa stormed back to the bridge and the others followed.

“I'm trying the display again,” iMala said, “but on a lower resolution.”

An amorphous blob grew and shrank before them.

“We can follow the battle better from the song.” iDana moped.

iLyssa paced back and forth. “One of the most important tests we've ever faced and we can't even get a proper view of it.”

Becca glanced at the shifting display. The blob adjusted with the singing over the radio.

There was a static sound, only for a second. The blob bulged in one area and the singing shifted slightly off-key.

A pause.

“What just happened?” Becca looked from face to face. “What was that?”

“oDele, bring them home,” iLyssa said coldly into the receiver.

“We're coming in,” one of the pilots answered. “Full spin recovery.”

“Adjust the display,” iLyssa commanded.

iMala changed the settings. The Shipping Authority vessel came into clear focus. It had stopped firing. The five fighters were no longer circling.

The three girls stood, staring, silently at the tiny model of a ship. iMala rubbed her right eye.

“What just happened?” Evie asked.

iDana answered, after a moment. “We've lost a pilot. Not sure who, yet.”

Becca ran from the bridge back to the observation deck. The Shipping Authority vessel rose under one end of the Vencume ship—a glittering debris field next to it. She watched it until it set.

Back on the bridge, iLyssa and iDana were arguing.

“The Reds can tear them apart.” iLyssa waved her arms. “We have the buzz-landers. Even if we don't launch any ground-troops, we can still put holes in their ship.”

“I don't want to risk any more of us,” iDana countered. “It was only a matter of time. We haven't had a proper test.”

iMala raised a hand. “I might have something...”

iLyssa's eyes were tearing up. “How the hell did they--?”

“They got lucky!” iDana snapped. “They were firing blind! Who knows how many bolts they put up before—“

“We are *not* going to let this pass.” iLyssa stood with clenched fists. “We made a big enough mistake when we let the first one go.”

“They might still have communications,” iDana said. “They could still call for help and give their location.”

“I want *everything* on that ship destroyed,” iLyssa hissed.

iMala stood and turned to her sisters. “I have something. I...I was just toying with it.”

iLyssa turned with clenched teeth. “*What* were you just toying with?”

“The field...” iMala whispered.

iDana gestured to the door with her head. “We can do this.”

The three girls hurried from the room.

Evie stared at the floor. “They killed one of my girls,” she said. “The Shipping Authority killed one of my girls.”

“Where are the Vencume?” Becca asked. “Why are they not involved in this?”

“We can make more,” Evie continued. “And we will. We will. There will be more.”

The radio buzzed. iLyssa had left the receiver behind.

Captain Deng's voice came over in harsh staccato. “We have lost stability on four sections. Sensors out. Multiple injuries.”

He's not talking to us. He's sending out a distress signal on all channels.

“Engines at forty percent...” a string of numbers.

He's giving the location. They aren't going to survive.

Evie started to list her own numbers in response. “*Three eight three two seven nine five zero...*”

Becca ran to the radio and tried to hail the Shipping Authority vessel. “We can pick you up. Please, hold on. Get your people evacuated to lifeboats. No one has to die because of this.”

The clattering display shifted behind her; something had attached itself to the model ship. There was a flicker.

“Please, captain Deng Xueshen, come in,” Becca pleaded. “Launch your lifeboats. I can talk to the Vencume. They'll understand. They're children. They were just children. No more people have to die. Please, they don't understand. The children don't understand. Launch the lifeboats!”

The device that had attached itself to the vessel bloomed, long fins extending and spinning. Becca ran to the tiny observation deck and waited for the ship to come into view.

What rose over the nose of the Vencume ship was surrounded by a shimmering bubble. Inside that, a vessel crumbled under its own weight. The implosion was silent and slow.

“Captain Deng! Please come in! Captain Deng!”

Becca ran back to the bridge. The clattering display showed the ship folding in on itself.

She wiped the tears from her eyes. “Please, Captain Deng. Rosemary. Someone? Come in!”

“They starved to death decades ago,” Evie said. “They can't hear you.”

Becca turned to face her.

Evie was watching the display with glimmering eyes. “They collapsed the field, Becca.”

Becca's vision was blurred by fear and misunderstanding. “They...*advanced* it?”

“The borrowed time field slows us down during travel,” Evie intoned, “but if the field collapses, or if the snapback fails, or if the MOUS doesn't make the correct observation...I knew the Vencume were doing something like that, but iMala really figured it out. She's using our mode of transport as a weapon against us.”

* * * * *

It was oDele who had been killed.

Evie had tried to explain the situation to the twins, but they had not been the most sympathetic audience and called oDelle a “silly pilot”.

Evie complained to Becca about it later that day. “They don't seem to care much about death,” she said, exasperated. “I don't think the others are even phased. It's like they're less upset about the death and more upset at being bested.”

“Well,” Becca said, “you said they would make more. Why would anyone care about death if there was an inexhaustible supply?”

Evie was taken aback. “You're handling this rather well.”

“Have you ever had someone close to you die?” Becca asked.

“I guess.” Evie looked at the ceiling. “I don't know...well...I guess I felt like it served them all right. I know that sounds weird. But...uh...it was like...I don't know.”

“It's...devastating.” Becca clasped her fingers. “And people see you and they don't recognize you. They're so used to seeing that other person there that looking at you is like seeing a face without glasses. And you go to bed and it's empty....it's cold.” Becca sniffled. “You lose an arm or a leg and you can't stand up right or function, but you know you have to keep going.”

“But you were close,” Evie said. “And if you care that way, then it feels like that. It's iMala's formula for the value of a thing. It's effect over effort. I suppose that if you can replace a thing easily, it has no great effect on its own. The effort is valueless.”

“Do you feel that way about Ulan and Uma?”

“I don't want them to get teased,” Evie said. “They don't really understand people and I worry that...if they ever meet other children...as long as they have each other, it should be OK.” Evie rolled her eyes back and recited:

*There is protection from most everything,
from fire and storms to frosts that sting;
add whatever blows may come to mind
but there is no protection from mankind.³*

She rubbed her right eye. “There's nothing more cruel than other children. I don't want them to face anything like I did. They aren't twisted and weird like that.”

Becca nodded. “You favor them because they're like you.”

“No, Becca,” Evie said. “It's because they aren't. They aren't like me at all.”

iMala

After that, Evie was coming to bed later and later, spending twenty, twenty-eight, and eventually thirty-six hours in her ancillary lab before crawling to bed. She would come in, unresponsive, and shamble to her bed, falling asleep moments after lying down.

Becca went to check up on Evie after a particularly long stint away. The engineer was slumped over her workbench, across papers covered in long, mathematical formulas.

Becca rested a hand on Evie's shoulder.

Evie woke with a start and papers scattered off the bench. “I don't know!”

The mantis automaton came to life and quickly gathered up the mess, placing a neat stack on the end on the bench.

“Evie,” Becca said worriedly. “You've missed several meals. What are you working on?”

Evie turned to the stack and sorted the papers. “I must have dozed off.” She handed a page to Becca.

It looked like absolute gibberish. “What is this?”

“That's a Kerr metric.” Evie was rubbing her eyes. “Which describes the geometry of space-time in the vicinity of a mass M rotating with angular momentum J where where r sub s is the Schwarzschild radius.”

“If you say so.”

“But, inside a rotating spherical shell, the acceleration due the Lense-Thirring effect would be...” Evie handed her another piece of paper.

Becca shook her head. “That doesn't explain what it is.”

Evie took the papers back. “It's pointless and it's *wrong*.” She rested her head on the workbench. “It's like it kills the MOUS or something. If I hadn't seen it, I would say it's physically impossible. Unless there's a GACHO involved, I can't figure it out, but even then...”

“A what?”

Evie stopped and rolled her eyes. “A GACHO. A gravitationally anomalous compact halo object.”

“So, what is the MOUS anyway?”

“Mandatory observation/universal synchronization,” Evie held her head. “It's probably some dumb thing that involves the square-root of negative one before Euler's number, unless following the speed of light or if analogous to the Hamaker constant.”

³ This is a section from the epic poem “Aniara” by the Swedish poet and Nobel laureate Harry Martinson. We can assume that Evie came across it once and this section stuck in her head.

“Gibberish.” Becca shook her head again. “How does all this work, anyway?”

Evie rolled her eyes again and asked, “Do you want the simple explanation or the complex one?”

“Simple, please.”

Evie sighed and started a lecture that she had obviously given many times before. “The borrowed time field slows us down, so even though it takes fifty-six hundred years, it only feels like four months. Once you reach your destination, you tell the snapback you want out of field, and the snapback asks the MOUS 'What time is it?' and it...uh...snaps you back.”

Becca furrowed her brow. “That's time-travel.”

“For all intents and purposes, yes,” Evie agreed. “*But*, you can't go back to before the field went up. That's why we call it 'borrowed-time', you see?”

“No.” Becca shook her head. “If that's the simple explanation, than what's the complex one?”

“We don't know,” Evie said. “We don't make them; the Vencume trade them for potatoes and wheat. It's why we're always careful to give them plants that won't produce seeds.”

Becca glanced over the scatter of papers again. “So, you're trying to figure it out now?”

“She *showed* it to me. She tried to *explain* it to me.” Evie crumpled the papers in front of her and threw them at the wall. “And it *still* didn't make any sense!”

The mantis picked up the wadded papers and set them back on the workbench.

Evie ran her fingers through her hair; it was getting greasy again and the dark roots were getting longer. “I can't do it, Becca. I can't figure out how iMala made that thing work.”

“But if she explained it—“

“It uses a different kind of *math!*” Evie wailed and flopped across the crumpled papers. “I have to unlearn *everything* I know about relativity and causality!”

“Well,” Becca offered, “ask iSkandar. It said they use the borrowed time principle to mature the clones quickly and the girls said they put the garden into advancement so they can harvest the crops quickly.”

Evie shoved all the papers off the workbench. “*Vesta, Diana, Minerva!* It makes no damned sense!”

As the mantis moved forward to pick them up, she held out her hands. “NO! I *want* them there!”

The mantis sat back.

Still angry, Evie grabbed the mantis and knocked it over. “That's all I can do, is put together some dumb clunker that picks up *trash!*” She kicked the papers across the room. “Meanwhile, *children* understand how time works better than I do! I went to school and spent all that time studying and look how far it's gotten me!”

The mantis picked itself up.

“Evie...” Becca held up her hands. “You're tired and hungry and frustrated. When's the last time you ate something?”

“You said I had to lose weight,” Evie growled through a clenched jaw.

“Not like this,” Becca said. “Go eat something and clean up and take a nap. Go get some real sleep. You're not going to figure it out by wearing yourself down.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess I need a break.” Defeated, Evie sighed. “There's got to be a better way to figure this out. I just need to find it.”

* * * * *

Becca was finding other things to do and, it turned out, there was a surprising amount to do a ship. Today, she was helping a couple of redheads with laundry.

iLyssa stormed in. “You, Doctor-Doctor!” The child took her arm. “There's something wrong with iMala. Come fix her.”

“Is she ill?” Becca wiped her hands on her thighs.

iLyssa tugged Becca out of the room. “She's laying in bed. She won't get up and won't talk to us.”

In the laboratory, iLyssa led Becca to a door at the back. There was a room with a spartan bed and a workbench covered in drawings and odds bits of equipment. It was dark and papers crinkled underfoot as Becca approached the bed.

iMala was lying on her side, fully clothed, facing the wall with her arms over her head.

Becca sat next to her and placed a hand on her shoulder. “iMala, are you not feeling well?”

The girl brushed off Becca’s hand. “Go away.”

“There’s something wrong with her,” iLyssa said from the doorway. “Just get her fixed, OK?”

Becca turned back to the figure on the bed. “Is there something bothering you?”

iMala rolled onto her stomach and buried her face in her arms. “I don’t want to talk about it. Just go away.”

Becca smiled to herself. *Ah, it’s not an illness. She’s just being a teen-aged girl.* Becca turned to iLyssa and waved her out of the room.

iLyssa mouthed *just get her fixed* and stomped off.

iMala was crying.

Becca was careful to not touch her. “Are you sad about oDele?”

iMala shook her head.

“You’re not sad about your sister dying?”

iMala rolled over. “I don’t care about that dumb pilot.” Her eyes were swollen and red. “We can always make more. Who cares?” She flung an arm over her face.

Becca pulled back a bit. *Are they so cavalier about death? Do they really not care?* “I think you’re saying that you don’t care because you don’t want to be hurt,” she said. “But you *do* care, so you’re feeling guilty that you don’t *want* to care. It’s OK to be sad about someone dying. It’s not OK to beat yourself up about something that wasn’t your fault.”

iMala lifted her arm from her eyes. “What if people die and it *is* your fault?”

Becca frowned a little. “Well, you can feel guilty about it, but it’s all about the circumstances—“

“Because, I didn’t want to kill those people.” iMala sat up and was staring intently at Becca. “It wasn’t even what I had been working on. There’s so much time spent in deep-space, and wouldn’t it be better if it only took a couple of days? Or a couple hours?”

Becca’s head was spinning. “So why are you...?”

iMala’s eyes watered. “I was working on a better field generator. I didn’t want it to be a weapon or anything. I just wanted it to attach to their ship and send them away. But they broke it!” She broke down sobbing. “iDana and iLyssa wanted all those people to die, but I just wanted them to go away! I don’t want to make bombs! I just want everyone’s life to be better!” The girl’s shoulders heaved with each sob.

Becca held out her arms and hugged iMala. “That’s why the Vencume call you Gentle Blue.” *And what do they call your sisters? Mean Blue and Bossy Blue?* “You don’t have to make bombs...” Becca stroked iMala’s wild hair. “You don’t have to hurt people if you don’t want to.”

“They made us to be weapons.” iMala continued to cry. “I wanted to send them away, but iLyssa was so angry that she turned it into a killing machine. That’s all we are. We’re just supposed to fight battles and win wars. That’s why they made so many of the others. We’re just supposed to give them weapons and fighters and guns and bombs. I want to do something else.”

“I’ll tell you what...” Becca held the girl tightly. “Would you like to be a smart person who helps others? Someone who doesn’t hurt anyone but actually makes them feel better?”

iMala sat back and nodded.

“Well,” Becca continued. “I’m a doctor. So my job is to see how people are hurting and make it not hurt. You see?”

The gray-haired girl sniffled. “Isn’t that in the data-bank?”

“I bet it is.” Becca smoothed iMala’s hair back. “And if it isn’t, then maybe I could reconnect so you can learn a few things from me. Would you like that?”

iMala rubbed her nose on her sleeve. “But you don’t like people poking around in your head.”

Becca nodded. “No, I didn’t then. But no one had explained it to me. I didn’t have a say in the matter. I *want* to give you this. I want to show you how you can use your ability to help people.”

The child took Becca by the sleeve. “We can do that. Penemue will let us do that.”

* * * * *

Becca and iMala left the laboratory and went down a couple levels to a new room. There, there were several human-shaped chairs. Becca had only seen the one before, *but maybe things had changed? Maybe I only saw the one the first time.*

Penemue, the Vencume responsible for data-bank connections, shifted from pale blue to light-purple when Becca and iMala entered the room. "The Doctor wishes to swim once more," it said.

"With more purpose," Becca answered. "I want to give her what I can."

The Vencume shifted to a pale blue-green.

iMala ran a hand over the Vencume. "She wants to teach me."

Penemue shifted to a blue nod. "Gentle Blue wishes to learn healing from the Doctor."

The two non-Vencume nodded.

Penemue gestured lightly to the chairs. "The ocean is taxed and wishes coaxing."

"We wish no hard decisions," iMala said, laying down. "Would this not calm the waters?"

The Vencume was massaging the child's head, long fingers turning white and pressing and probing the top of her skull.

"Is this direct from me to her?" Becca asked, lying down.

"You are together in our ocean," the Vencume said.

iMala clasped her hands and shut her eyes. "Penemue, Librarian, teach me how to swim."

It's like a religious ritual, Becca thought. Is this a form of prayer?

Becca felt the faint pressure across the top of her head. Everything was warm and fuzzy. There was a sound of static and the room filled with light.

* * * * *

Becca is sitting at the old oak table in her family's house. It's covered with plates of cookies.

iMala sits opposite her. "What's this place?"

Becca takes a bite out of a cookie. "This is my home. When I'm sad, I come here."

iMala points at brown-headed girl with bright green eyes reading in the other room. "Who's that girl?"

"That's my daughter, Huri," Becca explains.

"Why are you here and not there?" iMala asks.

Becca pushes a plate of cookies forward. "Because her father died when she was young. I want her to go to a good school and have a good life, so I'm out here and sending money back home."

"Didn't the Shipping Authority freeze your account?" iMala takes a bite of cookie. "Do you miss her?"

"Yes," Becca nods and snuffles a little. "Very much."

"This is a good cookie," iMala says.

"I'm glad you like it."

"Are you using me as a replacement for your daughter?"

Becca frowns. "I might."

iMala speaks with her mouth full. "Did you do that with Evie? She's younger than you."

Evie is sitting at the table now.

"Why are you here?" Becca asks.

Evie places a plate of cookies down on the table and pushes them forward. "You wanted to ask me a question."

Becca takes one of the cookies off the new plate. "I wanted to ask you about your sister, Gwen."

"I can't give you that information," Evie says. "I don't have access to it."

Becca takes a bite of her cookie. "This has absolutely no flavor at all."

Evie leans over to iMala, holding out a cookie. "You know I love you, don't you?"

The girl nods. "Those don't taste as good, though."

Becca realizes she has a cup of tea in front of her. "You can't talk to her. She's not really here."

iMala looks over her shoulder at Huri. "I want to be that girl. I want a real mother."

There is a Vencume in the room that runs long hands over iMala. "We want to be your mother." It holds out a plate of misshapen cookies.

Suddenly, the room is filled with children: redheads, blondes, gray, and black.

"You understand love," a black-haired girl says. "Give it to us."

Becca puts her hands over her eyes.

"All the cookies are gone," Evie says.

When she takes her hands from her face, Becca sees the empty table.

iMala is licking her finger and collecting crumbs. "I'll take what I can get," the girl says. "And I'll give what I can. If I plant enough seeds, maybe they will grow."

* * * * *

They were back in the room. Becca's head ached.

"Peculiar creatures," Penemue said. "You apply context where none exists."

iMala sat up and rubbed her eyes. "I need a nap."

Becca nodded. There was something new in her head, but it was still formless.

Back in the laboratory, iMala kicked off her slippers and climbed into bed. "Tuck me in?" she asked.

Becca leaned forward and pulled the thin sheet over the girl.

iMala stared at her intently. "Kiss goodnight?"

"Yes," Becca said. Her head was still fuzzy from the swim but she kissed iMala on the forehead.

The child smiled widely. "I'm going to dream about making people better."

Library

When Becca awoke from her nap, she looked at her right hand and thought it shimmered. The left hand, by comparison, looked perfectly normal.

In the mess-hall, all the girls had the same shimmering quality.

Evie was rubbing the bridge of her nose. She had dark circles under her eyes. *Her hands shimmer as well, and her jaw, but most of her face is still and dark.*

Evie opened her eyes and gave Becca a look. "What?"

Her eyes are practically glowing! "It's nothing."

"Nothing," she says." Evie humphed a bit. "Your eyes bothering you or something? You keep looking at things weird."

Two Vencume spun into the room to talk to the three designers. iLyssa's eyes narrowed, iDana nodded gravely, and iMala traced a circle on the table in front of her.

And iMala looked up at Becca. Their eyes locked and the child smiled.

"Earth to Dr. Tabib, *hello?*" Evie was waving her hand. "Why are you so distracted?"

Becca shook it off. "iMala and I connected with the data-bank earlier. Maybe it *is* affecting my eyes. Everyone seems to be shimmering."

Evie frowned. "Like wiggly or glittery?"

"It's hard to describe," Becca knitted her brows. "Both, I suppose. But you only shimmer in places."

"Let Mirabilis know," Evie said. "It might know what's going on."

* * * * *

iMala had named at least four other Vencume, besides iSkandar, as Becca came to discover. Aside from Penemue, there were Mirabilis (who was in charge of the current project), Renuatus (who had run the project on another ship and "died"), and Buer.

From what Becca could tell, the Vencume were unused to individual names; they were called by their role or function. Becca learned to recognize them by their voices, but iMala insisted you could tell them on

sight by the scales on their feet. iSkandar had long thin scales and Penemue's were triangular. Renatus had circular scales and Mirabilis' were square. Buer, who was the shortest of all the Vencume Becca had met—and the strangest—had pentagon shaped scales. They all had distinct personalities and Becca eventually compared them to people she had known.

* * * * *

“Doctor's sensors have not changed,” the Vencume Mirabilis drew a hand away from Becca's face. “This effect is unknown.”

“I see it in my right hand, but not my left,” Becca said.

iSkandar took Becca's hands. “There is no perceivable difference.”

Becca nodded. “No, but I see it on Evie as well, in places. Like on one of her ears but not the other.”

Evie reflexively reached for her ears.

“Demonstrate the effect,” Mirabilis asked.

“Well, her right ear, here.” Becca pointed at Evie's face, holding her finger a few centimeters away. “But the line is traced here,” under the nose, “to over here,” under her left ear, “then it curves like so,” across the neck.

iSkandar took Evie's head in one hand and traced the line with a straightened finger.

“I'm really not cool with this,” Evie said weakly.

“Not the top of the head?” iSkandar asked, letting go of Evie's head.

“Only the eyes,” Becca answered. “But I also see it in you two; iSkandar shimmers more.”

The two Vencume went through a complicated pattern of color shifts.

“Is Doctor familiar with Engineer's injuries?” Mirabilis asked.

Evie rolled her eyes. “Oh, that's impossible.”

“Humans have a quality, it is *ittichitti*...” iSkandar tried to form a word. “You see things that are not there. You have thoughts not based on the observed. Not a vision, not a thought....”

“Imagination?” Evie offered in her own tongue.

The Vencume ran its hand over her. “There. That quality. It terrifies you.”

Becca shook her head. “It's not terrifying.”

But Evie was nodding. “When it plays tricks with your head, or if it gives you nightmares? Yeah, it is.”

“So, I'm imagining it,” Becca summed up.

The two Vencume blue-nodded.

Evie was rubbing her right eye. “But, I didn't tell you about the ear, did I?”

“You might have,” Becca said. “That whole period is still a little fuzzy for me.”

“Doctor swam with Gentle Blue,” iSkandar said to Mirabilis. “This is an after-effect.”

Mirabilis blue-nodded. “What did Doctor ask?”

Becca shrugged. “I might have wanted to know more about the cloning process. The genetic mapping?”

“So, you're looking for it now,” Evie said. “Do you get it when you're in the garden?”

iSkandar purple-shifted to a frown. “The garden is in advancement right now. It is not safe to go there.”

Becca looked at her hands. “I don't know if I would get it there.”

“Advancement will end soon,” Mirabilis said. “Let us know if the effect lingers there.”

* * * * *

When it was announced that advancement had ended, Becca took the pod out to the garden section. She had to take a lift to the center of the section, where the spin had the least amount of pull, but the short trip from the lift to the pod was less taxing than trying to cross the bridge. The conduit hissed past her and the pod moved up and down, side to side, through the flexible connections between sections. Once in the garden section, she kicked to the lift and rode it down, into the pull.

In the outer ring, Becca accidentally tried to open a door with her left hand and got no response before using her right as Evie had instructed. There was a prickling sensation.

The door was not to a Human garden. This room was red-lit with thick, warm mist. The sea-smell was choking, and she knew she had gone the wrong direction, but was curious and had to look in.

Plants here were thin and tall. Most were red (or looked red in the light), but a few were a dark purple. Becca took a pinch from one succulent leaf and thought it smelled like pine or citrus. It tasted much the same when she pressed it to her tongue and spat the sticky sap away.

Looking past the red-leaved plants, Becca through she saw a pool of watercress. There was also what looked like a small field of grass but, on closer inspection, she saw it was rice. The large, green leaves of taro plants sat next to another pool of algae. *No wonder it smells like sea-weed in here.*

Leaving this garden, she crossed the corridor to the other, Human, garden. It was much drier here and the lighting was a strong, pale, yellow.

The trees were taller than she remembered. *But it was out of field, wasn't it? They've allowed time to take some natural course here.* The squash seedlings she had planted with aNnora were now crawling vines with rich yellow fruit. These shimmered only slightly. *So, the effect is still here, or I only think it is. aNnora did say the Vencume had done something to them.*

A stand of trees to one side had hardly any shimmer and she crossed to something her eyes could fix on. A grape bower spanned behind them, weighted with dark, purple fruit.

Becca sat down and leaned up against the tree, looking up at the gnarled branches. She was unsure of the type of tree or how long ago the Vencume had planted it, but it was covered in tiny white flowers.

She heard a faint voice behind her. "Dr. Tabib?"

Becca swung around to see two tired, terrified, *familiar* eyes peering out of the shadows.

A man's voice...barely a whisper. "Is that you? Are they with you?"

Becca quickly stood. "Gordon?"

He limped out, jumpsuit torn and stained. It *was* Gordon, but there were streaks of gray in his long blond hair and full beard.

"How long have you..?" but she stopped. *If he was in the garden when...*

"I never thought I'd see a Human again," Gordon said, his voice gruff and unused. "I'd almost forgotten. I saw the stars...I've had visions." He'd lost weight and his nails were chewed down.

Becca recoiled in terror.

"Don't leave me," he whimpered.

This is too much, too quickly. Becca swallowed hard. "How long have you been here?"

Gordon looked around. "I'm not sure. I lost count." He rushed at her and held her hand. "Oh...but you *are* real. I'm sorry. I'm sorry..." He broke down into heaving sobs. "They took me here. They took my shoulder and..." He glanced past her. "They aren't here. They brought me here. At least we can eat."

Is this something I'm actually seeing or something I think I'm seeing? Play along with it for now. See if anyone else notices and you'll know for sure.

"You can't stay here," she said. "You have to come with me."

"The door is always locked," Gordon moaned. "I've tried...I've tried."

Becca pulled him to the entrance to the garden. "We can go. We can get out. Come on."

She rested her right hand on the panel and the door swished open. Becca crossed the threshold.

Gordon held back. "You're an angel," he intoned.

This isn't real. You're imagining it. You'll pass someone in a hallway and that will settle it.

They went up the lift and floated out to the pod. Gordon seemed oddly graceful in the lack of gravity and said something about "it's been a long time", but Becca was only thinking about how her mind was obviously slipping away. Even when she found herself running out of momentum and Gordon gave her a little push to the pod, she was sure none of it was actually happening.

And, as they rode out to the other section of ship, Becca tried hard to not think about the human stink next to her. *It's in your head. You have to report it to Mirabilis. You're remembering your time on the lifeboat. That's what that is. Smells bring back memories. You bit off more than you can chew and it's eating a hole in your brain.* Nausea was creeping in.

The pod got to its destination and they floated out to the lift *You're going to be haunted. You feel guilty. You want to go home and you're imagining other humans because you really are lonely, aren't you? Doesn't it feel nice to be wanted?* Becca formed a tight fist against her stomach. *Don't you like to be needed like that? He's obviously injured. Look at his arm and how he can hardly use it. Oh, wonderful doctor, only you can help him. What an imagination you have! Don't you miss your husband? Look, you've gone out and gotten a replacement. What would your father think?*

The two got out of the lift and started down the hallway. *Isn't the ceiling a little taller here? It's like a church, isn't it? Do you remember when you went to the big cathedral with your family? You were so young and looked up at the mosaics and wasn't it wonderful? You thought all the windows were made of candy. And then you met the most wonderful man in the world and he gave you a daughter.*

What kind of woman are you that you aren't at home raising her?

And there was Evie with a Vencume. Was it iSkandar, who shimmered a little more than Mirabilis and had long, thin scales on its feet? Why was the Vencume turning that awful deep purple? The skin all mottled and spiky... Almost red now... *Oh, Evie, your face is so pale, even the parts that don't shimmer. They're both so still, still, like statues. And Evie is speaking but her fists are so tight, tight, white knuckles and her jaw is tight, tight, like tetanus, and that must be iSkandar with wiggling digits and they're both so upset and...*

“Tell me it's not real. Tell me I'm imagining it.”

* * * * *

Becca had a headache. iSkandar and Evie were arguing.

“Librarian might not allow it,” iSkandar said. The Vencume was shifting from indigo to magenta; Becca took it as a sign of worried indecision.

“I can understand why Penemue would be hesitant to allow a connection,” Evie went on, “but Gordon will have to be able to understand what's being said on this ship. There's also...*what* he's been doing this whole time. He wasn't always in the garden. You can't imagine what kind of damage can be caused by an improperly motivated Human.”

“It is unfortunate, but we do not know the quality of Broken Human,” iSkandar said.

“There's nothing we can do about it now.” Evie shook her head. “He's already in our frame of reference. We'll have to consider it time served. He's lucky it was only a few months.”

“Connect him,” Becca said. The words seemed to end the discussion. “I want to know how long he was actually in there. I'm...I'm a doctor. I have to maintain the welfare of the crew.”

Evie frowned. “He's not on the crew anymore. Captain Wainwright said.”

“Captain Wainwright isn't here!” Becca shouted, surprised by her own conviction. “That's a human-being and I'm held by a set of...I took an oath. OK?” She massaged her temples. “This isn't real, so what does it matter?”

“Oh...” Evie crossed her arms. “This is *very* real. This is just *really* bad timing.”

“We will talk with the Library directly,” iSkandar finally said, moving out into the corridor.

“You're going behind Penemue's back?” Becca asked worriedly. *Although, really, Vencume don't have backs to go behind or heads to go over.*

Evie nodded. “This is Vencume politics.”

iSkandar flickered from light blue to pale green. “Engineer is correct. There is still debate on the value of the Tzikzik project. Some think it is too dangerous, others think it is too stingy.”

Becca turned to face iSkandar. “Which camp are you?”

The Vencume shifted to a dark-blue frown. “Doctor asks this question?”

They were standing in front of a small lift. Becca had the feeling that its size was related to its visibility, so they were even taking a back-door.

iSkandar gestured to the lift. “There is a pod, too small for all of us. Take it four sections to stern and wait.”

“And you?” Evie asked.

“Send the pod back. We will continue from the landing.”

The lift was hardly big enough for two Humans; it may have accommodated a single Vencume. At the top, they were in near-weightlessness and kicked to the small pod that would take them between sections.

Evie was stone-faced the entire trip.

“You can’t still hate him,” Becca said. “So much has happened since then. Look at what the twins did to him; that arm might never work properly again.”

“That’s too easily fixed,” Evie said. “I know you’ve wanted to watch the Vencume process. Won’t that be a nice example? You’ll go back as the best doctor that ever there was.”

Becca frowned. “And you’ll go back with a stunning new ship design to shock and awe everyone.”

Evie laughed. “Everyone gets something out of this.”

“I think Gordon turning up now is a good sign,” Becca said. “It’s like we get a second chance on some level of...death assumed. The Shipping Authority will be pleased he isn’t dead.”

“It’s a bad sign,” Evie answered. “The twins had him hidden somewhere. They took him there and they knew that the garden had to be advanced. They’ve got a mean streak.”

Now, in a section she had never been in before, Becca floated out of the pod to wait by the lift. Evie sent the pod back.

“But you two never got along,” Becca said. “If the children were using a model of the world based on what was in your head, they would have used something like that against him.”

“So it’s my fault?”

Becca shook her head. “I didn’t say that. You also have to consider that they were obviously taking care of him. They had to feed him and leaving him in the garden...well, they left him somewhere relatively safe. He didn’t starve to death. As much as they might have abused him, they do seem to care for him a little.”

“We don’t know where we’re going from here,” Evie said, changing the subject. “iSkandar didn’t say.”

“It should be along shortly.” Becca floated against one wall. “There should be hand-holds or something here. This is terrible. I should be better at this....”

“Yeah, you should.” Evie was having no problem, hanging mid-air. “How did you ever pass zero-gee training?”

“The training was on a Human ship. Oh,” Becca noted, seeing the pod arriving behind Evie. “It looks like iSkandar is—“

“While we’re here...” Evie turned. She halted and paled.

iSkandar was exiting the pod.

The Vencume was not lumbering or shuffling. The top half floated easily out, fanning its five long arms in a graceful, star-shaped radial. It twisted slightly; the five bulky feet had flattened into long, wide paddles. The arms arced smoothly behind it as it left the pod.

It was beautiful.

Becca heard a choking sound beside her. Evie had curled into a tight, fetal ball and held her head with white-knuckled fear. Her eyes widened and pupils dilated.

“Evie?” Becca reached out to her.

Evie’s arms were crossed at the elbows over her knees. Her wide eyes stared past her forearms at nothing.

Becca turned back to iSkandar. The Vencume slowly kicked and floated next to them. The move was smooth and calm. Its body twisted in zero-gee, reaching out and forward, and glided towards them.

“No...” Evie tried to make herself smaller and shut her eyes tightly. “Get it *away!*”

iSkandar reached forward and ran a blue hand over Evie. “Engineer is behaving strangely.”

Evie’s hands were strained fists that she jammed against her eyes. “Don’t touch me! Becca, don’t let it touch me! I can’t....”

What did the Tzikzik that attacked the Tong Dizhou look like?

“iSkandar...” Becca held out a hand. “Go back a bit. Let me get her down to where there’s some spin. She can’t deal with you in zero-gee.”

iSkandar waved a long arm to Becca’s right. “Go down five levels.”

Becca took Evie’s arm and pulled her to the lift.

Evie was shaking and cowered in a corner the trip down. “Is it gone?” she finally asked.

“What’s wrong with you?” Becca asked. “You know iSkandar. He would never hurt you.”

“Gods, Becca,” Evie moaned. “You weren't there. You don't know what they look like.”

“I can guess.”

“I don't know what came over me.” Evie was crying a little. “I just...It looked like...I'm sorry.”

“Don't apologize to me,” Becca said.

Evie smoothed back her hair and gave her face a few light slaps. “I'm OK. Really. It's fine. I'll be fine.”

They exited the lift and sent it back up for the Vencume.

“It was just a shock, I guess.” Evie was still shaking slightly. “I'm lucky I didn't wet myself. It just came over me. I don't...”

iSkandar arrived on their level. The Vencume shuffled out of the lift. “Is Engineer still distressed?”

Evie stiffened. “I'm alright.” She rubbed her right eye.

The Vencume lumbered forward and ran a hand over Evie. “Engineer is still distressed. Voice is distressed. There is a smell...sharp. Twice now, this has been encountered before.”

“No, no...” Evie shook her head. “It's just leftovers. I'll be fine. I just...it was a visual thing.”

iSkandar shuffled slowly to a door. “Engineer still seems distressed. Doctor will tend to it.”

The door led to a large chamber, many thousands of meters wide and deep. Everywhere, laid out in neat rows, were shallow tanks, maybe three meters by three. The walkway between was only a meter wide.

No, it wasn't that the tanks were shallow, but the lip of one only came a meter up from the walkway. The tanks themselves were deep; it was the walkway that was raised.

But they weren't tanks; they were openings that curled up the sides of the ship's section. It was a vast ocean...orbiting the central column of the section. It stretched on forever. Becca realized it was the entire section of the ship. She leaned over the side of one opening where something waved just below the surface that looked like a sea-anemone or...

Under the water, were millions of shimmering Vencume. They were rooted in place and undulated with a deep, invisible wave.

“iSkandar,” Becca asked. “What is this place? Is this a nursery?”

iSkandar turned. “This is the Library.”

Evie was staring at the underwater creatures. “I thought the data-bank was a computer.”

The solitary Vencume shifted to a deep violet frown. “No artificial thing can work this effectively. The system is too complex.”

“They gave up on cybernetics,” Evie said, shocked. “The data-bank is a super-organism...”

iSkandar waved a hand over the surface of the water. There was a deep vibration. The surface of the water danced. The sound was sudden and full.

NOW SINGLE DIRECT CURRENT REQUEST TO US NOW SINGLE TZIKZIK CURRENT HAS PAST GONE AROUND LIBRARIAN OBJECT CURRENT THERE IS SINGLE NO INTERMEDIARY OBJECT TO US

Evie and Becca looked at each other with the same question. *Tzikzik?*

iSkandar had fanned out two hands in the tank. The long digits turned blue and vibrated.

The two Humans are with us. A third has been found. Will you allow connection?

Becca looked out across the surface as the underwater Vencume shifted color from dull gray to bright green.

CURRENT WHAT IS INDIVIDUAL ITS NATURE UNKNOWN QUERRY

The water around iSkandar's hands danced in vibratory patterns.

Their reproduction system has led to biological differentiation. The mind is unfamiliar. Information content is unknown. It has conflicting motives and is damaged.

The library had color-shifted again to a pale pink.

UNKNOWN ADDITIONAL INFORMATION MUST IMPERATIVE BE COLLECTED DIRECTION CURRENT ABERRANT BEHAVIOR INDIVIDUAL IS NOTED OBJECT BY US UNKNOWN IS DAMAGE PAST RESULT OF BIOLOGICAL DIFFERENTIATION QUERRY

iSkandar's hands vibrated across the water.

Humans have no ocean. They stand alone as pools. It is isolated.

Shades of blue shifted through the library. Becca saw it as a million nods.

*FUTURE THERE WILL BE CONNECTION OBJECT UNKNOWN NEW
INFORMATION COLLECTED IMPERATIVE WE DESIRE IT OBJECT UNKNOWN*

iSkandar raised its hands out of the water and started to shuffle to the door.

Evie ran up behind and laid a hand on the Vencume. "Hey, what did the library mean by *Tzikzik*? You're a Vencume, aren't you?"

iSkandar shifted to a pale purple. "I am *Tzikzik*. I am Blue Design."

Becca nodded. "That's why iMala gave you that name."

As they followed the...*Tzikzik*...out of the library, Evie hugged herself tightly.

iSkandar entered the lift. "I will go ahead and enter the pod. Engineer will not be distressed."

Evie shifted uneasily from foot to foot. "I feel like we should be walking out of there with a couple of stone tablets."

As the lift door shut, Becca turned to Evie. "iSkandar mentioned something else back there."

"What's that?" Evie was furiously rubbing her right eye.

Becca studied her right hand for a moment. "There's only three Humans on this ship."

Broken Human

Gordon was sitting shock-still at the table in the twin's room, where Evie and iSkandar had hidden him. Ulan and Uma were sitting opposite him, staring intently.

Becca had never been to the twin's room before. There were strips of colored cloth strewn about the room and dried flowers collected from the gardens; some of the dessicated plants were spindly, red, Vencume growth. Scattered across the three comm displays were several drawings that had been done in colored pencil. One was of two girls, drawn in black, that towered over red, yellow, and blue dots. Another showed a family—mother, father, daughter—the daughter was holding a star. This had been crossed out and the paper was wrinkled. There was a grotesquely detailed drawing of a red Vencume in zero-g; long lines of blue were coming out of it and a girl drawn in red was smiling with sharp, angry teeth. The table was covered with crude clay models of Humans and Vencume, some with bits of cloth pressed onto their bodies. Becca could make out a square girl with red cloth, a round one in yellow, and a long figure in blue. The yellow figure had been covered in dried flowers.

"Gorsky," Evie said, not hiding the disdain in her voice. "You've hardly touched a bite of your meal."

Gordon glanced at the bowl for a moment and looked quickly up at the twins.

Becca sat next to Ulan. "Didn't they feed you before?"

Uma reached out and picked up two of her rough figurines. They mock-battled in her hands.

Gordon was gripping a spoon. His knuckles were white.

"Let him eat," Evie chattered.

Ulan crossed her arms on the table and rested her chin on them. "Our room. Our toy."

"That's not a toy." Becca took Ulan's arm. "He's a human-being, just like...like you."

Uma picked up a Vencume figure and chattered. "We like Humans. We're going to play Humans." She picked up the long, blue figure. "We're going to play war!"

iSkandar shifted to a pale purple and wiggled long fingers.

Ulan picked up the red one. "We want to play, too!" She wiggled the yellow one under the flowers. "I can't play. I am dead."

Uma giggled and wiggled the Vencume figure. "We broke our toy," she chattered.

Becca watched the display with disgust and pity. *It's the most cohesive thing they've ever said.*

Evie watched with tight fists and clenched jaw.

Gordon was still gripping his spoon. He shut his eyes tightly and his face contorted. "I'm sorry. Please. I said I was sorry."

"Human is broken," iSkandar said. It started to move forward.

Uma leapt up and ran to Gordon's side. She rubbed his face and shook her head. "No, no. No cry."

Gordon stiffened and gripped the spoon.

"Uma, Ulan," Evie said, "why don't you two go and get Gordon something to drink? Don't you think he's thirsty?"

The twins looked at each other and skipped merrily from the room.

Gordon stared at the bowl in front of him. "Thank you."

"Broken Human needs to be connected," iSkandar said. "The Library has already said to connect. How soon can we do this?"

"I think that might be a bit much at the moment," Becca answered.

Evie shook her head. "If we're going to do it, we may as well do it as quickly as possible. I don't think there's any advantage to waiting."

Gordon was watching them with wide eyes. "You're talking about me, I know it."

They stopped to look at him.

"Broken Human cannot understand us," iSkandar said.

Evie took a chair at the table. "Gordon, listen, the Vencume have this thing, a direct interface. You remember the goggles I was wearing? How I could see with my eyes shut?"

Gordon stared at her. "I don't remember your eyes."

She shook her head. "Forget the eyes. That's not a good reference. Listen. We need you to understand what's going on while you're on the ship. We need to be able to communicate with you."

"I don't know who you are," he said to her.

He might as well have slapped her. Evie recoiled quickly and stood up.

"You've changed appearance a great deal," Becca said. "When's the last time he saw you, Evie?"

When Becca (and Gordon) had first met Evie, the engineer was an uneven, slouching, overweight woman with dark greasy hair, bad teeth, brown eyes made grotesquely large by thick glasses, and distinctive limp caused by a malformed pelvis and uneven legs. The last time Gordon had seen Evie, she had white hair, sat cross-legged in a mechanical walker, and the upper-half of her face had been obscured by an array of many, tiny, independently moving lenses. By this point, she was slightly taller than Becca (*and starting to gain that weight back!*) with two-toned hair, green-brown eyes, and two tiny dot-like scars under her eyes.

Gordon's eyes widened. "*You're* Evie?" He dropped the spoon and grabbed her hand. "I'm sorry, I am. I'm sorry about the lifeboat and I'm sorry about that time on the bridge. You don't know how sorry I am about all of that and I don't know what's wrong with me...what *was* wrong with me...I didn't know it was you under all that stuff. I didn't think that was Human. You were just a mechanical thing and you broke my rib and I never saw your eyes. Not under your glasses, not under your goggles. I never saw your eyes before... I never saw your sad, beautiful eyes...."

Evie whipped her hand away. Her jaw was clenched.

iSkandar was color-shifting again: magenta, dark purple, dark blue. "What is Broken Human saying?"

"You should connect to the Library," Becca answered, "and download our language."

iSkandar turned a pale green and back to light blue. Becca wondered if that was the equivalent of raised eyebrows.

"The point is," Evie was saying stiffly, "the Vencume have a way of giving you information, directly. We need you to connect to this system so you can get the language. You'll be able to understand what's being said on the ship and you'll also be able to talk to anyone. Becca and I have both done it and it's painless. We...uh...we have to make our lives a little easier here. We can't rely on translators because they're too crude."

Gordon was staring at Evie, nodding occasionally.

Becca thought he looked like he wasn't paying attention. "Gordon," she asked. "Do you understand what she's saying to you?"

He answered without looking at her. "Evie wants to put something in my head."

Becca frowned. "It's not Evie who would do it. It's the Vencume. I'm probably going to do the connection with you, just to help show you around."

Evie turned suddenly. "Why would you do that?"

"Well, so he isn't in there by himself," Becca answered.

"We both did our initial connection alone," Evie chattered.

Becca narrowed her eyes and chattered her response. "You're worried about him being nuts, and iSkandar is as well, but you think it's OK for him to go in there without a minder?"

"I need to talk to you about something." Evie gestured to the door and left the room.

Becca went out into the hallway where Evie was pacing.

“No, Becca.” Evie shook her head. “You still have that eye thing and we don't know what caused it.”

“But if it's just my imagination—” Becca protested.

Evie held up her hands. “It's your brain, then. You still have a *brain* thing going on. Not an eye thing.” She sighed. “You know, I remember this old movie I saw once about a ship that lands on an alien planet and the doctor gets killed because he tries to use this alien device to boost his I.Q. I'd feel pretty crummy if that happened to you.”

Becca wrinkled her brow. “What movie was that?”

Evie shrugged. “I think it was something by Shakespeare. The point is, we're dealing with stuff we don't understand and there's too much risk.”

“A risk you can take but I can't? That's very altruistic of you, to help out a guy who tried to kill you once.”

Evie rubbed her right eye. “OK, fine. It's not completely selfless.” Her voice dropped to a terse, conspiratorial tone. “iMala connected after she developed that field-collapser and did the alterations to the ships. *I want that*. I want that so bad I can *taste* it. She had a break-through that I've worked towards for years and always missed. I can't ask her how she did it because she...I'm owed something, you know? I laid the groundwork for that and I *earned* it. So, it's a pretext for going in and taking what's rightfully mine, but you aren't going to stand in my way.”

“A lust for knowledge,” Becca said flatly. “I wonder what the doctor from your old movie thought before he died.”

Evie's jaw clenched. “I don't have family back home. I've nearly died twice already.”

“No,” Becca responded with a curt smile. “Your family is here. Why not risk it again? Third time's a charm.”

“You're not going to give me this, are you?”

“And if you come out with a 'brain thing'? Well, what then?”

Evie grinned to herself. “Oh, but I remember when you found him. 'Oh, tell me it's not real.' And you want to hop right in there with him.”

Becca stiffened. “You're jealous.”

“Don't be stupid.”

Becca shook her head with a wicked grin. “Oh, no, you don't get off easy on this one. You two always fought. What do your old movies say about *that*?” She suddenly straightened out. “You...you don't actually hate him at all. You're afraid of him. Not because of some stupid mistake he might make but because of how he makes you *feel*.”

“*Shut up*,” Evie hissed. “Just shut it, now.”

“Why did you make your pilots blondes?”

Evie rammed her fists into her eyes. “The Vencume decided that. Just shut up.”

“Fine, do it,” Becca said.

“What?” Evie lowered her fists.

“Do it,” Becca said again. “Connect with him. You want to understand him. It's obvious you care for him, otherwise the twins might have actually killed him. They knocked him down a few pegs and now he's non-threatening. They softened him up for you.”

“Gods, Becca,” Evie moaned. “You make it sound so calculated. I didn't do any of that.”

“No...” Becca shook her head. “But you *wanted* to.”

Evie's face twisted. “That's sick.”

Becca pressed on. “You can't be intimate with anyone. You're afraid of them. Think about those guys on the station and the 'Gaines constant'. You kept them at arm's length because you didn't want to get hurt. You even did that with Rosemary. I've heard the girls sing that song. You *did* care about her, but you pushed her away so no one would get hurt and when the girls felt betrayed, they wasted no time in killing her and everyone else on that ship. And then you did that with Gordon. You knew he'd never accept you as you were, so you pushed him harder and harder until the two of you came to blows.”

“Go to hell, Becca,” Evie said with tears in her eyes. “I can't believe you'd say that to me. We saved your *life*.”

“And you hate me right now.” Becca nodded. “Right at this moment, you can't stand the sight of me.”

Evie turned and flung her arms against her face, elbows crossed and tight fists at her ears. Her shoulders had risen up to her ears.

“Evie,” Becca said calmly. “Listen, do it. Make the connection. Dive in there with him. I'm not going to stop you. Just be honest with yourself on why you're doing it. I don't think less of you. You're a Human being and you're allowed to be close to someone. I only hope that those feelings are returned, OK? Remember what you said about pain and how it's necessary for Human development? Just do it. Take that chance, no matter what the pretext might be. I support you.”

“You're making this all about him,” Evie said, her back still to Becca. “You think you could do it? You're still busted up about your family back home. You're going to put him back into that—like that stupid arm of his. How long did you have to care for your husband? I'll bet you were a regular Florence Nightingale.”

Becca withdrew a bit.

Evie turned around. “I'm sorry. I'm sorry. That was low of me.”

“I'll say.”

“Becca, I'm sorry.” Evie sniffled and rubbed her eye. “I'm scared and I get mean when I'm scared.”

“If you're scared of doing it, then don't.”

“No...” Evie shook her head. “I have to. I have to know what's going on in there. I can't stand unanswered questions and I have so many. I have to know. I don't know what I'll find or if it will be worthwhile, but I'm not going to be satisfied unless I know one way or the other.”

“Curiosity killed the cat,” Becca warned.

Evie smiled. “And gruesome rituals brought her back.”

* * * * *

The girls were all in the mess-hall, allowing Becca and Evie to sneak Gordon down the hall. iSkandar had gone ahead to explain the situation to Penemue. The two of them were shifting from purple to blue when the Humans entered the room.

“Only because the Library requests it.” Penemue gestured to two beds.

Evie lay down on one and Gordon the other.

“Is this going to hurt?” Gordon asked.

Becca smiled and took his hand. “No, it won't hurt.”

Penemue shifted a pale pink. “Doctor will take both hands.” It gestured to Evie.

“We're trying something new?” Evie asked, holding out a hand to Becca.

“Doctor will monitor Human health,” Penemue said. “Doctor will observe the process to prevent mishap.”

Becca held out her right hand to Evie, holding Gordon's hand in her left. She let her eyes relax and saw the shimmering effect in full force, as if Evie had been dropped in a tank of some glimmering liquid and it was spreading across. *I feel like I'm officiating at a wedding.* Evie's grip was dry and strong, like she was holding a tool; Gordon's was sweaty and desperate, like he was clinging on for dear life.

Penemue started to probe the tops of their heads.

Leaning forward, Becca saw that Penemue's hands were changing color to a pale green, almost white. It started the probing with just the tips of the long, tentacle-like fingers, slowly fanning out to cover more and more of the head.

Gordon's right arm twitched. “My face is going numb.”

“That's normal,” Evie answered. Her eyes were dilating.

Evie's hand went limp.

Gordon was looking straight at Becca, his eyes slowly dilating. He blinked. “Oh.” A sudden tight grip before his left hand went slack as well.

Penemue had turned a dull gray. *Just like the Vencume in the Library.* Becca leaned forward a bit to look at the hands. There was a fine film of what looked like a gel between the Vencume's hands and the two human heads. On closer inspection, it was actually many, tiny, fine, white hairs.

Evie mumbled, "Thank-you. That's very kind."

I wonder what they're doing in there. They look so at peace.

Watching the two humans laying there with perfectly relaxed faces, Becca imagined a swap-meet. There were tables strewn with bits and parts of machines, each table manned by a Vencume. iMala was dancing between the tables, handing out flowers.

Evie laughed a little. Gordon did as well.

The swap-meet vision came back. Evie and Gordon had baskets with them, putting items in each other's baskets, pointing out random objects. Smiling.

Gordon's eyed widened a bit. "You did?"

Evie's eyes watered.

"Tzikzik," Gordon said. "I see."

She's explaining the girls to him. I hope they're working it out.

Gordon frowned a bit. Evie was also frowning.

Are they disagreeing on something?

"That's terrible," he said.

I wonder how much I talked during this.

"We can fix it," Evie mumbled.

Color came back to Penemue. The Vencume wiggled its fingers and released the human heads.

Evie's hand came to life. She gripped and blinked. Her eyes watered a little.

"How do you feel?" Becca asked as she released their hands.

Evie was rubbing her face. "*Vesta, Diana, Minerva,*" she said through her hands. "I need a nap."

"Yeah..." Gordon had sat up. "That's, uh...that's a lot to take in." He rubbed the back of his head and gave Evie a look of concern, then hopped up and held out his left hand to her. "Let me help."

Evie uncovered her face and took Gordon's hand. He pulled her up to a seated position.

iSkandar approached the two humans. "We must hide Broken Human now. Tzikzik will be returning."

Mouse

Becca was in the room she shared with Evie, reading about surgical techniques on one of the three displays. She was thinking about Gordon's right shoulder and how it was most likely a ligament tear; either it would need to be patched or replaced. Considering the nature of the ship, replacement seemed the best option.

Gordon was back in the twins' room, sleeping. Uma and Ulan had promised they wouldn't hurt him anymore, and hiding him there seemed the best solution. No one had found him there before; no one would find him there now. Plus, it was accepted behavior that the twins would take food from the mess-hall to their own room. If they suddenly stopped, it would arouse suspicion. Gordon, meanwhile, seemed oddly accepting of the situation.

There was a knock at the door. "Becca," iMala's voice said. "I need your help with something."

She used my name, not "Doctor-Doctor". Is it a form of respect? Becca sat up and opened the door half-way. "iMala, what kind of help did you need?"

The girl pulled her into the corridor. "Well, I have aNdrea helping out, but I want another pair of eyes on this. I need someone there besides me who knows what she's doing."

In the mess-hall, they went back to the kitchen where the redheaded aNdrea was waiting. There was a device on the table and a tube of spray.

Becca picked up the tube. "Are you expecting an injury of some sort?"

"Of course," iMala said. "That's the whole point. I have to know how much she can stand."

aNdrea turned on one of Evie's cooking fields. The air around it started to waver with extreme heat. "Let me know when you're ready."

iMala made an adjustment to the device on the table and pointed it at aNdrea. "How does that feel?"

"I don't feel anything. You sure it's on?"

Becca felt dread mixed with mild nausea. "What are you trying to do here?"

“aNdrea is going to hold her hand over the burner.” iMala made another adjustment to the device. “I have a field pointed at her that's going to kill the pain and we're going to see how much she can take before she actually feels it.”

Becca ran forward and turned the field off. “You can't do that.”

“Yeah, we can,” aNdrea said. “You have the spray there to fix any damage. It's fine.”

“I need to know the effect,” iMala protested. “We have a hot-plate but I don't have any mice to see if they lick their feet⁴.”

aNdrea turned the field back on. “If it's really bad, you're here.”

iMala turned back to the device on the table.

“Huh,” the redhead grunted. “It feels like my sinuses are full.”

“You don't have to do this,” Becca protested.

aNdrea gave Becca a dismissive look and started to lower her hand into the cooking field. “OK, I'm aware of warmth, but it's tolerable.”

“Do you feel light-headed or groggy?” iMala asked.

aNdrea shook her head. “No, nothing like that. A slight pressure.” She lowered her hand more. “The heat is there, and I can tell that it's hot, but it doesn't hurt. I can feel the instinct to pull my hand away...I'm aware of that.”

iMala watched aNdrea lower her hand more. “You're aware of an instinct, but you're able to override it?”

“Yeah.” aNdrea nodded and turned her hand over. “The heat here is new on this side. The skin is thinner.” Her palm was bright red. “Don't turn that thing off until we apply the spray, OK?”

There was a smell. Becca felt abject revulsion.

“How much damage do you think you can take on that?” iMala asked.

aNdrea shook her head. “I'm not sure. The instinct is strong. I think this side is cooked.” She turned her hand over and the back was red and blistered. “Well, second degree or something. I'm iffy on risking any more.”

Oh, praise be; they're stopping.

aNdrea turned the field off and grabbed the spray from Becca. “Keep broadcasting. I'm serious. You turn that off, I'll pound you.”

iMala put her hands behind her back. “I shan't touch it.”

aNdrea applied a liberal amount of the spray on her hand, back and front. The flesh sizzled.

“That was a good test.” iMala smiled.

iDana poked her head into the kitchen. “Are you doing something in here? I was getting weird readings.”

“Nothing you'd be interested in,” iMala said. She quickly turned the device off.

aNdrea hissed a little and Becca handed her a towel.

“Nothing?” iDana entered the kitchen, scanning with narrowed eyes. “I was trying to get that new screen to work and there was some interference.”

aNdrea slyly slipped the tube of spray into Becca's pocket. “I have to go take care of some things.” She left with the towel still wrapped around her hand.

iDana was sniffing the air. “There's a smell in here. It's odd. What have you been doing?”

“I said it was nothing you'd be interested in,” iMala muttered.

Unpersuaded, iDana picked up iMala's device from the table. She turned it on and pointed it at Becca. Becca felt a pressure behind her eyes. She suddenly felt hungry.

“Stop it!” iMala reached for the device. “You're going to break it!”

“This broadcasts something,” iDana said. She made an adjustment.

Becca felt a wave of nausea. “Give the...thing...back to your sister.”

4 iMala has described a common procedure for testing the pain-killing effect of a drug. A mouse is placed on a hot-plate and the temperature is increased. The number of times the mouse licks its feet is a measure of the animal's discomfort. The greater the temperature the mouse can withstand, and the reduction of the number of foot-licks, is an analgesimetric test of pharmaceutical efficiency. We really do this.

iMala snatched the device from iDana and turned it off. “You don't know what you're doing. You always break things. Just leave it alone.”

iDana raised her eyebrows. “We'll see.” She left the kitchen with her hands behind her back.

“They always break things,” iMala tiskted and checked the device. “They're going to break it. I know it.”

* * * * *

The two Vencume, Mirabilis and Renatus, approached Becca later that day. They were both an agitated dark blue and Becca wondered what the scientist in charge of the current Tzikzik project (and the other scientist who had been in charge of the previous project) would want to discuss with a Human doctor.

“Doctor has another Human on board.” Mirabilis shifted from dark blue to purple, the square scales on its feet turning a vivid magenta. “There is evidence in the garden.”

“The twins had hidden him there,” Becca explained. “I understand that you're upset as well. It wasn't something any of us planned.”

“This changes the schedule. Broken Human must be returned. All Humans will be returned.” The Vencume was staying purple and moving to a light red-violet.

The shortest Vencume with pentagon-shaped scales, Buer, spin into the room. “You cannot return the Humans so early. We still have too much to learn. The Library has been pleased with their connection and there is great danger awaiting them.”

Becca held out her hands. “Buer is right; we can't go back that easily. All of us face stiff charges in Human hands. They already tried to execute Evie and there were orders for my execution. Now that a Shipping Authority vessel has been destroyed, it's only going to be worse.”

Buer ran hands over Miralilis. “Scientist must not end the project yet. Doctor will help.”

Becca looked at the Vencume. “You wanted to end the project?”

“Scientist is concerned with the project's viability.” Buer ran hands over Becca, maintaining a light blue. “Current conflict with Humans is a concern and Other Scientist has expressed certain...objections.”

Renatus was a deep purple now. “We cannot risk civil-kind conflict. This is not the purpose of the project.”

Buer went through a complicated color-shift and made a high-pitched whining sound.

“Assistant is noted,” Mirabilis said. “The schedule has still changed. The ship will return all Humans. There will be no conflict.” The two Vencume scientists left the room.

Buer ran a hand over Becca. “Doctor is distressed. Humans will not be returned. The Tzikzik project is teaching us many new things about Humans and ourselves. These are...you say it...'birthing pains'. The Tzikzik are too valuable to us. What you are sensing is pride of others who think they are far beyond you. We cannot continue our current path or we will stagnate.”

“If they hand us over to the Shipping Authority,” Becca asked, “do you think things will go the same? Is this something we have to do to protect the girls?”

“Those rains do not fall now.” Buer massaged the top of Becca's head. “Scientist does not sense far. The project will continue. Scientist does not understand Human politics. Humans will not be returned.”

Becca felt her eyes getting heavy. “Hey...you're...don't do that...”

Buer continued to massage Becca's head. It wrapped an arm around her. “Doctor is too useful. Tzikzik project will continue. Your distress is a result of our actions. We cannot allow you to be harmed.”

“I'm relaxed. It's fine.” Becca's face was going numb and she tried, weakly, to move the arm away.

“Doctor will assist with Broken Human,” Buer said. “Doctor will fix Broken Human, Engineer, and the Tzikzik. You have a knowledge that goes beyond the helix. This is something we must understand as well. You express this knowledge in how you deal with them. It is a knowledge we wish to express to all Humans. You will be the means of our expression...not the Tzikzik.”

Becca pushed against Buer's arm. She saw the Vencume's hands had turned a pale green.

The room was getting brighter. There was a buzzing sound.

“I figured it out!” Evie came into the room, smiling wide. “It has nothing to do with gravity!”

Buer let go of Becca.

"I hope I'm not interrupting something," Evie said. "You two having a moment?"

Did Buer try a connection? What just happened?

"Engineer is pleased," Buer said, running hands over Evie. "Additional Yellow design is leaving advancement soon. Evie will assist Blue with additional ships."

Evie's eyebrows shot up. "Oh! You started that already? That's good! That's great."

Buer was pale pink. "Yellow design is useful. The other Tzikzik are still a threat and that situation must be repaired before we can say the project is a success."

Evie was nodding, but Becca felt herself shaking her head.

"Repairs for Broken Human are in preparation," Buer continued. "Becca will perform the fix."

Evie gave Becca a mock-punch on the arm. "Hey, you get to do it. You always wanted to. You can work on that arm of Gordon's."

Becca brushed her lips. The numbness was fading and she nodded weakly.

"Evie is useful and senses far." Buer ran hands over Evie. "Humans are useful and will be maintained." The Vencume spun from the room.

"Did you hear that, Becca?" Evie was still smiling broadly. "They made more. I said they would."

"Mirabilis wants to end the project," Becca stated.

"Huh?"

"I said..." Becca looked up. Her head still felt fuzzy. "You heard what I said. They want to end the project. iSkandar said--"

"iSkandar is Tzikzik," Evie crossed her arms. "Like iMala."

Becca rubbed her eyes. "Mirabilis and Renatus were here. They say that the project is ending and that they're going to return us. You, me, Gordon. They want to hand us back over."

Evie sat down. "Don't you want that? Don't you want to go back and see your daughter?"

"Evie!" Becca shouted. "The Shipping Authority wants to kill us! You don't remember that? We destroyed one of their ships. How many people died on that ship? You think they're going to welcome us back with open arms?"

Evie stiffened. "Becca, I know how the collapser works. I know how to halve a journey between systems. You don't think that the Shipping Authority wants to know how to do that?"

"Does anything inside your head have anything to do with what happens outside of it?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Evie asked. She seemed genuinely confused.

"Before we left the station," Becca explained, "the Shipping Authority thought we were going to war with the Vencume. What have we done to prove them wrong? A jail break, a ship was attacked, a ship was DESTROYED. The Vencume are trying to avoid a conflict and they want to end the project. Do you understand what's going on here? What does *ending a project* usually entail?"

Evie's jaw was clenching. "They're not killing my girls."

"They're turning the ship around!" Becca went on. "They want us off the ship. They want to start over. We're going to be sacrificed for civil-kind relations!"

Evie started to mutter a string of numbers.

"What the hell is that anyway?" Becca demanded. "I need you here, not off in number-number-land."

Evie looked up at Becca. Her right eye twitched.

"OK!" Becca threw her hands in the air. "Finding Gordon wasn't a good thing. Happy?"

"No."

The two of them sat at the table for a long time, not saying anything.

Evie sighed. "Go fix Gordon's arm."

Becca looked up at her.

"Seriously." Evie waved a hand. "Go do that. I'll go say goodbye or whatever. I wanted to talk to iMala about the field anyway. I figured out some others things as well, so I should at least give her that."

"Buer doesn't want the project to end," Becca added. "I think it tried to—"

"I need to talk to iSkandar." Evie rubbed her eye. "I understand how 'borrowed time' works now. We might be able to use that. I found some...effects."

"Which Vencume is in charge of this ship?" Becca asked. "Who's the captain?"

Evie laughed hollowly. "I think the Library is in charge. Maybe Penemue? I don't think they have a captain the way we do."

Becca rubbed her chin. "The Library *wanted* connection. Buer was saying that we were too useful and the Library was pleased. If the Library is in charge..."

"I only guessed," Evie said. "I don't know for sure. Hey, if they want to end the project, what's going to happen to iSkandar? It's a Tzikzik as well." She paused. "Wait, how can they be ending the project if there are going to be more pilots?"

Becca rubbed her eyes and stopped cold. "Did Buer use our names just then?"

The two Humans looked at each other.

Lytle

iSkandar brought Becca the tools she would need for the surgery, along with a twelve-centimeter strip of ligament on a tray and a tube of spray.

The twins let them in to where Gordon was, laying on a bed. He sat up and smiled. "Beks, the girls were telling me about your prison break. Uma told me you punched a Shipping Authority guard."

"I didn't punch anyone." Becca frowned. "And don't call me 'Beks'."

"Oh..." He frowned in response. "She said your hand got them in the head."

"I didn't have anything to do with that," Becca said and started to arrange the tools on the tray. "Take off your shirt. We're going to fix your shoulder."

"Right here?" Gordon fumbled with a sleeve. "Is this some kind of Vencume stuff?"

iSkandar moved in behind Gordon and helped him out of the shirt. "Broken Human talks too much."

Becca laughed a little. "Yes, Gordon. It's Vencume medical technology. We're going to replace a ligament in your shoulder that was torn. Normally, we'd try to repair it, but that would add to your healing time. We need you up and running as soon as possible."

"Are you...hey!" Gordon swung around out of iSkandar's hands. "What's it doing?"

"Broken Human should lie down," iSkandar said. "Broken Human will want to rest afterwards."

"It has to numb you for surgery," Becca explained. *Didn't Gordon get the language? Shouldn't he know this? What were they doing when they connected?*

But Gordon was laying down and let iSkandar continue to probe his head. "Like you did with Evie, right? But you're going to do the actual stitching, right?"

"Not like back home, but yes."

Gordon brushed his lips with his left hand. "I feel weird."

iSkandar was massaging the right shoulder with one black hand. The flesh paled.

Becca quickly washed the shoulder and held a scalpel on the end of one finger. "Are you ready?"

iSkandar blue-nodded and Gordon mumbled a weak "yeah".

Becca made the first incision. *This seems so advanced, but it's actually very primitive. This is such an invasive way of doing this. Back home, we'd only make a few small cuts and use endoscopes to do it all inside the shoulder. But we are replacing the ligament, aren't we? I'm not just tacking it into place.* She pulled her shirt up over her mouth and nose. *Let's try to minimize the risk of infection, OK?*

Once the top of the shoulder was open, iSkandar pulled back the opening. Becca saw its hands were covered in a fine film.

Becca replaced the scalpel on her finger with a couple of hooks. These were on long stalks, so her hands were not near the opened shoulder. She worried slightly that the tools would fall off her fingers, but they held tightly.

iSkandar held Gordon's arm out from his body and rotated the arm. Becca could see the torn ligament immediately. She cut it away, leaving only a centimeter at the connection points.

Gordon had his head turned and was watching. His large pupils could not focus and he blinked slowly.

iSkandar handed her the arm, and Becca held it out straight while the long, Vencume fingers placed the new ligament in place. She dropped the tools off her fingers and picked up the long tines that would hold it in place while it was stitched down.

Now, iSkandar slipped a couple of needles on its fingers. His hand turned yellow and the rapid stitching started.

“You did my hand, didn't you?” Becca asked.

iSkandar turned a light pink. “That was more complicated.”

iSkandar finished the attachment at the glenoid cavity and Becca pulled the new ligament taught. They relaxed the arm to a resting position across Gordon's chest to check for length. After a bit more stitching, iSkandar was done with the attachment to the top of the humerus. Becca held the flaps of skin in place and iSkandar applied the spray.

It was done.

Ulan and Uma got up from where they had been sitting and ran to Becca's side.

“You fixed him!” Ulan said with a broad smile.

Becca pulled her shirt off her face. Her chin was sweaty. “Yes, and you can't break him again.”

“We promised.” Ulan frowned. “You worked hard.”

iSkandar was still massaging Gordon's head with a black hand and it pulled him up to a seated position. “Broken Human will rest now.”

Gordon rolled his shoulder and smiled. “That's amazing,” he said groggily.

“OK...” Becca led the twins from the room. “Let's leave him alone for a while.”

“You worked hard and fixed him,” Uma said. “You're the best mommy.”

In the hallway, Becca turned to iSkandar. “What happens to the twins if the project is ended?”

It color-shifted a complicated pattern. “First and Second are not proper Tzikzik. They may be considered Human and will be returned.”

“And what happens to the others?”

Again, iSkandar shifted in indecision. “Destruction would be....complicated. This decision has yet to be made, but our ocean still laps. It may not reach that point. The water raises high in them and must not dry out.”

“Who makes that final decision?”

“The Library.” iSkandar ran a hand over Becca. “Doctor did not mention this to First and Second.”

“No...” She shook her head. “I guess that was dishonest of me.”

“It is Human,” iSkandar said. “You do not wish to discuss such things with them. You treat them as offspring.”

“Those two make me nervous.”

“They were alone. We had not connected with Engineer yet. They did, later, but there was much time from advancement to connection.” It ran a hand over Becca. “They are...raw? It is not a good term.”

“They're children,” Becca offered. “But they aren't Evie.”

* * * * *

Becca had found herself exhausted after the surgery on Gordon and the discussion with iSkandar. Also, worry gnawed at her stomach. Even if she skipped a meal, she needed to rest. She didn't feel she could face the children while their fate had yet to be decided.

* * * * *

In her dream, Becca is a child herself. She is watching an argument between her parents through the sliver-world of a cracked door.

Her great-aunt is suddenly in the room. “You're a clever little girl, staying hidden.”

Becca's great-aunt Lytle has always sacred her and she feels the childish fear return. The old woman never married, but traveled the world and now runs a curio-shop in the old district. And, in dream-logic, they are suddenly in the shop, surrounded by dust and antiquities.

“I have been everywhere,” great-aunt Lytle says. “I have seen just about everything there is to see. But I think that you will see much finer and greater things.” The old woman pours some coffee. The frothy, brown liquid steams from the small, glass beaker.

“What do you mean, teyze Lytle?”

“I have seen the stars,” the old woman goes on, “but you will dance with them. You are Rebecca and you will bind us with them.”

The child Becca nods at the meaning of her name.

“Your father does not want you to go to school.” The old woman chuckles. “This is foolish. If you teach a boy, you teach a boy. But, if you teach a girl, you teach everyone she knows.” A long Vencume arm peaks out from under her skirts and stirs her coffee.

One of the twins is in the shop with them, examining a typewriter closely and watching the keys as they rise and fall. But it isn't one of the twins.

“This is my friend Evie,” Becca says. “She's really smart.”

One of Lytle's Vencume arms tousles the child Evie's head. “Did you meet at school, or on that boat trip you took?”

Child-Evie runs off to look at an old telephone. She dials a number and runs the cord through her fingers.

“She's just a child as well,” Lytle says between sips of her coffee.

Becca now stands as an adult in her great-aunt's curio shop. “Why did you open this place?”

Teyze Lytle is now a Vencume and speaks with Buer's voice. “Look at all these things I've collected over time. Someday, I'll die and what good will it be? Nothing but dust and faded memories. Maybe here, someone will see something and take it home and love it anew.”

Becca recalls this explanation from her great-aunt.

The Buer-Lytle continues. “We have been everywhere and we don't have much time. We cannot lose our knowledge. It must be passed on. I wish I could express this better to you. Forgive the seeds I have planted. We are at a turning point. This must be preserved. If we do not start this process now, it may be too late.”

There is a rumble of thunder outside.

** * * * **

Becca woke with a start in an unusually quiet room.

Didn't Buer try to connect to me earlier? Was that what it wanted to say? Why use my great-aunt?

As she pulled on her shoes, Becca remembered Lytle. Yes, there had been a discussion when Becca was younger as to if she would go to school. But it had been great-aunt Lytle and the old woman's clout that had sent her to university. Becca's father had just wanted her to get married.

And she did. Becca did get married. But that was after she got her degree.

She remembered when great-aunt Lytle died. A surprising number of people had come to the service and they all shook Becca's hand. “Oh, you look just like her.” And “You were always the smart one. She liked you best.”

Great-aunt Lytle had left behind a trust for Becca's schooling.

How will Huri go on without me? If the Shipping Authority froze my account, doesn't all this time away count for nothing? And if the Vencume take us back? Will that make amends? They can't punish her for that.

The Vencume can't punish the children for what the Shipping Authority did.

It's only two of them. It's only Renatus and Mirabilis. Maybe Renatus is bitter. Didn't they kill him on the other ship? But the girls took care of that, so hasn't he been avenged? No, they don't think like that.

Becca combed her hair back and left the room she shared with Evie.

And what is Evie doing? She's done with her mantis; now she's working on something new. Don't you have something to work on? Yes, Evie. That's what you can do while you're here. She's not an adult. She's never made an adult decision. Look at where you are now and how that was all Evie's doing. No, not Evie. Well, parts of her. Parts of Evie made that decision. They won't kill the twins, will they? Does Evie have any children back home? No, she's too young for that. She really is young, considering. I wonder if she was a prodigy.

Becca made her way to the mess-hall. *Maybe we'll make one last meal together. Those redheads aren't that scary, really. I've gotten used to them.*

No one was in the mess-hall. No redheads were cooking or cleaning.

Do you think you'll ever see Huri again? Maybe not. But you were a good mother to the children here, weren't you? For what that's worth. You at least tried to love them.

In the laundry room, and no one was there.

Even in the twins' room, there was no one. Not even Gordon. And no one on the observation deck.

Or the ad hoc bridge. Or Evie's ancillary lab.

It was as if the ship had been deserted.

Where is everyone? Are they in the garden? They must have put it into advancement and are collecting another harvest.

That must have been it. Becca made her way down the hallway to the lift that would take her to the connecting pod. *They must be in the garden. Did they end the project already? They couldn't have. Maybe the girls are having some sort of farewell in the garden? How would they react to that? They don't seem to care much about death.*

There was a Vencume ahead of her, shuffling slowly along, its long blue hands tracing the wall. It looked odd.

“Doctor...” the Vencume held an arm out to Becca and she recognized the voice as Renatus, the one with round scales on its feet. “Doctor is safe. Humans will...return will...”

“Are you OK?”

The Vencume ran its hands over Becca. “Where is Engineer? Where is Broken Human?” There was something different about the Vencume's hands.

Now, Becca was afraid. “I don't know. I haven't seen any of them.” It looked like the Vencume had human hands. Renatus flickered and Becca was suddenly reminded of an old professor who taught anatomy. “What's wrong?”

Renatus shifted to a deep purple. “We saw a toughness, a cleverness. We have swum these waters before...before we met you. Before we met Engineer. You are strange creatures.”

“Do you need my help?” Becca held out her arms.

“The Tzikzik are on the bridge,” Renatus quivered. “We have been here before.”

The...on the...like before?

“The project was to continue,” the Vencume shifted to a magenta. “It was explained. Engineer had spoken with them. We cannot end the project. Your...imagination...is in play again.”

Becca stared at the lumbering creature before her and swallowed hard. It *did* look like her old anatomy professor now. She could make out the bald head and hunched shoulders. “What's going on?”

“The Tzikzik are in control.” Renatus sighed. “They say the ship now belongs to their army.”

RED

Decoy

“First we load into the buzz-landers. They're small tubes, so there's not much room for you and the gun. But the suit is a big part of it. That adds a lot of bulk. We can still move, sure, but it's not the same.

“So, you're stuck in a tube. It's dark, but that's not a problem. It's only annoying when something itches. One time, my foot....

“Then, you feel it turn upside down. We always launch head-first because that's how we come out of the landers. What a noise! It's dead-quiet for a few seconds while the bay opens, but you know that once that little red light comes on, it's just you and your armor and the tube. You better hope your line holds or you're not getting back. No room for two in a tube.

“Whoomp! You're out! Your head weighs so much you're going to black out and you know why the tube is so tight tight and your armor is suddenly tight tight like your legs are going to fall off and it smells different because the mix just changed, just enough to keep you going.

“Wham! The shock just goes through you and your head buzzes and you know you've just landed. The spikes are gripping fast and the cutter is running circles around your head like a chain-saw halo and then there's a sky over you and the tube isn't tight anymore.

“A new shock hits you from below and the mix smells a little different again because you just got a big dose so you can take it. Everything is happening in slow motion and that's good because you aren't in the tube anymore but shooting at the ceiling and you better spread those legs post-haste or you're just going to fall back into the tube and then you won't be any good to anyone.

“It's usually dark when you land. But it was dark in the tube, so you had time to adjust and you cock your hip just so, like flicking your hair, and better bring that gun around and get ready to fire because they're going to be on you in no time, even if time is moving at half-speed.

“You don't even have to aim, really. They're big and you're just there to put holes in them. You don't even have to kill one—just immobilize it. I like three in the legs and a couple in the arms. That leaks them quick and then it's just a slipping hazard.

“This is when we're really together. You have to be together on this. That's why we do the chants, to show how together we are.

*Fingers work as one
Fingers and a thumb
Hand holds the gun
Eyes see when it's done.*

“Now, maybe someone decides they want to get fancy. Maybe it's you. So you cock your hip just so, like flicking your hair and the gun's behind you again and now you flick your wrists and there's two little handles in each hand. You feel the impact and instinct makes you grip it like dear life and now the fun really gets going. Because once someone gets the fancy bug, it spreads fast and no one's shooting anymore but we're all dancing and putting big ugly gashes in things.

“And this is my favorite part, really, because there's no recoil on the gun and so you never get to really feel the kill. But when you're dancing and spinning and kicking and slashing, there's just that little bit of resistance that lets you know you just hit a target and it's time to put a little more effort behind it and keep on going until there's no tomorrow.

“That always pisses them off. They get so crazy-mad when you stop using long-range and get up on them because they figure they have a chance. I almost feel sorry for them. We've got armor and long knives and all they have is an arm that could take your head off if you hadn't poked a hole in it and spilled out all their strength on the floor.

“Well, and they have poison. One of the hands is poisonous. I think the Vencume used it as a natural defense and they used it on you when they put your hand back on, but now it's a mean, black paste and it's good we've got armor, even if we can take a strong dose of it. That's part of our design. The Vencume did that, not those three freaks.

“Once you've sliced-and-diced everything with more than two arms, it's time to get those over to where you came in and sometimes there's a little life left in them. You just want to put it down next to your exit so that when you leave, it comes with you.

“But first, you need to see what's left of anything with only two arms. If it's nothing, and it usually is, then time to hop-a-plop back into the tube and don't hit your head on the way down. Because, you know, nothing's left, so it's okay to leave a few holes in things.

“You just hitting the floor isn't enough, though. You really have to jump on it to get the tube to close. Then it's radio for a reel-in and, home-again-home-again, get out of the armor, check for leaks, and count your ammo.

“And you're hungry after. Always, hungry after. And there's things to do and Cerberus wants a report on how it all went down.

“And seeing you, if we have to. Just in case we missed something.”

* * * * *

Becca had gone to observe the redheads practice in their gym. There had been several injuries over the last month and she wanted to know why. On her way to the outermost ring, she felt the increasing centrifugal force bearing down on her shoulders and knees. *And they practice under this pressure! How long have they been doing it? No wonder they look like Peggys...*

Walking down the corridor to the gymnasium had winded Becca. It was like trudging up a mountain under a four-day knapsack. Whatever acrobatics the girls were doing were mere background to Becca's desire to find a seat and catch her breath.

aNdrea and aLtsoba were boxing, dancing back and forth and taking direct punches at each other, occasionally connecting with a jaw or stomach. They wore no gloves and stopped, after particularity powerful blows, to apply spray to whatever had been injured.

aNnora and aRlene were also going through some martial moves, but these involved high kicks and sweeps; it looked like dancing...until one landed a blow and the other came crashing down. Whoever had been dropped had to roll away from a quick succession of stomps from her attacking sister.

To one side, aLima was doing rounds on a pommel-horse, her body spindling gracefully around her hands that worked up and down with machine-like precision. Hand forward, hand backward, one after the other, on a pommel, and off. Her ankles were locked with each flair before she broke suddenly into wild scissors, over her head, from one side to the other. The routine ended with a spinning handstand and flawless dismount. The child hadn't even broken a sweat.

Becca felt envy boil in her stomach when aLima jumped with ease for another round. *Do they ever get tired? Even back home, men only run a routine for two minutes at most. Here she is, running three minutes at a time and then going back for more. What did the Vencume do to their muscles? How can they stand this gravity?*

“You find it tiring,” aNevay said, holding a large balance ball. “Do you want to sit down? This might be more comfortable than the floor.”

Becca looked at the ball with dread. *I'm about to show them how uncoordinated a human can be.* “I'm fine on the floor. It won't roll out from under me.”

“Suit yourself,” aNevay answered, perching cross-legged on the inflated ball. It sagged under her weight. “It can't really roll from you once you're on it. But, you have to have decent balance first, of course.”

“What are the Vencume doing?” Becca asked. She was watching aNnora apply spray to the nose she had just broken on aRlene's fist.

aNevay idly shoved her finger in her ear and scratched. “The ones on the bridge cleared out and ran off to the Library. I say, let 'em. Fewer to keep tabs on.”

A roar at the back of the room caught Becca's attention. It was aCadia slashing at a cloth dummy with blades she had attached to her forearms. The girl pulled her arms up, crossing before her face, and the blades retraced. Another howl and double-slashing motion, and the shining metal edges unfurled, adding extra force to the cutting motion.

“They don't seem upset that you've taken over,” Becca observed.

“Why would they?” aNevay asked. “We haven't shown them any aggression.”

Becca nodded at first, then shook her head. “But aren't you going to upset the 'schedule' by not doing what they want?”

“We're two days from Peg-51,” aNevay explained. “Evie figured something out and so it takes us less time to get from point A to point B. I think it's a better snapback or something. Whatever it is, we can get somewhere in a few days rather than months. Cerberus was pretty pleased with that.”

“The three-headed dog from hell?” Becca asked. *She must mean the three designers.*

“They're nothing but heads,” aNevay said with some disgust. “What else would you call those gray-haired freaks? It's like a hydra or a...King Ghidrah or something. We had to convince them that taking out the Tzikzik threat was more important than any Vencume schedule. We can do it; we have time. I mean, if we're supposed to fight them, then we should fight them. It bugs me that those monsters are out there. We're Human, right? We have to take care of Humans. If we ignore it, then we aren't better than them. No.” The girl shook her head. “We have to handle that before we do anything else. We might have been bred for war, but we don't desire it.”

aCadia let out another battle-cry and slashed at her cloth dummy.

“So because you don't desire a war,” Becca asked, “you're going to go and have one?”

“Problems are watered by absence,” aNevay answered. “We don't like to run away. We like to face things head on.”

Becca nodded wearily. “Tell me how you recover a ship....”

* * * * *

Meals during the last month had continued as normal. The only absence was two redheads who took over the bridge while the designers were eating. Becca, Gordon, and Evie sat opposite the designers.

The three designers seemed excited by a chance to prove themselves against the Tzikzik threat, regardless of what their redheaded sisters might have said about having to convince them.

To hear iLyssa speak, you would think it had been her idea. “We'll need a list of attack locations,” she said. “Once we have that, we'll just work our way down the line. Sadly, we can only get the Human locations from the Shipping Authority, so no idea what the other civilized races are doing.”

“As we recover ships, we'll deliver them to the various stations,” iMala added. “Our step-siblings have been busy, but it's doubtful they know about us.”

“And as we start to work the edges, we'll also be in-line to intercept any bursts,” iDana cooed, showing off how they could pluck “secure“ transmissions as they pleased. “So, we can monitor if there are any more attacks, as well as how public opinion is going.”

“I also want copies from the data-banks of any ships we recover, so we can see how the attacks took place and how they changed over time,” iLyssa said.

“If we want them back in one piece,” iDana noted, “we can't use the collapser.”

“Pity.” iLyssa shook her head. “That would make this much easier.”

The three girls were also pleased the video-screen they had installed on the main bridge. “We used a Vencume skin for it,” iLyssa explained. “It can do the color-shifts easily enough.”

Becca expressed some distaste at the material for the video screen, but iDana put her mind at ease. “Why would we skin anyone if we can just grow it?”

And, considering how disposable (or how available) parts were, it made perfect sense. The new system used a model of a Human eye lens (but using a cuttlefish model for the retina that lacked a blind-spot) that fed into the Library and displayed the image on Vencume skin. The skin worked as well as any monitor, as long as it was kept wet. The girls had to occasionally paint it with a nutrient solution.

The skin-screen had been iSkandar's idea. The...*Tzikzik*...had a plan that would never be obvious and he moved casually during the transition. Becca imagined that iSkandar was a part of the overthrow, no matter how bloodless it may have been. “He“ was always there, assisting.

This lithe creature reminded Becca of a surgeon she had worked with during her residency. Dr. Kemel had been self-deprecating man with a mop of prematurely gray hair and a wan smile. Through political maneuvering, he had eventually become the department head, bypassing the usual procedure. Once he achieved

this position, Becca never saw him again; the department only interacted with those he had delegated to handle situations.

Buer was also heavily involved in getting the ship adjusted. This slightly-squatter Vencume (or maybe Becca was just superimposing her great-aunt on it) seemed intently interested in assisting the girls. Becca imagined her great-aunt Lytle directing the girls' movements, or chuckling behind a hand after answering some seemingly obvious question. Buer was happy to explain the higher functions of the ship and the cloning factory. Becca also remembered that Mirabilis had called Buer "Assistant", so it might have been in its nature to help whoever was in charge.

Mirabilis was concentrating its time in the Vencume garden while Renatus and two other Vencume had moved to another section of the ship that Becca understood to be a nursery for the Human-form Tzikzik. An additional six pilots had come out of advancement and another seven redheads were about to enter.

* * * * *

As they got closer to Pegasai-51, new concerns were raised. A small meeting was held in the mess-hall. iLyssa, iDana, and iMala sat on one side of the table with iSkandar standing behind them. Becca, Evie, and Gordon sat opposite them with Buer behind them.

iDana was pointing to her hand-made map laying on the table. "We can't just fly past them." She frowned and tapped a star marked *Peg-51*. "They're on the lookout for this ship."

"They're on the lookout for *a* Vencume ship," Buer said. "Do Humans know the difference between one ship and another?"

Becca stared at the table. "So, we tell them, I mean, *someone* tells them that the situation has been handled and there will be no more attacks of any kind."

"That's how you deal with a grass-fire." Evie raised a hand and pantomimed. "Run through to the other side where there's nothing left to burn."

"The Shipping Authority isn't going to let you go that easily," iDana protested. "They probably want Doctor-Doctor's head."

Gordon crossed his arms. "So give it to them."

"She's too useful to us." iLyssa's eyes narrowed. "We're not going to do something like that."

"No." He laced his fingers. "I wouldn't expect you to. But, I do know that we're having this conversation with a woman who lost her right hand, and another that lost a lot more than that, and they look fine to me."

Evie started to laugh and gave Becca a mock-punch to the arm. "Didn't I tell you I was the woman to get you a new head?"

"Oh..." Becca thought on it. "A hand or an arm is one thing. A head has a brain in it."

Evie was still laughing.

iMala was already nodding. "It doesn't have to be a working brain."

"iDana figured out how to replicate fingerprints," Evie said. "I bet she can do retinals as well."

iSkandar nodded in its own blue-shift way. "They will chase them until they have them."

"Or until they *think* they have them," Buer added. "Third Human is useful."

"Hey." Gordon smiled. "I even got a name-change out of the deal."

"Doctor-Doctor is familiar with the process." iLyssa pointed at Becca. "You will grow the decoy parts."

"An entire head is complicated--" iDana started.

iLyssa frowned. "iSkandar will assist."

"We should have done this in the first place," iMala said, shaking her head. "We could have avoided that fight with the *ZhengYang*."

"You had no way of preparing for that," Becca said.

"We're growing him a set, too," iLyssa said suddenly, pointing at Gordon. "So, we'll need his chip. We still have the tank from last time."

Gordon stopped and looked at her. "Aren't you just dropping me off?"

iDana shook her head. "You're a risk. You stay here where we can watch you."

"Anyway," iMala said, smiling. "We have other things to learn. We need someone like you."

* * * * *

iSkandar took Becca to the “factory“, where clones and parts were grown. Becca found it hard to focus on anything there because of the still-unexplained “shimmer“ effect. If she concentrated, she could ignore it.

There was a tank filled with a thick, milky liquid. iSkandar made an adjustment to the machine next to it. “We have the map, so we can extrapolate that information for what we want.”

“What is this?” Becca asked, pointing at the tank.

“Calcium solution,” iSkandar replied. “We have to make the...frame-work? The skeleton. We do not grow the whole being here. Those are other tanks. We will still have to leave these in advancement to let some parts grow naturally.”

The device started to trace a pattern on the x, y, and z axes. The creamy solution hardened in places.

Becca frowned. “Are we making all of this in the same tank?”

“Yes.”

“The bones are all going to have the same genetic signature.”

“No one will check them.”

She crossed her arms. “How can you be so sure?”

“By the time anyone gets to that point,” iSkandar said, “the problem should have resolved itself. We are counting on Human shock and disgust. You are curious creatures, but there are some questions even you do not ask.”

“You're also counting on us not knowing how advanced your stem-tech is,” she huffed.

“There is that.” He blue-nodded.

Still offended, Becca thought of something else. “Is this where you made Evie's arms and legs?”

iSkandar almost chuckled. “You are careful to not mention your own hand.”

The machine had half-finished a skull.

“What about her bone marrow?” Becca asked. “We use that to protect ourselves against infection.”

“In that case, it was grown separately and injected before we added anything else,” iSkandar said. “We know about marrow; you taught us. You have some in your hand. Another section of the ship is already in advancement and we cannot complicate the field more than we have already. These will have no marrow; they will be slightly lighter.” iSkandar stopped. “How much does a Human head weigh?”

Becca shook her head. “I've never weighed one. I think it's five kilos.”

“Humans identify with heads and hands,” iSkandar observed. “All your information takes those images and nothing else. You do not account the entire being.”

“Faces and hands are unique,” Becca countered. “Scars prove a lifetime of activity. A person who frowns or laughs forms lines that show how they frowned or laughed during their life. Fingerprints map the random nature of our birth.”

“You must find it hard to relate to us.”

Becca looked at the shimmering creature beside her and saw that gray-haired surgeon from so long ago. His eyebrows were raised over pained eyes and a half-smile hid some uncomfortable truth.

“We find ways,” she finally answered.

* * * * *

After the skulls were finished, they worked on rolling out meters of blood vessels and nerves. Becca was threading the vessels through the muscles they had made while iSkandar worked on the more delicate task of laying out a nervous structure. Another machine formed cartilage ears and noses.

Becca was jealous of iSkandar's multiple hands and ability to multi-task. *His hands always turn yellow before they move quickly, but they turn blue when he slows down for precision work. I wonder if there are two nervous systems and the color shows which is active.*

Even at that, the task took several days and they did not leave the factory while it was done. Becca was distracted at one point when she thought she could see the stars through the walls and floor of the room. *This must be part of that shimmering effect. Or I'm tired. This is tiring work.* She took four-hour naps every ten hours and ate zero-gee rations.

iSkandar had only stopped working twice, to rest in a tank of a cloudy solution. *Is he sleeping? Eating?* Becca felt herself nodding off as the creature floated in his tank for an hour. *We must be right on top of Peg-51 by now. This is taking forever.*

The heads were almost complete. iSkandar did most of the work there and left the hands to Becca. It might have been his way of letting her work on something that was less disturbing; as the hands became less like bits and more like human parts, Becca found working on them more difficult.

She had been working on the heads as well, but had to stop. "It's looking at me," she had complained
"It has no eyes," he had answered.

iSkandar injected the raw material for the "brain" through the base of the skull and sprayed the hands and heads with a solution. "We will leave this in advancement and come back," he explained.

Becca took the opportunity to clean up and change clothes. She ran into Evie on the way.

"You look like hell," Evie said. "How'd you get so messy?"

Becca rubbed her eyes. "We've been at it for days."

"You've been in there a half-hour," Evie stated. "Days? Maybe it just feels that way."

Becca went to iSkandar without showering. He was standing next to Buer, both creatures a dull gray with pale, interlaced hands. As Becca approached them, neither seemed to register her presence. *They're talking about something. They're communicating. They're leaving everyone out of that conversation.*

Closer to them now, Becca saw they were holding three hands, each covered in that fine, white down.

Becca thwacked iSkandar on the side. He shook himself into a pale blue as Buer shuddered red.

"You went to clean," iSkandar said. "Why have you not done so?"

"We were in advancement." Becca was shaking with rage. "No one said we were going to be in advancement. I'm getting older doing this. You never told me how long this was going to take."

"The factory is in advancement now," Buer offered. "This step can be left unattended."

"How many days have I been in there?" Becca demanded.

"Three-hundred percent," Buer said flatly. "We will be at Pegasai-51 tomorrow. You will be in the factory another six days."

iSkandar nodded. "Doctor can spare two weeks, surely."

"If I had *known*," Becca protested. "If someone had explained it!"

"We are explaining it now," Buer answered.

"I will finish the process." iSkandar ran a hand over Becca. "Doctor did not understand and will not be able to perform any duties while in this state of mind."

Becca waved her hands dismissively in the air. "Fine! Six more days! I can do that. I just wish someone had told me how long this would take. What if it had taken years? I'd be coming out of there an old woman."

Buer took her to one side, away from iSkandar. "Becca, Rebecca...I'm sorry."

Becca wiped away tears of fury. "Don't do that. Don't use my name like that."

"Does it upset you to Humanize us?" Buer asked.

Becca heard her great-aunt's voice. She shook with confusion and betrayal. "Yes. You're not Human. I can't look you in the eye. I don't see you frown or nod or smile. You've crossed a line with me."

"You gave us Human names."

"I didn't do that." Becca wanted to sob. "iMala did that. I just went along with it because...It made things easier. You're not Human and you never will be."

Despite it all, she saw Buer nod in its own blue-shift way.

"Gentle Blue: iMala, Cautious Blue: iDana, Noisy Blue: iLyssa..." Buer ran a litany. "Doctor: Becca, Engineer: Evie, Third Human: Gordon. You are unique. You name each other accordingly. Does my naming your uniqueness upset you?"

Becca rubbed her face with a sleeve.

"We don't want to upset you," Buer went on. "This is an unusual circumstance for you. No Human has experienced these things. I think...I am of the opinion...You are not faint-hearted. We over-estimated the curious nature of Humans. Our experience with you is limited. You will teach us?"

Becca nodded. "You thought we were like you."

Maybe the Vencume laughed. "We have...Vencumized you as you have Humanized us."

iSkandar approached them. "We must return and finish the process. That is...if Doctor will come."

“Yes,” Becca agreed, and laughed a little to herself. “Let me go clean up. I’ll be right there.”

* * * * *

The skin had spread across the human skulls and hands. Unseeing faces gaped through a miasma of pinkish liquid. iSkandar pulled out a tray of eyes and started to attach them.

Meanwhile, Becca checked the fingerprints on the hands to make sure everything matched there. It looked like iDana’s process worked and she set about scarring the decoy Evie hands. She had a reformulated spray that would heal, but would keloid. *I can give them two weeks of my life. It’s not that much and it’s not the kind of thing I’ll be doing on a regular schedule. What can you do in two weeks anyway? I mean, besides make a head and a pair of hands. I’m glad he’s handling that part. Why would I ever make a head back home? Maybe eyes? I bet I can grow a new ear. I know how this works. This is an internship all over again.*

The hair had been the toughest part. Evie’s hair was naturally a warm black, but the Shipping Authority would be looking for white hair. They couldn’t tweak the genetics to make it grow out white and had to resort to the trauma of electric shocks to force the follicles to give up the pigment. With each zap, the face on the head would contort, life-like. Becca only watched it the first time. After that, she had to look away and gnaw on the knuckle of her left thumb to keep from screaming.

When the finished products were brought to the designer’s lab, Evie was waiting with Ulan and Uma. The twins tapped the glass and frowned.

“Dead,” Ulan said.

Uma nodded. “*Blech.*”

Evie studied hers intently. “I have a weird shaped head.”

iLyssa stiffened a bit. “What’s so weird about it?”

“It was worse before,” iDana said.

“I don’t know how you can stand to stare at that thing,” Becca said. “It’s ghoulish.”

Gordon was also looking at his, albeit in a more side-ways manner. “It’s hard to look at yourself like that. But you have to.” He ran a hand over his front, like he was pushing down nausea. “It’s not like a mirror. You see things differently when it’s not reversed.”

“Every time I turn around on this ship,” Evie mused, “I see myself.”

iMala was setting up the pressurized tank. One of the cuffs had been sealed off. iDana plucked out Gordon’s right decoy hand and plopped it in the tank. iLyssa shoved her hand in one of the cuffs and tested the gun-like device that would move the chip. Gordon obliged and placed his right hand in the other cuff.

Moving Gordon’s chip was a quick process, the girls having done it once before. iMala was also pleased to use her pain-killing device on a larger and unknown subject.

Once it was done, Evie started to roll up a sleeve. “I suppose I’m next.”

“We’re not moving your chip,” iDana said.

“We have to replace your eyes and hands,” iLyssa explained. “We’re going to give them what you have and give you something that matches how you were before.”

Evie suddenly realized that the eyes for her head were not in its sockets. “I thought you were just...”

iSkandar gestured to a chair.

“You knew,” Becca said. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“Why else would you scar the hands?” iDana asked.

Evie sat down and wrung her hands. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

iSkandar uncovered a tray with a set of surgical tools.

Becca still felt a righteous indignation. “Why doesn’t anyone ever *tell* me anything?”

“That was our assumption again,” iSkandar said. “You ask many questions, but did not ask about that.”

Evie was wriggling in the chair. “What does it matter?”

“Think about later,” iLyssa demanded. “Once all this is over and done with...we have to make you match how it was.”

Evie squirmed. “I can’t. I...I wish I could. No, I can’t.”

“It’s only for a couple of minutes,” iDana said. “It won’t be any time at all.”

“No.” Evie pressed her hands to her eyes. “You don’t....You don’t know what it’s like.”

“iDana can tell you all about it,” iLyssa said. “She's had it done.”

“Shut up,” iDana hissed. She already had one hand pressed against her right eye.

“We'll knock you out,” iMala offered. “We'll wake you up when we're re-attaching them so we can map the nerves.”

“No, no...” Evie was almost sobbing. “I want to. Really, I want to. I...It's too much like...I don't care. I'll be a refugee my whole life.”

“Strap her down,” iLyssa hissed. “This is stupid.”

“Do me,” Uma chittered. “Take out one of my eyes and replace it.”

The others turned to look at the twin. iSkandar rotated with tools clattering.

“I'll do it,” Uma chittered on. “I'll do it to prove the process. I can be half-blind for a couple minutes, if it puts her mind at ease.”

iMala made an adjustment to her pain-killing device and pointed it at Uma. iSkandar moved towards the girl with scalpel raised.

“No!” Evie cried out. “I'll do it. Don't do that to her.” She leapt forward and raised a hand over Uma's eyes. “I'll sit still. I'm sorry.”

iSkandar shifted from blue to violet. Becca saw the creature frown.

“Please,” Evie begged. “I'll do it. I'll sit still for it. Don't blind her.”

iMala made another adjustment to her pain-killing device.

iSkandar moved with the utmost, blue-handed precision, removing Evie's eyes and leaving as much nerve-stalk as possible. Evie gripped the chair with white knuckles and clenched jaw. She had flinched a few times and iSkandar had to hold her head still.

The old eyes went into the tank with the head. “We'll attach that later,” iDana said.

Evie's new eyes went in a second later. They were a teary dark brown that quickly turned red as Evie sniffled.

“How are you doing?” Becca asked Evie.

Evie made fists and rubbed her eyes. “It's a little off. I have to get used to them. The focus is OK. My head feels strange and full.”

“Let me know if you get hungry or nauseated,” iMala said. “I've seen that side-effect.”

Evie's hands took more time. The new ones, scars and prints intact, were seamlessly placed as the old, flawless hands fell away like so much dead skin. iDana placed them in the tank with the strange, lifeless head.

“You're feeling OK?” Gordon asked.

“I feel like a child's toy,” Evie answered and rubbed her wrists. “A spoiled, angry child that knows its mother will just buy it new one.”

* * * * *

The Shipping Authority wasn't taking any chances. Pegasai-51 had been turned into a military outpost.

Well, it was as much of a military outpost as could be gathered in a couple months. The cruiser that led the battle group, the *XingLong*, was waiting by the station with a destroyer, the *JianYang*. It was assumed that the two frigates of the group were running a picket along the border.

The four remaining pilots had already been sent to their ships, awaiting a launch command that the three designers felt would be inevitable.

The redheads were in full armor and hopping from foot to foot; the girls were full of adrenaline and their clips were full of five-centimeter bolts that they were anxious to fire into any intruder.

Gordon was the first to suggest trying diplomacy this time. “I heard what you did that that other ship and what happened. But that's three ships and a station. Let's see if we can keep the body-count down this time.”

Mirabilis had been brought out of retirement from the garden and manned the comm between the ship and the station. It may have been its time in the garden, but this Vencume reminded Becca of Old Man Sazji.

None of the children in town knew (or cared!) who he was or what he might have done before, but they all knew him as the old goat with the fruit trees in his yard. Every year, in late summer, the children would raid

the trees, clambering over the wall like so many monkeys. It was a yearly ritual: climbing the wall, plucking as many fruit as one could, and scampering away before Old Man Sazji (dressed in a towel and face still white with shaving foam) would come out and wave his ancient straight-razor at them. His garden was always littered with rotten fruit that he could not be bothered (or was too old) to pick up. And, going further, Becca remembered going to Mr. Sazji's funeral as an adult. It turned out he'd been a diplomat during one of the flare-ups in the south. They had read about it in school, but the name had never clicked. Old Man Sazji was just a crazy relic that shouted at children and Becca's personal truth could never be wiped away by anything that history said.

Becca, Gordon, and Evie circled in the background, listening. Gordon had one of the Vencume translators with him, the volume turned down low.

Mirabilis made an adjustment to the comm, like an old man trying to tune in his favorite evening drama. The Vencume hesitated before chittering:

“Please, Pegasai-51, forgive our sudden appearance. We are trying to fix a mistake we have made. We must apologize for any misunderstandings that may have occurred. The Tzikzik threat will be neutralized soon and we only ask for Human patience and cooperation in this venture.”

Meanwhile, the translator intoned in a smooth, rich baritone:

Pegasai-51 does not see arrival. Vencume mistake. Vencume misery. Poor timing. Tzikzik soon unthreatened. Human follow.

“That's going to start a war,” Gordon shook his head.

“Poor timing or not,” a human voice said, “we cannot allow these attacks to continue. We need to know that this is not a Vencume activity. What guarantee do we have?”

The translator, however, said:

Bad occasion. Attack unplanned. Vencume action. Human submittal.

“Mirabilis,” Becca offered, “ignore the translator and let us do it. This stupid little machine can't handle it.”

“They want to know that this isn't a Vencume thing and they want a guarantee,” Evie translated.

“We offer the Humans that offended you, but only what we could recover.” Mirabilis was turning a light purple. “We will send the parts to show that we have settled the issue with the ship that attacked you.”

Human trophy to deliver. Technology further mechanics in time.

“Mirabilis!” Becca hissed. “Speak more plainly! They're going to get confused!”

“We will handle the remaining Tzikzik and there will be no more attacks,” Mirabilis said haltingly. “We have the means to settle the situation and are taking such measures.”

Vencume assist Tzikzik situation. Attack not. Vencume wager ship for destruction.

“They're going to flip out and starting firing any minute,” Evie moaned.

“We do not wish to wager anything,” the Shipping Authority stated. “We only want the prisoners returned to us so we can question them further.”

No wager. Human trapped question more.

“I need to work on the translators,” Gordon said. “This isn't going to get us anywhere.”

“No wager!” Mirabilis was turning a bright purple, the square scales on his feet a deep purple. “We offer the Humans. We give what was recovered. Tzikzik issue resolved. We will settle it.”

Wagerless. Humans returned. Tzikzik handled. Vencume absolve.

“That sounds a little better,” Evie said and nodded. The other Humans agreed.

Whoever was manning the Shipping Authority comm was working their own translation. “So you will return the Human prisoners and we will handle the remaining Tzikzik attacks?”

Human returned trapped. Tzikzik attack Human solve.

“Just say 'yes!'” Gordon hissed. “Say you're returning the parts you found!”

“Human remains returned,” Mirabilis struggled. “We return parts we found. We destroy Tzikzik.”

Humans returned. Parts found. Vencume Tzikzik ended.

“Parts found should be enough.” Evie rubbed an eye.

* * * * *

An un-named Vencume was sent to the station with the decoy parts. It felt like forever until the Shipping Authority responded.

“We see that you have recovered...three people,” the voice stated with an edge of fear. “We only asked for two, but you might have been a little...overzealous in bringing these back to us.”

Evie translated quickly to Mirabilis.

“We apologize for any misunderstanding,” Mirabilis said. “We did not know what was involved.”

The translator spat out a reasonable facsimile.

“They're trying to figure out what to do,” Gordon explained in hushed tones. “Another effect of the heads, besides getting them off our backs, is to shock them a little. Humans still don't know much about the Vencume or how they deal with things. Presenting them with...scalps...will make them think we're capable of anything.”

The Shipping Authority came back on. “We will give you attack locations. Inform us if there is need for assistance and we will help.”

Mirabilis was the consummate diplomat. “We should be able to deal with the issue, but we will let you know if more help is needed. Again, we apologize for this. We know it will not bring back the dead. We will bring back your ships. There will be no more dead. We are sorry this has happened.”

Now that this business was settled, the massive Vencume ship left Pegasai-51 and started the trek to Ursus Major-47.

“I bet they don't think we can do it,” Evie said. “Or they want to send us on a wild goose chase.”

Gordon shook his head. “They wanted to lie to us and make us go away, but they also think that we know more than we're letting on, which is true. That this is such an out-of-the-way outpost puts their backs against the wall. They gave us some information so we'd leave, but they're going to watch us very carefully. Don't be surprised if we run into them again.”

Black Arm

The six new pilots were out of advancement and the mess-hall was getting crowded.

Gordon was sitting at a table with Evie and the three designers. As Becca approached the table, a voice called over the room.

“Becca! Becca!” one of the pilots yelled. “Come sit with us!”

Evie grinned falsely. “Someone just got *popular*.”

Becca rolled her eyes and took her plate over to the pilots' table. The ten girls shuffled in their seats.

The pilot who had called Becca over introduced herself as oDette. She had slightly thicker lips than the others. *I have to learn a whole new set of similar faces with similar names.*

Introductions were made: besides oDette, there were oLivia, oRtense, oCtavia, oLena, and oRenda.

“How do you pick your names?” Becca asked.

“The Library picks them for us,” oRenda said (she had slightly smaller eyes), “by meaning and organization.”

oLena leaned over to Becca. “There was a baby-name book on one of Evie's data-sticks. Once the Library knew it was for unique identifiers, it decided to use them for us.”

oRtense tapped the collar of her jump-suit. “We should write down our names, to make it easier while we're getting to know each other.”

“You guys aren't having any trouble, are you?” oLivia looked at the four original pilots.

oLathe frowned. “No.”

“There's more of us than them,” oCtavia whispered. “So they're sorta threatened.”

“We can also hear you just fine!” oFria snapped.

They ate in relative silence after that. The new pilots still smiled at Becca and each other while the first four glowered at their end of the table. *This new batch is friendlier. Batch. I just called them that. Like a batch of cookies or something. This new breed? This new series? These new girls...*

“So!” oDette looked at Becca. “Tell us about him.” The others giggled.

Becca had been jolted out of her reverie. "Who are you talking about?"
oRtense waved the question off. "How many *hims* are there on this ship?"

"Oh," Becca's eyebrows went up. *She means Gordon.*

"He...he always annoyed me." oVida squirmed. "We don't like him."

"Oh, he's OK," oLivia said. "He's a lot like us."

Becca laughed and shook her head. "You mean, *you're* a lot like *him*."

oRenda had finished eating and stood up. "You should come watch us launch."

"Becca's not going to care about that," oRiana said. "She's a doctor. She doesn't care about ships."

The first four stood and walked out, leaving their plates behind.

oDette helped the others collect the dirty dishes into a stack and take them back to the kitchen.

oCtavia came up to Becca's side and ran a hand down her arm. "Are you up for it? You want to watch a launch some time?"

Becca nodded. "Yes. I'd love to."

"Our first proper run." The pilot grinned. "We'll be hitting one soon. You'll enjoy it."

The girl winked.

* * * * *

Buer came to Evie and Becca's quarters and asked them if they could move in with the twins. "Additional Red are coming out of advancement, but there is not room on the red arm. If you could move to the black arm, we can put them here in white."

aLima and aNdra had come to help with the move. "There's going to be another seven of us," aLima explained, "and we only have the ten beds. The pilots were able to double up when they made those additional six, but we don't have that kind of space."

"What's the 'black arm'?" Becca asked.

aNdra held out a hand and counted off her fingers. "It's the five arms of the section: white, blue, yellow, red, and black."

"Just like on a Vencume," aLima said.

Buer did a minor demonstration, color-shifting the three arms that were facing Becca.

"We're already in red," aLima continued, "and the pilots have yellow, but we need more room."

"There's only two of you in white," aNdra stated. "But there's three people in black, so we should just move you there."

Evie chuckled a little to herself. "It's also easier to ask us to move than the twins."

When Becca and Evie arrived, Ulan and Uma were overjoyed that they were going to share their quarters with others. They already used one of the rooms for themselves and had left Gordon in his own (with its spare bed).

The twins had placed drawings of the occupants on the doors. Evie was drawn in orange and brown. Becca appeared in shades of green, and Gordon in purple. The twins had even cleared the last room (next to the one for Evie), overturning the beds and stacking them on top of each other to form a crude workbench. There was a drawing of the mechanical mantis on that door.

"My equipment is being moved here as well?" Evie asked.

aNdra nodded. "Cerberus needs that space," invoking the redhead name for the designers. "They said they were working on something."

"And it's not *your* equipment, anyway," aLima added. "Some of the things that you were using have been moved down, but we're only *lending* it to you."

"I'm being kicked out of the lab?" Evie's voice raised in indignation. "Are there going to be more designers as well? Is that it? They've getting more hands and they think they don't need me?"

"No more Blue Tzikzik," Buer said. "Three is dangerous enough."

The twins giggled.

Evie was still fuming. "It's unacceptable! I gave them the plans for a better snapback on the borrowed-time field. Slowing down the field is pointless unless the snapback can catch up to the MOUS's reference frame! I did that and I think a little recognition is in order."

Becca could almost hear iLyssa's demanding voice.

"This is preposterous." Evie sighed. "They have to see it differently. I'll be right back."

"Have fun storming the bridge," Gordon called after her.

Becca only had a couple changes of clothes, so unpacking consisted of laying the neatly folded bundles on the spare bed in her room.

Gordon poked his head in. "Need any help?"

"Oh, I don't know." Becca picked up a slipper and pantomimed lifting its imaginary massive weight. "I...*nnng*...almost.....there! I'm done."

Gordon laughed, but his eyes were suddenly serious. "Listen, Becca, I've been a jackass in the past but I know that act isn't needed anymore." He leaned on the door-frame. "It never did what I wanted it to do, anyway. If we're going to be jammed in here together, I just want to get that out now. I'm hoping we can start over."

Becca sat on the edge of one of her beds. "What act was that?"

"The bold, dashing pilot, of course!" He grinned and rubbed his right eye. "You know how it is on the pebble-jumpers; all the guys have to be Dick Daring and wow the ladies and the other pilots just look down on you if you're a decent human being. It was a month on the *Dizhou* before I knew that wasn't how the deep-space flights went, but it was too late to be someone else. I know that sounds dumb, but I've been there in the thick of it. You women are lucky; you get to be sensitive and smart at the same time."

Becca laughed nervously. *Did he ever rub his eyes before? Doesn't Evie do that all the time?*

"Don't get me wrong," he said with hands raised. "I respect the hell out of you. I thought that I could drop the act around you, but I'd already done the damage and nothing makes a lie stand out more than telling the truth. I figured you'd just hate me for a whole new set of reasons and I didn't want to deal with it. Call me lazy."

"Lazy."

"Deserved." He nodded. "I just had a lot of time in that garden. I..." He sat on the floor. "When you spend your whole life trying to impress people, and there's no one to impress, you kinda come to a new understanding of yourself. Do you think we can all start over?"

Becca nodded to herself. "I think everyone on this ship is starting over, one way or the other. Even the Vencume."

Gordon cocked his head to one side and asked, "Are you afraid *of* them or *for* them?"

"That's an odd question."

"I feel afraid *for* them," Gordon kept his line of thought. "I've been reading their history on the comm and parts of it don't make sense. I think they're very, very lonely and they're trying to fill it with adopting something very dangerous."

"People with low self-esteem will date anyone," Becca answered. "If what iMala said is true, and the Vencume hate themselves, then we could be looking at the biggest codependent relationship in the galaxy."

"Yeah..." Gordon laughed. "But this one has kids involved. That's going to be an awful custody battle."

* * * * *

When Evie came back several hours later, she had a surprised look on her face. "I ran into my mantis on the way down here," she explained with a thumb over her shoulder. "And then, I ran into it again, but on another floor. Did you know that they've made five more of them?"

"The same design or variants?" Becca asked. She was brushing Uma's hair while Ulan sat to one side and drew the two of them.

"Looked the same," Evie answered. "I couldn't tell."

Gordon chuckled. "Emulation is the greatest form of flattery."

Becca continued to brush Uma's hair back and started to separate it into sections for a braid. "Well, they must have seen a use for it. What was the mantis doing?"

“The first one had a bundle of laundry.” Evie sat down next to Ulan and looked at the girl's drawing. “The second one was carrying what I guess was dirt. It was in a covered container.”

“But you built the first one to help out on a ship,” Becca said, “so that makes sense.”

Becca had finished braiding Uma's hair. The girls stood up and switched places, Uma continuing the drawing where Ulan had left off.

Gordon turned from the comm he was reading. “You should be happy that they like your design. Coming from that bunch, I'd take it as a compliment.”

“Good gray design,” Uma said, adding shading to Becca's face in the drawing. “More gray design.”

Evie's eyes narrowed as she watched Becca brushing Ulan's hair. “Why are you doing that?”

Ulan shut her eyes with all the contentment of a purring cat. “Pretty.”

“See?” Uma held up the drawing. “Pretty sister. Pretty me.”

“There's more to life than being pretty.” Evie scowled.

Ulan opened her eyes and gave Evie a hard stare. “Pretty is nice.”

“Pretty doesn't last,” Evie said. “Pretty is only for now.”

“Enjoy now,” Uma answered. “Now is now.”

* * * * *

Evie and the twins had an shouting-match after that, so Becca went back to the kitchen. It got her out of the tense situation and cooking helped clear her head.

There were three redheads there she didn't know. They introduced themselves as aTlanta, aDelaide, and anSabi (they even had their names written on the collars of their work-suits!) and they asked how they could help in preparing a meal. When Becca told them she had planned on *imambayildi*, they immediately collected the aubergine, tomato, onion and parsley without her telling them what was in the dish.

“You know what's in it?” she asked them.

aDelaide nodded. “We've always known. It's served cold.” She split the aubergine.

“But your daughter Huri prefers *karniyarik*,” aTlanta stated, “with meat.”

Becca froze. *How do they know about my daughter?*

aSabi started to peel an onion under cold water.

“I always had to tell the others,” Becca said. “You even know how to peel an onion.”

“We have some information they don't.” aTlanta was removing seeds from the tomatoes.

aSabi nodded. “We always knew they were there, but...it's odd. It's like they're behind us.”

“Not that they're stupid,” aTlanta quickly added.

“Just less friendly,” aDelaide finished.

They have my information. They have Gordon's. The others have only Evie's.

“You know what a bursa is?” Becca probed.

“It's a fluid sac that forms a cushion between tendons and bones.” aSabi was dicing the onion, cutting one side, cross cutting the other, finally chopping off piles of perfectly diced onion. She kept her fingers curled the entire time, only exposing her knuckles to the blade.

“When it's inflamed, it's called *bursitis*,” aTlanta said, chopping the tomato. “Why?”

“I was just curious,” Becca said.

“We're not like the others,” aDelaide said. “They're very angry. I think they get mad because we're not angry the way they are.”

The other two redheads nodded.

“We keep our distance.” aDelaide said. “It's hard because we're all in together. Maybe they're jealous of us?”

“Yeah,” aTlanta agreed. “I got anNora in an arm-lock during practice and she was really mad.”

“They're very proud,” aSabi said. “But we came later. They've already seen combat. We'll see some soon. They might like us then.”

* * * * *

Evie had secured a collection of equipment. She was busy setting up her ancillary lab in the spare room the twins had set aside for her. Two Vencume that Becca did not recognize were helping her set up the various devices and bins of materials.

"It's not what it was before," Evie complained, "but it will do in a pinch. I still have room and the tools I need, so I can't kvetch too much."

"Glad you're happy," Becca said.

"She's delighted," Gordon offered from the other room. "She just won't admit it."

"I'm coping!" Evie yelled back at him. Then, under her breath, "He always has to be right. It's his worst attribute."

Becca smiled. "Not that you ever had that problem. You're a fine couple." *And it looks like he might have picked up some of your personality from that connection...*

The two Vencume left and Evie shut the door. "You're just like him."

Becca's eyebrows sought the refuge of her hairline. "How so?"

"It, uh..." Evie looked at the door and her voice dropped to a whisper. "He said I was a horrible woman, you know? I'm a terrible mother."

Becca sat cross-legged on the floor as Evie set up her lab. "Is this because of the argument you had with the twins?" *Or because of some self-loathing you've transmitted to him?*

"I guess," Evie answered, clamping a drill-press to a table. "All that 'pretty' talk rubbed me the wrong way. They can't grow up thinking that's important. I think for myself."

"You spend a lot of time thinking about things," Becca said. "How much of your personality was formed by what you looked like? Do you feel you'd think differently if people thought you were attractive?"

Evie's jaw clenched. "Hell if I know."

"Think about those guys back on Peg-51 and how differently they treated you," Becca said. "Or like Rosemary..."

Evie flinched at the dead woman's name. "Everyone thought because I was ugly that I wasn't into guys," Evie said, sorting out a set of screwdrivers. "Why do you have to be pretty to care about guys? It's all total bull." She put a container of bolts to one side. "A woman has to be ugly or smart or strong or successful and suddenly she can't be an object of desire for any man. Why is it all about looks? Like how you look determines what you like."

"You like machines," Becca said.

Evie sneered. "I like machines because they behave the way they're supposed to. You program it, it does its job. All that 'pretty' talk and 'oh, I gotta have a boyfriend' is for simps."

"Do you think I'm a simp?" Becca asked.

Evie stopped sorting bolts. "Que-wha-huh?"

"Well..." Becca laced her fingers. "For having a husband and a family and all that. Does that make me a simp?"

"That was your *choice*," Evie said. "I mean, you decided on that. Heck, even if you had chosen to stay at home and raise a family, that still would have been your *choice*, right? Who cares what you do with it? We can't all be spayed cats."

Becca laughed. "*Spayed cats*? So says the woman with over twenty daughters."

Evie frowned. "I didn't have them. I could never do that. That's terrifying."

Becca felt a mix of praise and revulsion from her friend. "It's wonderful. You haven't done it, but it really is wonderful. You know that you did that. That's a little bit of you. It's...programmed or not, biology rewards us."

"Genes that are happy they get to keep going," Evie said. "I guess. I saw a live birth once. That's gross."

Becca frowned. "You look at the inside of your hand all the time and you're going to tell me what gross is."

Evie rubbed her right eye. "You know what I mean. It's not like it used to be, but it's still creepy."

"It's only creepy to people who don't do it," Becca countered.

"Do you think that will change when we get back?" Evie asked.

Becca shook her head. “No, people will still have children. Naturally. Maybe some might choose a tank, but I feel that Humans still need that time. Pregnancy isn't all bad. You get to know that person you're about to bring into the world. We need that. It's human.”

Evie turned to sort a collection of electronic elements. “I guess. But I still say Humans don't make sense. All that dumb politics back home. My family was really into that. I can't stand it.”

* * * * *

It had been a busy day of cooking and cleaning and Becca was worn out. *Just think! All your schooling, and look what you do. Wouldn't your father be proud? She can feed an army and still keep a clean house! Great-Aunt Lytle would be furious.*

She showered and fell into bed. There was no time for thinking before sleep overtook her.

Becca woke up and heard chittering in the other room. She went into the door and listened to what sounded like some strange dialect; only some of the words didn't make sense.

“...Unavoidable...they may be smart, but not like that....”

“This lack of *chichitiizi* is going to cause trouble later on. If they had thought it through when they made the *zikzikkiti* we might not be in this situation. We'll have to see what the others do in response.”

“We still have the three adults, and that may give us a *tizizikikiki*. I worry more about...”

The sound was coming from the twins' room. Becca opened the door.

Uma and Ulan were sitting on the floor, playing some kind of game they had made out of clay and paper. The two girls looked up at Becca and smiled.

“Awake!” Ulan put down one of her game pieces decisively.

Uma frowned at whatever move had been made and picked one of her pieces off the board.

“Was there a Vencume here?” Becca asked. “I heard chittering.”

The twins looked at each other. “No Vencume,” Ulan said.

“If there was no Vencume,” Becca chittered, “then who was talking?”

Uma put her hands to her ears and chittered, “Just stop. You mangle it.”

“You always mess up the tenses.” Ulan shook her head. “It's embarrassing.”

“So, it was you,” Becca said. “You can't talk, but you can chitter.”

“We can talk fine,” Ulan chittered. “You just have to pay attention.”

Becca faced the girls. “Your sisters don't have any problem with Human—“

“Our *sisters*,” Ulan seemed upset, “connected when they were toddlers. You're lucky they didn't form their own dialect.”

“That *is* the usual outcome,” Uma chittered. “Adults learn a pidgin while the children form the grammar-based creole.”

“You don't understand us at all,” Ulan complained.

“We're Vencume in Human skins.” Uma ran a hand across her front. “We received the Vencume connection early, and grew off of that. It's hard to walk with two legs when your mind wants five.”

Ulan smiled wide. “But the Human mind still leads to Human cunning. It's unusual. I think it's because of the brain structure. There's a rat wrapped around a lizard wrapped around a fish.”

Uma nodded. “Not that we've ever seen those creatures, but our second connection, with the Human part; we got that image.”

Becca sat down near the door, slowly.

“But,” Uma chittered on, “we formed our own thoughts. The others are Engineer plus ten years in an echo-chamber. They'll make her mistakes over and over.”

“They always fight things head on; she never learned any subterfuge.”

“There's no *chichitiizi* to them.” Uma moved one of her game pieces. “They just go along and make decisions and then figure out how to get themselves out of trouble.”

Ulan rubbed her chin and looked at the board. “No long term thinking. No plan.” She moved a piece. “It's how they got that Yellow killed. That could have been avoided.”

Becca looked at the game board. It might have been chess or some variant. “What is...*chi-chi-ti*...”

“*Chichitiizi*,” Uma corrected. “It's a kind of...strategy? Diplomacy? It's the soft form of winning.”

“The round-about-way-that-prevents-problems,” Ulan explained.

Uma moved a piece. “Like the break-out. When we came and got you? They wanted to just go in, guns blazing. Everyone wanted some big fight. We suggested the gas. We told Assistant to suggest it. If we hadn't been there, more people would have been killed. What a mess! Very ugly.”

“But the others treat you like idiots,” Becca said. “Doesn't that bother you?”

“Of course they do.” Ulan moved a piece several spaces and forced her sister to remove more from the board. “No one asks an idiot to risk themselves. No one expects an idiot to do something clever. No one watches an idiot carefully.”

“Not even Engineer knows about us, really,” Uma said.

“And you're not going to tell her,” Ulan threatened with narrowed eyes. “She'll tell everyone.”

“She started this stupid *zikzikkiti*,” Uma chittered. She knocked over a piece.

The girls set the board up again.

Becca sat stone still. *Everyone has an agenda. I'm just another piece in some game. Evie's game. The twins' game. The Vencume's game. We're less than Human now. We don't have our own goals anymore and we just go along with whatever whim others set up for us. It doesn't matter what we want or how we feel; we just move along as they decide. The twins are still treating us like toys. They just poke us with a stick and see how we wiggle.*

“Doctor is very quiet,” Uma chittered to her sister.

“Doctor is thinking about what to say next,” Ulan answered. “And whether or not to say it.”

Uma nodded. “Doctor is smarter than some people.”

“Why...” Becca started, then stopped, then started again. “Why did you do what you did to Gordon?”

Ulan bared her teeth and growled the word. “Life-boat.” She didn't chitter it.

Becca formed small fists in her lap. “Revenge.”

Uma shook her head and moved a game piece. “Our connection was only recent. We would have been no matter what. It's the others that came from that. That connection they had so long ago doomed them all. If Engineer hadn't been left behind, if she hadn't needed to be put back together, they never would have taken that information from her. That one action made them what they are.”

“But I gave them information as well,” Becca protested. “I told them how a Human works. They made changes to the shape, how they're built, because of me. Will you tear me apart as well?”

“You did it for her,” Ulan answered. “You did what you were *trained* to do.”

Uma held out a hand and turned her head. It was a command for silence.

Evie was making noises from her room. A groan and arguing.

Becca went silently up to the door and peeked in.

Evie was wrapped hap-haphazardly in a sheet, thrashing in bed like a drunk. *She must be having some nightmare.*

“That damage,” Ulan said softly by Becca's side. “That might never be undone.”

Becca shut the door and they returned to the twins' room.

“She needs to sort that.” Uma frowned and moved a game piece. “It's going to hamper her. They all do that.”

Becca's head was swimming. “They all...?”

Ulan gestured with her chin as she sat back down at the board. “They all have nightmares. Every one. None of them sleep right. They all thrash and moan and kick and curse. No one talks about it. It makes the Blues nervous. It makes the Reds mean. It makes the Yellows try to hide it under false superiority. They're all afraid and hiding it from one another.”

“The Reds get in terrible fights.” Uma shook her head and studied the board. “They call each other cowards and claw at each other. They bully each other into not being afraid.”

“Noisy Blue got her arm broken,” Ulan said. “They beat her bad. Cautious Blue lost an eye in one fight and had to have it replaced. They fight all the time. Round Yellow lost a mean clump of hair once.”

The twins nodded at each other.

“They don't seem afraid,” said Becca.

“False false false,” Uma spoke the words. “You no fear? You hide.”

“No fear front daughter,” Ulan spoke. “You look guts, you no fear.”

“Don't talk about my daughter,” Becca chittered.

“What is a daughter?” Ulan chittered. “What is a mother?”

“We don't understand these terms,” Uma chittered and moved pieces on the board. “But they mean a lot to you. They mean a lot to her. She wants to be mother. She wants us to be daughters. She wasn't there. We grew up without her. We play along.”

“We'll learn something,” Ulan added. “Maybe she will. No telling.”

“Why didn't you kill Gordon?” Becca blurted.

Ulan laced her fingers. “That's another oddity of a Human brain. You feel things and act on them. Killing him won't solve anything. And it was easier to hide him while he was alive. Bodies stink.”

“We put him in the garden because he told us to leave him alone,” Uma added. “I think it's improved him greatly. He's a little less bold.”

“Doctor must be tired.” Ulan moved a game piece. “You should go back to sleep.”

Uma moved a piece across the board. “Tomorrow is a busy day.”

Conflict

The passenger-ship, *JiangPing*, was just ahead of them.

The pilots dragged Becca to the launch bay. “You have to see this,” oLena said, adjusting her helmet. “At least once.”

Becca was left in a control room where she peered at five ships, held nose-up by massive, crescent-shaped arms. As each pilot approached her ship, a slice folded out, like a slide on a microscope. The slide had a Human-shaped indentation that each girl lay on, spread-eagle. Once they fit their hands into the gloves and their feet into the boots, the slides folded back into the ships.

The control-room door locked and the crescent arms lifted each ship, rotating it nose-down. The floor of the bay opened up to the passing stars and the ships were held over the gaping void. One-by-one, as each ship let off that first spark of engine-flair, the crescent arm released them into the exterior.

It may have been fifteen minutes later; the first ship suddenly appeared in the bay, firing retros and letting the massive crescent grasp it.

One-by-one, the ships returned. The floor closed underneath them and the door from the control-room to the bay unlocked.

The ships were turned right-side-up and the pilots exited.

oLivia danced into the control room and smiled at Becca. “How was that? Exciting, huh?”

“Was that the whole fight?” Becca asked.

“Oh, no!” oRtense laughed. “We've just knocked out the sensor array and engines. The Red Eagles have it from here.”

* * * * *

Two of the redheads came to Becca in her ad-hoc sickbay. aNaba had long gash along her left side—the amour was striped in the thick, black, poisonous paste.

“What did you find?” Becca asked, not wanting the answer she knew they would give her.

“Oh, they spaced the passengers,” aVari explained, sitting to one side. “Nothing from them. Those other Tzikzik are messy bastards, that's all.”

aNaba wiggled her fingers in front of her face. “Booga-booga, and all that. Ew.”

Becca tried to hide the revulsion she felt. *To just be thrown out like that; how horrifying.*

“I don't think they met a lot of opposition,” aNaba said. “They must have killed them first.”

“Yeah,” aVari said. “They probably stung them or just tore them apart. Passenger ships should have some kind of defense, you know?”

Becca dabbed away the paste with long swabs and checked the wound underneath. “Did you get some of that poison in here? It's discolored.”

“It itches,” aNaba complained. “Part of it is numb.”

“Make sure you don't touch that stuff,” aVari said. “Might drop you in a heart-beat.”

“Your sisters wanted me to see their launch....the pilots?” Becca talked to fill time while she cleaned the scratch. “They were quite excited by it.”

aVari laughed. “They just want to show off that launching system. Sure, it's neat, but it's so removed from the dirty work.”

“And you do the dirty work,” Becca said. “You an the others.”

“Our older sisters use too many bolts.” aVari frowned. “It's wasteful. They just start firing without thinking about where to put them.”

“Didn't that cause a fight earlier?” Becca asked.

“They yelled at us for moving too slow!” aNaba's eyebrows shot up. “Can you believe it? We're not afraid, but a little caution would be nice.”

“Well, this was the first sortie.” aVari grinned. “We'll get it worked out.”

* * * * *

The next ship recovered was a destroyer. iLyssa wasn't as concerned with what they could salvage, so they used a field-collapser on it. They were still able to copy over the data-bank.

The three designers discussed it later.

“This isn't unusual,” iLyssa reasoned. “We used the collapser on the *ZhengYang*, so if we're pretending to be fighting us, then it only stands to reason that we would have used a collapser on another destroyer.”

“We're pretending to be an *unrelated* ship that's going after other *unrelated* ship,” iDana reminded her.

iLyssa waved it off. “Then they can assume that the Vencume have the technology to collapse the field.”

“And if other Vencume ships have been attacked and haven't used a collapser?” iDana asked.

“Then they can take it as a remarkable show of restraint on our end,” iLyssa stated.

* * * * *

Becca was in the garden with aVariella, one of the new redheads. They were transplanting pallets of radish, beet, and potato seedlings when oRtense came to her.

“Will I ever have children?” the blonde asked.

Becca brushed back a curl of hair with the back of her hand. “That's up to you. I hear you're intact, so you have the possibility.”

“Why would you want kids?” aVariella asked.

The pilot ignored her sister. “Do you think it will be soon?”

“You in some kind of hurry?” aVariella asked. “We have too much to do right now to hassle with that.”

“Oh, not for a few years yet,” Becca answered. “When you're older.”

“Because I want children,” oRtense blurted. Her eyes glistened.

Becca stood and led the blonde out of ear-shot of aVariella. “What brought this on?”

oRtense blushed deeply. “You have to promise to not tell anyone.”

“I promise.” Becca nodded and leaned forward.

“I had a dream,” oRtense whispered into her ear. “You know dreams? And I was flying with Gordon. And we flew through the sky, but it was a funny sky—all blue and no stars. And we didn't have ships. It was just us, flying in the sky. And I saw....uhm...” She blushed again.

“Right,” Becca nodded. “You saw him.”

The girl continued. “But we were flying and then we were flying together and I was warm but the air was cold and we were together. And then I had babies. They were all blonde and they could fly.”

Becca smiled. “So you want babies?”

“They were little,” oRtense explained. “And they needed me and I loved them and they loved me. They loved me no matter what. And I had to take care of them, but it was OK because they were mine.”

“Someday.” Becca rested a hand on the girl's shoulder. “You might have children. But they're a lot of work. It's not like when you were little.”

oRtense nodded. “There was a lot of blood, and it hurt, but it was OK. And they cried a lot.”

“Yes,” Becca said. “Babies cry a lot.”

“But I could have babies?” The girl looked hopeful. “Someday, when I'm older?”

A thought came to Becca, strange and pink. “Did you ever play with dolls when you were little?”
oRtense shook her head. “We never were little like that. I see what you mean, but no. We always played with ships and songs. We never played like that.”

Becca nodded. “I’ll bet, if you wanted to, someday, you could do whatever you wanted to. You know, I had a baby. A daughter.”

The girl nodded slowly. “It hurts to be away. You want to see her grow up, but you still think she’s your baby. She’ll always be small to you and it hurts because you think she’ll be big when you get back.”

Becca nodded.

“You’ll get back,” oRtense said. “We’re going to make sure. You’re going to see her again and she won’t be all grown-up when you see her. We’ll make sure.”

Becca watched the blonde skip out of the garden and returned to the bed of seedlings.

“What did she want?” asked aVariella.

“I’m going to claim patient-doctor confidence on that one.”

“Suit yourself,” the redhead answered. “They can’t keep on task. Silly blondes.”

The two worked in silence for a while.

“I hear you’re teaching them a few new tricks,” Becca said. “iMala said your sisters were learning more efficient use of the weapons.”

“Oh, that.” aVariella nodded. “They saw how we didn’t have to stop to reload as often. They’re quick learners.” She laughed. “We never could have just come out and said it. They’re too proud.”

“But you’re all starting to get along a little better?”

“Once we taught them how to play chess, it all started to work out.”

* * * * *

“You don’t know how to play chess?”

Becca sprung the question on Evie as they escorting the laundry down. A mechanical mantis wobbled under the weight of so many dirty clothes and sheets while the women idled along either side.

Evie gave Becca a wounded stare. “Who said that?”

“One of the new redheads,” Becca explained. “The new ones are teaching the old ones chess. That leads me to believe that you don’t know how to play. That seems a little odd. You spent so much time at school with bright kids and all that time on ships—“

“Did you ever ask me to play?”

Becca laughed a little. “You can’t just wait for other people to ask you. Sometimes you have to make the first move.”

“Becca, let me tell you something.” Evie sighed. “I’m not the most competitive of people. I don’t wander around with some board under my arm waiting for a challenge.”

“You could have played against a computer.”

“To what end?”

“Well,” Becca tried again. “So you would know how to play. Lots of people know it, it’s a very old game, and it’s a nice way to spend some time with a person. It doesn’t involve any interpersonal skills or chance; there’s no running or jumping. It just seems like the kind of thing that would be right up your alley.”

They went into the laundry room and the mantis set down the bundles. Evie’s jaw was clenching.

“So why didn’t you ever learn how to play chess?” Becca asked again.

“Stop teasing me.”

“I’m not teasing you,” Becca said. *Why is she getting defensive?* “I’m just wondering. It seems so strange that you, of all people, would not know how to play. I mean, do you want to learn? I used to play against my grandfather and he could hardly walk.”

Evie straightened suddenly. “So, it’s some cripple game? Is that it? You’re surprised I don’t know a game that cripples play?”

“No, I mean...” Becca stammered. “It’s just a game. I figured you’d want to know.”

“No, you felt it necessary to mention that your grandfather couldn’t walk,” Evie said tersely. “You could have just said your grandfather, but you threw in the *unable to walk* to sweeten it. *There’s no running or*

jumping; it's right up your alley. That's *what* you said and *how* you said it. You think that just because I spent my childhood in hospital after hospital that I would enjoy it. You think that because a game needs no interpersonal skills, that someone who people used to call 'Gargoyle Gaines' would be a wizard at it."

"Evie, it's just a game."

"A game that everyone knows how to play but me!"

"The twins play it," Becca stated. "I thought that maybe you played with—"

"They're lucky if they can play checkers," Evie hissed. "I don't think the Vencume knew how a Human brain worked and they broke something when they connected them."

And you're not going to tell her, because she'll tell everyone.

Becca sighed. "No, I guess they don't play chess. It must be some other game."

Evie looked satisfied.

"Well," Becca said, "the offer still stands. If you want to learn how to play, I'm available. Just let me know. How the pieces move is the easy part."

"So, what's the hard part?" Evie laughed.

"Knowing which piece to move."

* * * * *

The third attack location was reached in two days and the girls quickly tracked down the next ship to be recovered.

Becca had accompanied iLyssa to an observation deck. The designer had a hand-held radio and smiled meanly.

"This is getting easier," iLyssa gloated. "And I wanted to see what it really looks like. That new screen is OK, but nothing beats the real thing. It's nice that we have a near-by star to see all this, isn't it?"

"I can hardly see anything," Becca said.

iLyssa laughed. "Oh, I keep forgetting. You're just a trichromat and can't see ultra-violet or infra-red."

"You can?" Becca asked.

"We're the designers, aren't we?" iLyssa said. "We have to see what we're doing."

Becca nodded nervously.

The target was a freighter, four rotating sections; she couldn't make out the name, but thought it said *Tong Gu*.

The golden fighters made their lazy arc out of the launch bays, accompanied by a complex ten-part harmony over the radio. The pilots easily picked off the sensor array and engine, even though someone on the freighter fired a couple of recovery-lines at them. One recovery harpoon hit a fighter, but the tiny ship spun wildly until the harpoon-launcher was torn from the bay. The fighter spun the opposite direction and hit the freighter at a connection point with the detached gun.

"Now *there's* a move you'll never see anywhere else!" iLyssa laughed and spoke into the hand-held radio, "Who did that harpoon move? That was pretty clever."

A sing-songy voice answered cheerily. "That was me, oRenda."

iLyssa frowned a bit at the new pilot's name. "Nice adjustment to the unexpected." She seemed less impressed.

Next, the buzz-landers launched. These tiny cylinders attached themselves to the hull; there was a spray of molten metal where they gained entry.

The redheads chanted over the radio:

*We're setting sail on a boat today
On the only sea we've ever seen.
We'll kill them all, 'cause that's the way
Programmed to our singular gene.
So fire a bolt; watch it go through;
We'll fix this problem, good and well.
We're yellow, red, and sometimes blue*

Anyone else can go to hell.

This moment of drama, then—mission accomplished—the signal was sent that all was clear. The other Tzikzik had been killed; shredded to tiny pieces by magnetically fired bolts of metal. It was no more exciting than putting a squid in a blender and pressing the “on“ button. This is the legacy of mammals: their curiosity, their cunning, their adaptability, their willingness to turn any obstacle into a fine, palatable paste.

“Well, that's another one down,” iLyssa noted. “We'll copy over the data-bank and get that thing towed to Ursus Major-47.”

“You'll just take them out, one at a time?” Becca asked. *This is too easy for them. How can they do what grown Humans can't?*

The girl nodded. “This is nothing. Just wait until—“

There was an explosion where the ship had been. It sounded like thunder when the shock-wave hit the hull of the Vencume ship.

“Drop out of field!” iLyssa screamed into her radio. “Quick! Quick! No time to leak on this! Drop the field!”

Becca was still staring in disbelief at the debris that had been a freighter.

“We dropped out of field when we came up on the ship,” a voice answered. It was iDana. “You should have known that. Makes it easier for us to hit them.”

Static came across the hand-held. “Explosion...pick-up...no idea...” A redhead was muttering into her helmet.

“I've got the pilots ready for a recovery.” iMala now. “We can just use the magnets we worked into the suits.”

“How long do you think those suits will last?” iLyssa asked after a pause.

“Need a pick-up,” a redhead radioed. “Today would be nice.”

Becca turned to iLyssa. “You might have designed suits that can last, but we don't know what kind of injuries they've received. You have to bring them in quickly.”

iLyssa nodded, but looked like she was still making up her mind. “We've never really done a test on the suits. We don't know the full capability of—“

“Stop being stupid for at least a minute,” iDana radioed. “Where are you? Are you on that deck? Who's with you?”

“I'm sending out the pilots,” iMala answered. “We're reeling in the buzz-landers. I need to see what kind of damage they received and five of them are occupied.”

Becca felt a hard knot growing in her stomach. *She can't leave them out there. They have to come back in. They have to save them.*

“I'm not going to let you waste resources like this.” iDana's voice now had the extra huff of someone walking quickly. “We don't have time to put more in advancement before our next encounter and you can run tests whenever.”

“Seriously,” a redhead radioed. “This is not a good place to be. Bring us in.”

The fighter-ships came into Becca's field of vision. *Oh, praise be. At least iMala understands how grave this is.*

“I'm getting tired of this complete disregard for our mission!” iDana's raised voice was coming over the radio and from just outside the observation deck. “You seem just a little *too* willing to toss away the only means we have to deal with—“

“Big words,” iLyssa answered. “You don't have any vision. We can do *anything* on this ship. We can always make more.”

iDana was on the observation deck now with a hand clamped firmly over her right eye. *It must be fluttering again,* Becca thought.

“I see how it is,” iDana said. “You're showing off. You want to prove to Doctor-Doctor how clever you are. You're being stupid. You think you're so smart that you can just toss people aside and make more.”

“They're getting picked up,” iLyssa countered. “See? Out there? They're picking them up.”

“You're the cat that licks its tail,” iDana answered. “You're too shocked by the fact that the ship was rigged to blow and you're trying to play it off. Face it; you just got bested by a dumb bomb and now you want to take it out on them.”

“This isn't quick,” a pilot radioed. “We have to go too slow for this.”

Enough is enough. Becca ran out of the observation deck and made her way to the pilots' bay. *They're going to fight and argue over something that isn't arguable. This is ridiculous.*

Evie, Gordon, and iMala were already in the control room for the bay.

iMala had set up a large device, pointed at where the ships would come in. “It's my pain-killing ray,” the girl said. “A big signal, as strong as I can get it. For when they...if they...”

“It's OK,” Evie said. “I know what you mean.”

As the ships came back into the bay, Becca could see two red armored girls hanging limply off one of the ships. One of the redheads was missing part of a leg.

“That's all of them,” iMala said, counting faster than the adults.

Once the bay had reached pressure, each redhead pressed something on her suit, dropping to the bay floor. Becca and the others rushed out to check the survivors.

It was aTlanta who had lost the leg. Gordon helped her up.

“I'll kill her,” the redhead hissed. “You can always make more.”

iDana and iLyssa had come into the bay at this point. iDana immediately checked each red-armored girl, looking for problems in the suits, helping them get out of the clunky encasements.

iLyssa stood with her hands on her hips. “Well, I'm glad to see we didn't lose anyone on that run! Looks like the suits did just what they were designed to do.”

A random redhead buried her fist deep into iLyssa's stomach.

“When we say we need a pick-up, you give us a pick-up. Understand? No debate. You don't hesitate when lives are on the line. Got that?”

Doubled over on her hands and knees, iLyssa nodded weakly. She vomited on the floor and nodded again.

“And you're cleaning that up yourself,” the redhead went on. “We're not doing *that* for you.”

aTlanta was leaning on Gordon. “Go grow me a new leg. The suit pinched it off when the foot lost pressure.”

The pilots had come out of their ships and clustered to one side, unsure what their role in the conflict would be.

Another redhead had her hand on iDana's shoulder and was gripping tightly. “Nice suits. Kept us alive. Despite your best efforts.”

The designer's body curled with discomfort. “At least we got you back,” iDana moaned.

Other redhead nodded. “I like that painkiller. That made the landing a little easier.”

“You're welcome,” iMala answered.

“You're just big bullies!” one pilot yelled. “You're just big dumb bullies and we had to save you!”

A redhead took a swing at the shouting pilot. The blonde jumped back so quickly that Becca thought the girl would fall over. Instead, the pilot landed nimbly on her toes.

“It's because you can't breathe...” A redhead was leaning over iLyssa. “That's what happens when you get hit with something sudden-like. That's concussion on your diaphragm. It might not hurt, but you weren't made for combat, were you?”

From her crouched position, iLyssa shook her head.

“And you never go out there and face it, do you?”

Again, iLyssa shook her head.

“And you're not going to pull a stunt like that again, are you?”

iLyssa shook her head vigorously.

iMala was looking at aTlanta's missing leg. “We need to go to the factory and fix that.”

Five other redheads came into the bay, the ones that had been reeled in their landers. One held her hands out to take her sister from Gordon. “We have it from here.”

iMala followed them out.

The redheads stumbled from the bay, stopping momentarily as they walked out of iMala's pain-killing field to roll their shoulders or shake their heads. Becca was unsure if she should follow them to check the damage they had received from the explosion or to stay behind and make sure iLyssa would be able to stand again.

The decision was made when iLyssa finally stood and said, "I guess they rigged it to go once they lost pressure. We'll have to make sure everyone's back in their lander before we reel in next time." She rubbed her stomach. "Where's my tube of spray? I think she left a bruise."

Family, Genus, Species

The garden was producing squash this cycle. Becca made a soup of butternut and pumpkin.

"Not your usual fare," Gordon half-teased her.

Evie was working on her second bowl. "Who cares? It's good, even though it's missing something. I can't put my finger on it."

"Milk," Becca said. "It should be thickened with heavy cream, really. And chicken stock. And we need pepper or chili. I feel limited with what we have on board."

"It's better than any other ship is doing right now." Gordon smiled.

Evie scraped out the bottom of her bowl. "Maybe, but the first ships grew their own. They were pretty big and had hydroponic gardens. I mean, they weren't going to hit some populated port at the end of their journey. They had to survive on what they brought with them or could grow."

Becca watched Evie's long fingers work the spoon. "Don't you have some portman in your background?"

"My great-grandmother." Evie laughed. "Once the field ships started up, she decided it was better to rejoin the Human race. Those others...*ppft*...they're so inbred it's freakish. Sure, they helped start the Shipping Authority, but so what? People who chose to stay on stations like that...it's not natural."

Gordon gave her a half-hug. "Not that you ever had problems with gravity."

Evie frowned and shook him off. "I used to hear all sorts of stories about great-great-grandparents and how they were the first out here. I don't think anyone expected me to try to return to it. My blood is just more subject to centrifugal force than centripetal."

"Centripetal enough," Gordon mused. "Brought you right back to where you started."

"You're a lousy pilot," Evie snapped. "How did you wind up out here?"

Gordon rubbed his right eye. "Rebellion. My mother was a lawyer and my father a psychologist. I could never win an argument with either of them."

"But I'm sure they were fascinating arguments," Becca said.

"And you, *Doctor-Doctor*?" Evie asked with keen eyes. "What were your folks like?"

Becca felt suddenly ashamed. "My mother stayed at home and raised us. I don't know what she did before that or what she would have done afterwards. She had a stroke when I started my residency."

Gordon's face softened. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Brothers and sisters?" Evie asked, glossing past the revelation.

"Eldest brother Mustafa has become the mayor in his town." Becca went through the list. "Older sister Selda teaches math at a secondary school. Younger brother Derin owns a chain of grocery stores. Youngest sister Jale is a fashion designer."

"Middle child," Evie observed. "I'm oldest. How about you?" The question was directed at Gordon.

"Only child," he answered. He brightened somewhat. "What's your middle name? Mine is Jules."

"Safiye," Becca said. "I think there was a doctor named that, so I'm living up to my name."

Gordon nodded. "Names are important. You have to live up to them or what they mean or whatever."

"She who binds," Becca whispered. "Uh, *Rebecca*...that's what it means."

"I think mine means a hill by a lake or a tree on a hill or something," Gordon said.

"A hill by a meadow," Evie corrected.

Becca smiled at Evie. "Why did you have a baby-name book on your stiks?"

Evie looked up from her bowl. "What?"

"One of the pilots told me the Vencume found a baby-name book in your quick-bag," Becca explained. "It's where the girls get their names. You hadn't noticed a pattern?"

“Oh,” Evie answered, half-heartedly. “I meet a lot of people. I like to know where their names come from and what they mean.”

Becca nodded. “You still didn't tell us your middle name.”

Evie frowned. “It's Augustus.”

“You're kidding,” Gordon laughed. “*Augustus?* How'd you get saddled with that?”

Evie shrugged. “I guess my folks wanted a boy.”

* * * * *

Becca awoke the next morning with a stomach-ache.

Later that day, there was vomiting and diarrhea. *It can't be something I ate. We're only eating vegetables and fruits here.* The stomach-ache was turning into abdominal cramping.

It has to be the change in diet, Becca thought. I'm not getting enough magnesium or potassium or something.

Four hours later, Becca could hardly sit up straight. The cramps forced her into a fetal position and there was a fever. She lay curled on the floor of the lavatory and even taking a breath was painful.

It was Uma who found her in that condition. “Doctor is ill,” the girl chittered.

Her sister, Ulan, agreed. “See if she's pink.”

Uma brusquely pulled up Becca's shirt to examine her abdomen. The girl tisked and shook her head. “Pink-belly. Assistant should be notified. Go check Engineer.”

Ulan frowned. “We did not call on Assistant when Toy was ill.”

Becca didn't have the strength to chitter. “Wha...is...pink...what is...?”

“Little worm,” Uma held her fingers centimeters apart and spoke, “Lives in you. Burrows through stomach. Lives in belly-place.”

It's a parasite, Becca thought. It's in the peritoneum. She could not bend down to see her abdomen. *Where did it come from?*

“Doctor is not Toy,” Uma said to her sister. “Doctor will not have pain.”

Buer was suddenly there with a collection of surgical tools. “We will remove it,” the Vencume chittered. “Once out, you will be able to digest it and create anti-bodies.”

Uma and Ulan were on either side, moving towards Becca's arms. “You must sit still,” Ulan warned. “Lay out. Don't fold yourself.”

Buer's hands had turned black and started to massage Becca's abdomen.

The numbness spread quickly and Becca worried her bowels would release what little had been left in them. Now that the pain and cramps had stopped, she could look down. There were bright-red splotches across her belly.

“This may still cause pain,” Buer said. “You must trust us.” The tool looked like something used to core apples.

Uma held one arm; Ulan held the other.

“Doctor must not fear,” Uma purred. “It is only a small amount of time.”

Buer punched the first red cyst with the tool. It did not hurt at first, but then there was a sharp pain. Uma and Ulan held Becca's arms down.

The thing that Buer pulled out her looked like a small, furry tongue. This was placed in a small container. *One, two, three...* Ulan was applying spray on each wound.

They will eat me bit by bit. Becca tried to scream but couldn't draw enough breath.

Five, six, seven...

Becca snapped back into fetal position; it was like the spring from her head to her feet had been stretched to its limit and been let go. She knocked her forehead on her knees and wrapped her arms tight around her middle. *I won't let them back in. No matter how hard they pull, they won't be able to open me up again.*

Becca is dreaming again. Her older brother has just punched her in the stomach. “You're not telling Mom anything,” he says. “That's personal.”

Her younger brother stands on on side and watches.

"Mom said," Becca says between gasps. "You know it's wrong."

"That's between me and god," her older brother says. "And you aren't god."

"You wanna be," her younger brother says. "You're gonna work for god. You wanna be god's spy."

Becca can only kneel on the floor of the kitchen and try to draw a breath.

Her older sister comes into the room at this point and slaps her older brother.

"You think you're so big and tough," her older sister says. "I'll tell Dad and then we'll see how tough you are."

Cold hands on her face woke her up.

"I thought you would die," Uma chitterd. "That would not have served us well."

Becca gave her a nasty look. "I had a nightmare you were stabbing me."

The girl responded with an understanding smile. "We were. We had to get *these* out of you." And, with that, she held up a small container. Inside were seven or eight worms crawling around in some rotten meat.

That rotten meat is me, thought Becca.

"You had pink-belly." Uma held the container protectively. "And it looked like a bad case. You had a fever and the cysts were visible lumps."

Becca felt like gagging. "Cysts? What's going on?"

Uma blinked at her. "Pink-belly is caused by a worm. Its eggs are ingested and it burrows into the lining between the intestines and the muscle wall. You had seven living in there. We had to get them out and treat the wounds so they wouldn't spread. You're very lucky you survived."

Becca ran her hand over the skin on her abdomen. The skin puckered in several different places under the rib cage. For the most part, it was numb.

"The process might have damaged some nerves, but the spray should have healed most of it." Uma stood up, clutching the container. "I'll put these in a safe place for you."

"Just get rid of them," Becca moaned.

Uma shook her head. "You have to eat them. That's the only way we'll be able to prevent it from happening again."

Becca tried to sit up. "Have you had to eat one?"

Uma put a hand on her hip and chittered, "*Everyone* has to eat one. Pink-belly is a juvenile disease, but it can kill an adult in less than two days. If you eat the worm, then your body will be able to metabolize the eggs if you ever ingest more. It's the only real means of inoculation."

"Did Gordon get pink-belly?" Becca asked.

Ulan had come in and smiled broadly. "Toy had pink-belly soon after. We took care of it before the garden." She took the container of worms from her sister. "You eat now," she commanded.

Becca stared at the wriggling things in the bowl. "You had to eat one?"

"Engineer ate," Uma spoke. "You eat."

"No, no..." Becca turned her head away. "They're still moving. I can't eat that."

Ulan took a worm from the container and threw it against the wall.

"No move now. You eat."

Becca managed to get three down. Ulan thought that was enough.

* * * * *

The garden had completed another cycle. Cucumbers and melons were coming out this time.

Becca was doing cold dishes this cycle. aDelaide was cubing a honeydew melon while aLameda carefully sliced cantaloupe. Becca was preparing a pickling solution for some cucumbers.

"I heard you all got sick," aLameda said.

Becca nodded. "I had pink-belly."

aDelaide slowed down her cubing process. "Oh, that's ugly. But you ate your worms, huh?"

"I guess you ate worms early on," Becca said.

"*Cheep cheep*," aLameda mocked. "Like baby birds."

"Do you think we'll ever eat any other kind of meat?" aDelaide asked.

Becca shrugged. "You'd have to raise it and slaughter it. You might try keeping chickens, but they don't do well in zero-g. They can't eat or drink and their hollow bones prevent them from making orbital launches."

aLameda nodded. "We could just bring eggs on board."

"You could do that," Becca agreed. "But you'd have to tend them. Living animals need someone to look after them."

"We take care of all kinds of things," aDelaide said. "We take care of the garden. The Vencume can't do that. It's too dry for them."

"How have they worked out the arrangements for you?" Becca asked, changing the subject. "Do you fill one section and whatever is left over goes into the new one?"

"We have the white arm to ourselves," aLameda said. "The seven of us. We thought about doubling, but...it didn't work out."

"How did you all sort that out?" Becca asked.

aDelaide passed the bowl of seeds to her sister. "They have their ways. It's not really a problem until we meet for practice. We have to work as a team, so it's important. We don't have full camaraderie yet."

"They fought a lot during advancement," aLameda stated. "But they had the others with them; you know, Cerberus and the Herd of Fillies."

The pilots call themselves the Golden Swans, Becca thought. *I wonder...* "So the designers are Cerberus and the pilots are fillies. What do you call yourselves?"

"We're the Red Lions," aDelaide said proudly.

"And what do the pilots call you?"

"Eagles," aLameda said with a hint of disdain.

"And Cerberus is 'The Owls'," aDelaide added.

"And you can't forget the Crows," aLameda laughed. "Carrion Crows."

Becca nodded. *Owls and eagles and swans, oh my.* "You all have your own names for each other. You don't use each others' actual names?"

aDelaide crossed her arms. "What are we suppose to call them? Designers? Pilots? We aren't Vencume. We don't call people by function."

* * * * *

A lifeboat with six human survivors was spotted the next day. It wasn't from one of the ships on the list.

Evie insisted that she and Becca be the ones that greeted the lifeboat once it was brought on board. "We have to show that we aren't criminals of some sort."

Buer and iSkandar were hesitant to allow it.

"This is a Vencume ship," iSkandar stated. "Humans will want Vencume to greet them."

"This is hardly a Vencume ship anymore," Evie argued. "This is a Tzikzik ship. Aren't the girls in charge?"

Buer had flickered from dark blue to light green. "If that is the case, ask them who will do the greeting."

In the corridor, Evie grabbed Becca's sleeve and pulled her to one side. "We're going to go do this, no matter what anyone says. These people have been on a lifeboat too long to even *try* to wrap their heads around the girls."

"We're still wanted criminals," Becca protested. "That might not go as smoothly as you'd like."

"Just come with me," Evie countered. "You'll see."

They hurried to the bay where the lifeboat had been brought on. Evie threatened the two Vencume who were there. "Get out of here or I'll break your hands."

Once the Vencume had cleared out, Evie banged on the hull: *two, three, five, seven....*the accepted greeting of civil-kind.

"We don't have suits!" came a shout from inside the ship.

"OK!" Evie yelled back.

The woman that opened the hatch was an obvious Wainwright. Becca noted the widely-spaced eyes, dark skin, and thick hair. *They really are everywhere, aren't they?*

“I thought this was a Vencume ship,” the woman said.

“It is.” Evie offered her a hand.

“Captain Bernice Wainwright.” The woman introduced herself. “The freighter *Tong Defu*. We were going to Leonis-83.” *She's going by the book on this. The shock of it all is going to hit soon.*

Besides this Captain Wainwright, there was her husband and chief engineer (a Pritam Singh), his sister and navigator (Dristi), Bernice's brother and pilot (Phillip), the chief steward (Marinka Wrengel, who wore shoes that looked like gloves, with long toes exposed), and a second officer (Thomas Randi).

They also had the body of Bernice's cousin and second pilot (Jamie). Becca examined Jamie's body. There was a black gash across his back.

“They slashed him just as he came into the lifeboat,” the pilot Phillip said. “Some kind of poison. He gasped and that was it.”

“We only just got away,” second officer Thomas said. “It's been three days.”

“Did anyone else get stung?” Becca asked.

Captain Wainwright stiffened. “My doctor got it on the face. It killed him instantly. He never made it to the boat. They chased us.”

Evie was examining the lifeboat. “Was it only the...eight of you?”

Pritam answered. “We also lost our junior engineer and three loadmen.”

Jamie's face was frozen in an agonized rictus. The toxin had been painful and quick; a radically different effect than Becca had seen from the redheads in the sick-bay.

The survivors were shaken and looking a little dehydrated.

“We'll see about recovering your ship and getting you the rest of the way,” Evie said, matter-of-factly. “We can feed you for now and give you a place to sleep, I think. We're working on this Tzikzik threat.”

The steward, Marinka, placed a long hand on Becca's shoulder. “What are they?”

“It's a Vencume experiment that got out of hand,” Evie explained. “We're taking care of it.”

“Why are there Humans on a Vencume ship?” the navigator Dristi asked. “We've heard stories about a couple of Vencume spies. You're saying that Vencume are responsible for this, but that you're going to fix it. Doesn't that seem a little convenient?”

Becca stood away from Jamie's body. “It's a very long story to explain how we're here and what's going on. Please, I'm terribly sorry that you've been involved in this. The Vencume made a mistake and they're trying very hard to fix it. We only want to help.”

“You're Dr. Tabib,” chief engineer Pritam Singh said. “The Shipping Authority said you were a spy. This is some kind of trap.”

The survivors of the *Tong Defu* clustered together and held each other.

How much they look like Vencume! See how they run their hands over each other.

“Trust us or don't,” Evie snapped. “I'm done with proving to people who I am or what I am, but we're going to get your ship back and drop you off where you belong. If we'd wanted you dead, you'd be dead. We gain *nothing* by lying to you.”

The steward, Marinka Wrengel, stepped forward. “Been out three days with a body in tight. Glad to have spin again. If you say a thing, and you do a thing, I'm with.”

Bernice looked angry and backed towards the life-boat. “Wrengel might be, but I can't risk the crew; there are too few of us.”

Evie turned to say something, but Gordon came in with iMala, oCtavia, and aLameda. He was all smiles and held his arms wide to the survivors of the *Tong Defu*.

“We are glad that you have made it! We were worried that we would never find a survivor!” He started to shake hands vigorously. “Gordon Gorsky. You may have heard of me. I was the junior pilot on the *Tong Dizhou*. You're a Wainwright, right? We were flying with Wainwrights when this whole thing started. Maybe you know them? Captain David Wainwright? Oh? You don't know them?”

“I do know them,” Bernice said. “He's an uncle of mine.”

“Mine as well,” Phillip said. “We know them well.”

“You have another cousin, you know,” Gordon went on. “Jason had a son, did you hear? Stephen.”

Bernice's eyes watered a bit. “I hadn't heard that.”

“They're on the *Jiang Gong*, along with David, Stella, Judith, and Paul.” It was like he was presenting them with a new ship and month's vacation somewhere warm. “So! You're going to the Lion? How about we get you to Big Bear for now? How long were you out?”

Phillip looked a little dazed. “We were three months in. We had another to go. We only got the bursts from the Shipping Authority about—”

Gordon took the man's hand and turned him to the three girls. “Let me introduce you. You've heard about Tzikzik, right? Here's three versions of a Tzikzik-fix. They're going to recover your ship. Girls, introduce yourselves.”

iMala bent her knees a bit. “I'm iMala. I'm a designer. We...we make things that work.”

“I'm oCtavia,” the blonde said. “We're fast pilots.”

aLameda clicked her heels and bowed. “aLameda. My team uses hand-to-hand combat and we recover ships. iMala and the others make our guns.”

“They make our ships, too,” oCtavia added.

“Say, you're a portman, aren't you?” Gordon asked the steward, Marinka. “I can tell by your shoes. We had a Pegger steward on our ship. This must be rough on you. We have lower-spin areas if you get too worn out.”

The woman pointed at her crew with a long toe. “I flew with them. I stay with them.”

“Well, you're going to be sharing quarters with aLameda and her crew while we get this sorted out. Say, aLameda, why don't you show them where that is so they can get cleaned up? oCtavia, be a sweetie and get them something to eat. These are tired people and they need to rest up and get sorted.” He pointed at Captain Bernice. “You want to let folk know what's going on? Come with me and we'll get a burst sent. Leonis-83, you said? That's a long trip. Is it true what they say about the beaches there?”

Bernice shook her head a little. “I think. I...I don't spend much time on the planet.”

Gordon wrapped an arm around her and led her and the rest of her crew out of the bay. “I've heard some wonderful stories about things there. The sunsets cannot be beat....”

* * * * *

Becca had an opportunity to speak with Dristi later. The navigator was delighted to see the observation deck and the two watched the rolling sections of ship.

“They look like storm clouds,” Dristi said.

Becca nodded. “Evie says it looks like the ocean.”

“That meal we had,” the navigator looked out under the ship. “Fresh lettuce? Tomatoes? How do you manage it?”

“We have a garden,” Becca explained, smiling to herself. “We eat a lot of aubergine. Squash...”

“It must be nice to have a garden actually *on* the ship,” Dristi said. “What was that meat? Was it a kind of fish?”

Becca had to pause before answering. *You can't tell them you just feed worms so they won't get sick.* “Yes, something like that.”

“It was delicious, whatever it was,” Dristi said. She paused before continuing, as if the next thing she would say would cause offense, “Those girls we're with...are they Human?”

Becca waffled a bit. “Genetically, yes. The Vencume have made some adjustments, but they made them to fight the Tzikzik. They're doing all of this for us. The first were—”

Dristi cut her off. “I'm sorry; I'm not going to absorb everything you're saying right now. This feels like a dream. We thought we were going to die.”

Becca laughed a little. “I know how you feel.”

“When they sent the first burst,” Dristi said, “when we first heard what happened to your ship, there was a lot of confusion. Do we go back? Do we keep going? Then, we heard about other attacks. Then they said that two Vencume spies had escaped. We couldn't believe it. People were talking about a war.”

“I thought we were isolated,” Becca said. “Then I found out we were the first.”

“Rakota...” Dristi sniffed a bit. “Our junior engineer. He turned the ship. He got it away from the lifeboat. I think he's the only reason we...We owe our lives to him.”

Becca nodded.

Dristi sighed, long and faint. "I haven't seen any Vencume on this ship yet. I wish I could meet one. I've never met a Vencume."

"They're strange creatures," Becca said. "There's nothing Human about them, but they—" She laughed. "Some of them remind me of people I knew. Maybe I've just been with them so long. It might be a side-effect of connecting to the Library. I'm not sure."

"Library?" Dristi looked at Becca.

What would happen if she connected? If we take them back and some of them have connected...It only seems right. They might not be here that long, but if they can go back and speak the Vencume language, that might make things easier later. I wonder if...

"I need to discuss something with someone," Becca said. "I don't mean to be rude, but I think it might make things easier for everyone, if you'll...if they'll...I'm sorry. I'll be right back."

Dristi rubbed her neck. "I don't know what's going on."

"Yes." Becca nodded. "I know exactly how you feel. I'll be right back."

* * * * *

Buer and Gordon loved the idea.

"We want to give this to Humans," Buer said. "We will give this to any Human. We can start the process. The Tzikzik are one means, but this is much better."

"It gets the story out," Gordon said. "As long as these folk aren't going to catch any flak from the Authority when they get back, I'd say it was a perfect PR campaign."

"But if they connect," Becca noted, "then they'll know what the danger is. So they'll know if they should keep quiet or let it out."

Buer pink-chuckled. "Gordon already showed them the others. That much of the story has been released."

Gordon gestured to Becca, but referred to both her and Evie. "The moment those two decided they had to meet the boat, I knew it would be better to be completely honest. Half a story only lets someone else write the missing bits. If you're going to give them part, better to hand the whole thing over."

"So, you see how connection might help?" Becca asked. "If they tap into the Library, they're going to get language, some of the history; they'll get a background on why this is happening this way."

Buer blue-nodded. "This will help advance the schedule. Your Authority may not like it, but if there are enough, it cannot stop it. We must do this."

"The Authority already distrusts us." Gordon laced his fingers. "But to get a Wainwright in on it. Oh, they won't be able to hush that up."

"Our Captain Wainwright already knew the Vencume were doing things with DNA," Becca added. "Let's give this one the whole story."

* * * * *

Buer and Penemue were waiting outside the room. Becca and Gordon tried to explain to an unbelieving crew.

Marinka, the portman steward, sat with fingers and toes twitching. Captain Bernice had her hands folded in front of her chin. Pritam and Dristi paced with their hands behind their backs.

It was the second officer, Thomas Randi, who nodded first. "We've always wondered."

Becca opened the door and let the two Vencume in.

Dristi stood shock-still. Her brother steadied her.

"How's this all play, now?" Marinka asked.

Becca explained. The portman woman nodded. *She's got a hungry look. She started flying to get away from the stations and steward was the easiest position to fill. She's out for adventure. She's ambitious. Even if her captain says it's a no-go, she'll still try for it.*

"I'm a go," Marinka said.

Captain Bernice unlaced the fingers she had been breathing into. “No, I'll do it.”

Pritam Singh stepped forward. “If my wife is in, I am as well.”

“If my brother is in,” Dristi said, “then I am.”

“If sibling rivalry is driving this,” the pilot Phillip said, “then I can't let Bernice go alone.”

“We can't risk the entire crew,” Bernice countered.

“It's not really a risk,” Gordon explained. “You'll want to take a nap afterwards, just to let it settle.”

Becca nodded. “I've connected twice, and I was watching when Gordon connected.”

Dristi was staring at the two Vencume in the room. “What's it like?”

It's like a visitation. It's like a dream. It's like a vision. It's like prayer.

“It's like being a child and listening to your grandparents,” Becca said.

“It's like buying fresh fruit in an open-air market,” Gordon said at the same time.

The crew of the *Tong Defu* laughed a little to themselves.

“It's different for everyone,” Gordon stated. Becca nodded.

“Well!” Phillip grinned. “I guess we're all in.”

“There are six of them,” Penemue chittered. “We cannot do more than five at one time. Even that will be difficult. They are too varied for this to be a simple process.”

“What did it say?” Thomas asked.

“It said it can only do five at a time,” Becca said.

“It's only doing five anyway,” Thomas said. “Count me out. I'm not a risk-taker.”

“At least watch the process,” Becca said. “They'll want a control back at the station. You're their witness.”

* * * * *

Penemue appeared as tired as the crew of the *Tong Defu* after the connection.

While the Humans retired to sleep, Becca strolled with the Vencume Librarian. Becca was still humanizing them in her mind, and this one reminded her of a records clerk she had dealt with once.

The head clerk, Ms. Muren, had always looked tired. She was a straight-laced woman, who wore high collars and tailored suits, and hissed at people who wanted information from her. But, she was always able to find it more quickly and with less hassle than any of the friendly, fresh-faced clerks in the office. The hospital staff hated to deal with her, but they knew that if you needed something quickly, Ms. Muren was the one to ask.

Penemue shuffled along the hall. “So much information. Humans are so varied. The portmen... fascinating...after so long...”

“I hope the Library is happy that there's more to give them,” Becca said.

“We will be,” Penemue said. “We will welcome this.”

Becca halted in the hallway. “*Will* be? Didn't you just connect five Humans?”

She thought she saw Penemue smile. “We have connected to them. Now we will give the information to the Library.”

“I thought it was instantaneous.”

“There is no means to do so,” Penemue said. “We hold basic information, but much is held back from us. We will barter soon.”

The two stopped in front of the tiny lift that would go to the Library pod.

“How can you hold so much information?” Becca asked. “You connected Evie to Gordon, me to iMala, these five. How can you hold the whole of Vencume knowledge without some connection to the others?”

Penemue laughed like a dusty Ms. Muren. “Doctor, there are many of us. We take turns out of ocean. We all hold much.”

The Vencume entered the lift.

“There's more than one Librarian?” Becca demanded.

The Vencume made an adjustment to the life control. “We are many.” The doors closed.

* * * * *

The girls recovered the *Tong Defu* the next day. There were no human bodies on board.

Pritam Singh, Evie, iMala, and three redheads went over and did enough repairs to sustain life on the ship. Captain Bernice took the time to talk to Becca and Gordon.

“We know what the risks are,” Bernice said. “So we won't tell the Authority about you yet. They can think this is a strictly Vencume ship for now. We all agreed on that.”

“I'm sorry we put you in that situation,” Gordon said.

The captain shook her head. “No, we needed to know. I have to thank you for the chance to win big on this gamble. I didn't know what we were getting into, but I'm glad we did it.”

“I should thank you for being so open-minded about it,” Becca said. “I hope it helped put you at ease.”

Bernice laughed. “Well, if we're going to be neighbors, we should at least introduce ourselves correctly.”

The massive Vencume ship arrived at Ursus Major-47 with three ships in tow. Besides the *Tong Defu*, there was the collapsed destroyer and the passenger ship. The Shipping Authority was shocked.

“We appreciate these recoveries and are pleased to see there are survivors,” Ursus Major said. Gordon had made adjustments to the translators and it came across much more smoothly.

“We sent these survivors with a new translator,” Mirabilis said. “We hope that this additional information will help in the future. We must thank the crew for this opportunity.”

“Yes, we have the new translator,” the Authority radioed back. “We are copying over the programming and will forward this to our people. You should be aware that we found another two ships that had been pirated. We apologize for any conflict that may have come about during this time period. We see now that this threat is not Vencume. It may look similar, but we see that these are some different creature.”

“Our apologies on this most unfortunate turn of events.” Mirabilis was having only minor difficulties with the translation. “You are finding our attempts at improvement. This should have been an internal concern, but you were involved. We do not wish for any more harm to befall any Humans. “

There was a pause as the Authority parsed what they had just heard. “We are forwarding new coordinates to you. We apologize for this misunderstanding.”

“We hope that this is only a minor problem,” Mirabilis said. The Vencume had turned a light blue. “We only wish for complete understanding in this situation.”

Purpose

The next ship recovered was another passenger ship. There were sixteen Tzikzik and the remains of eighty Humans. The Humans had either been poisoned or torn apart.

Meanwhile, meals were now being taken in shifts. With fourteen redheads, ten blondes, and the others, there was too little room for all the girls to be in the mess-hall at one time. The redheads were first shift, the blondes the second. The Humans and designers were last. The three gray-haired girls now left the bridge to a team of pilots (the old ones) when they left it.

“What I don't understand is why they're pirating ships,” Evie said between bites. “It's like they're shedding members or something. What's the point?”

“It makes sense if you're trying to start a war.” Gordon shoved food around on his plate. “And if you have the means to produce more crew members easily, there's no risk in losing anyone.”

iDana chewed thoughtfully. “So we can't be sure of the numbers.”

“We'll need more people,” iLyssa said.

The other two designers nodded.

“How many does it take to run a ship this size?” Evie asked.

“You can run a bridge with three,” iLyssa said, somewhat defensively. “But the Library can perform the auto-pilot functions. We give them the destination; they get us there. They make the adjustments.”

“You make it sound like the Library is actually running the ship.” Becca laughed.

The three designers did not laugh back.

“OK, so there could be a large number of them,” Gordon said. “How many do you usually encounter on a captured ship?”

iMala smiled at him. “We find anywhere from eight to eighteen. Never more than twenty.”

“And to think, we run those ships on half that,” Becca said.

“It was only more than ten on the passenger ship.” iDana glowered. “It must have taken that many to throw a hundred people off. Well, the manifest said a hundred passengers, but we didn't find any.”

Becca felt her meal trying to force its way back into the open.

“No wonder the Shipping Authority was so upset,” Evie said, staring at her plate.

“There's still the matter of the first ship,” iMala said. “The one that started the project. We have no idea how many there are. It could be crawling with them.”

Gordon nodded. “Then it would make more sense to pirate supplies. It may be getting too crowded.”

“They're starving,” iDana mused.

“But they aren't taking cargo,” Evie pointed out. “They're just abandoning their people.”

iLyssa stared at the ceiling. “We haven't seen any changes from ship to ship. It's the same batch from before. If they had communicated with the main ship that has the factory, they might have tried something new. All the ones we've seen are the same basic design.”

“They still haven't figured out an internal skeleton,” iMala said.

“Or proper muscles for locomotion!” iDana almost laughed. “They're still using a hydraulic vascular system. It makes immobilizing them pretty easy.”

“The new Reds taught us that,” iMala said. “They're using a lot less ammo. We're getting much more efficient.”

“What's our death-count at so far?” iLyssa asked callously. “Are we including that destroyer we hit?” iDana asked.

“The *ZhengYang* or the other one?”

“What other one?” Becca asked.

“The one that had *her*.” iLyssa pointed at Evie. “We left them alive.”

iDana rolled her eyes back and fished for a fact. “A destroyer has a standing crew of thirty.”

iMala was counting on her fingers. “So sixty on the two destroyers and four on the *Tong Defu*. Twelve on the *Tong Gu*, then the *Jiang Zhen* had one-hundred-and-eighty passengers and a crew of fifteen. *Jiang Ping* had eighty passengers and a crew of twelve.”

“So...minus our thirty, three-thirty-three,” iLyssa nodded. “That's not too bad.”

Evie frowned. “That's still three-hundred families that have to mourn a lost loved one.”

iMala shook her head. “No, eighteen were Wainwright. We even had twelve different Trechantiris.”

“We only had that one portman,” iLyssa went on, “and she lived. We can't speak for the passengers, but the bag wasn't as mixed as you'd like to think. Most of them were families traveling together.”

iDana nodded. “At most, it's eighty families.”

“That doesn't make it better,” Becca stated.

“There's no dearth of Humans in the universe,” iLyssa said. “We're adaptable and can survive in almost any environment. It's part of why the Vencume are so willing to use our model. They can't withstand the same low temperatures or extreme gravitational stresses we can.”

“A Human can get shot and keep moving.” iDana grinned between bites.

* * * * *

Becca was doing laundry with aLima and aSabi when Renatus, the head scientist from the prior ship, called on her.

“Why does Doctor perform such menial tasks?”

“I find them calming and fulfilling,” Becca answered.

“Doctor should have joined us in advancement with Red Humans.”

Becca left the laundry room with Renatus. *He would not have come down here just to see what I was doing. There has to be a reason.*

The Vencume still reminded her of her old anatomy professor, Mesut, whom Becca loathed. He told her once she would never amount to anything unless she could give the Latin name for every part in the human

body. Out of spite, she learned the Arabic names Ibn al-Nafis had used in his “Commentary on Anatomy in Avicenna's Canon”. She almost failed Professor Mesut's class and never won his approval.

Renatus shuffled beside her. “We are close to *Alpha-Omega-Epsilon-Cee-Eks-Vee-Two-Thirty-Six*. The new Tzikzik will try to recover it, but they will use the methods they have used before. These will not be successful.”

He must be talking about...about what? A location? “What is...?”

“It is the ship where I was stationed,” Renatus said. “It is where I started my project. They will try the same tactics, but these will fail. They will be outnumbered. We cannot advance enough new Tzikzik in time.”

Becca probed a place in the back of her head. *AQE-CXV-236. AQE is a laboratory ship. CXV is the area where the ship was deployed. 236 is the ship itself.*

“Do you want me to try to dissuade them?” she asked.

Renatus was an agitated purple. “You must be prepared to evacuate. You must take Engineer, First, Second, and Third Human with you. We have a ship prepared for you in the white arm of section eight. Your Shipping Authority is following us. They will pick you up. If we must, we will destroy both ships. This has been discussed with the Library.”

Becca's face flushed. She felt like she had just been caught cheating at a test.

Renatus dragged a hand across her. “Doctor is upset. You cannot dissuade the new Tzikzik. This project is still a failure. The final battle will show it. You must be ready to evacuate.”

“What about you?” Becca asked. “Do you have a ship ready? Are you going to cut-and-run as well?”

“Our records are on the ship we have prepared for you,” Renatus answered.

Becca felt the blood leaving her neck and face. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Engineer is responsible for the current *zikzikkiti*,” Renatus said. “Any additional information passed on that route will lead to more confusion.”

There was that word again. The twins had used it once. “What is a *zik-zik*...?”

“It is an action-to-advance-or-improve-a-decision,” Renatus answered. “Our current *zikzikkiti* was caused when Engineer told the new Tzikzik that the project was to be ended. The one on *AQE-CXV-236* was caused by similar circumstances.”

* * * * *

It was two days later when Becca was called to the bridge. The girl who took her there, aCadia, was already in her amour.

Evie and Gordon were waiting when Becca arrived.

“Glad you could make it,” Evie said. “Thought you'd like to witness the final chapter.”

“This is only another chapter,” iMala said, giving the Vencume-skin screen a coat of nutrient. “We hope to have many more after this.”

“There it is.” iDana pointed. “There's the source.” A large shape was taking form on the screen.

Becca looked at the massive ship before them and realized that the ship she was on was just as large. *That's it. That's AQE -CXV-236. Can I get the others to the escape-pod in time if I have to? How will I get them out past the designers? Are we going to take them with us? How many will Evie try to save before all this is over?*

“That's the one that started it all,” iLyssa said. “It launched the first escape-pod; it attacked the *Tong Dizhou*.”

“It's like going home, in a way,” iMala observed.

Ship 236 started an assault of hurled projectiles. It looked like junk that had been scrounged at the last minute: tanks, half of an escape pod, something that looked like armor plating. Most of it missed; but, what did hit, bounced away.

“That's stupid and desperate.” iDana tiskied. “This is a large ship and prepared for assaults like that.”

Now, ship 236 started to curl, helix-like, on itself. iLyssa made adjustments on the control panel. “This is where it gets interesting. You're going to see just how we do things.”

As they came alongside the other, their ship started its own spiral-curl. The double-helix swiveled through the void of space, tightening in. They weren't even going to bother with hurled projectiles, but were out to physically over-power the ship with the craft itself.

The fighters deployed in a smooth arc; Becca saw them lazily exit one bay and gnat about the wrestling match that was the two main behemoths. Fighters were deployed from the other side, but they were an older design that moved much more slowly and were easily picked off. An easy massacre played out before them, accompanied by a complicated melody of ten notes that fell over each other and danced through careful harmonics. No pilots would be lost to this fight.

The mammoth Vencume ships started to change texture. Each section spread out long, spiked fins. Becca could only see the other, but imagined both vessels undergoing the same transformation. The long barbs aimed slowly at the flank of the ship beside it, scraping the side of the vessel alongside it. The spirals tightened even more, each threatening to crush the other like a boa.

“We might lose spin in a couple sections,” iDana said. “The Library has been warned.”

“That's the first thing to disable,” iMala said as she launched one of her field collapsers at the head of the other ship. It rapidly advanced the sensor array and bridge in a slow, painful implosion.

The child smiled at the contained effect. “I said I could control the radius.”

Ship 236 stopped its physical assault and the texture smoothed. The tightening spiral relaxed.

Now, the buzz-landers started their deployment. They were tiny in comparison with the other ship, but they hit their target in two neat groups of five and one of four. It was the virus invasion of a cell; a sudden spray of molten metal announced the breach of the hull. Becca knew that inside the ship, holes had opened in the floor of the outermost ring and vengeful, red combatants had sprung from the depths. It must have looked like devils leaping out of hell itself.

The redheads chanted as well, announcing themselves to the universe and anyone who cared to listen.

*There are no months, no weeks, no days
Our seasons are by will alone
So where we lived affects our ways
A ship has been our only home
There is no sun to go around
We know only one sky
But now our feet are on your ground
Best just lay down and die!*

iLyssa laughed.

“There's something else happening,” iDana noted.

A pod passed by the connection point between two of the sections on the other ship. It found an entry point and attached itself.

“Who launched that?” iLyssa demanded.

The pod fell away from the point, a hatch closing.

Becca felt a moment's panic. *Was that the escape pod Renatus wanted me to use?*

“It's the Vencume!” iLyssa yelled. “They're going to the other side. They think they can escape just like that?” She gripped the hand-held and barked into it, “aRlene! Start working back. We just had some defectors cross over.”

“To where?” the redhead asked.

iMala was checking a display. “It's the Library on our ship.”

“We'll mop it up when we're done here,” aRlene answered. There was an angry rattling sound in the background and a *ffpt ffpt ffpt* of bolts being fired. “Things are a little hairy here right now.”

“Go handle it now!” iLyssa screeched. “I don't want them getting away like that!”

“And they won't,” aRlene said over the noise on her end. “Our hands are full right now. Once we finish with this, we'll deal with that.”

iLyssa was fuming.

aRlene's voice crackled over the radio. "There's something happening over here. Sections of ship are closing off."

"That's standard defense protocol," iDana answered. "They should have done that first."

"There's waves of them over here," aRlene responded. "Why would they cut off their own supply line?"

"Where are you?" iLyssa shouted into the hand-held. "Are you together?"

aDelaide responded this time. "We're pinned in section three, red arm. Five of us here. They just keep coming."

"aRlene here; similar situation in white arm. Five on this team, no idea how many of the others. We've never seen them in numbers like this."

Another voice came over. "aNnora in blue arm. Four of us here. We're going to run out of ammo if this keeps up."

"You didn't tell us there were this many!" aDelaide shouted over the radio.

aNnora come on again. "It's a good thing the sections closed off, we only have a few more to deal with."

"This is only one section, too," aRlene responded. "How many in the others?"

iLyssa turned off her radio. "We need to handle this pod issue."

"You could always send the twins," iDana offered. "Give them a couple guns and have them go over there. They like those kinds of odds."

"I need to send someone who knows what they're doing," iLyssa hissed. "You can't trust those two to anything when—"

Gordon pointed at the other ship. "Look."

Connection linkages were giving way. The other ship was breaking apart, one section at a time.

"Is that because you advanced the bridge?" Evie asked.

"We're losing spin over here!" aDelaide yelled. "The lights are going out."

"You're all still in section three?" iDana asked.

"We're in the Library," someone chittered. "We've convinced them to loosen the sections on the condition we retrieve them."

"Ulan, is that you?" Evie asked.

"Uma, actually, but Ulan is with me. We've spoken with the Library directly," the girl chittered over the radio, "but we have to absorb their section. They have a lot of information that they want to share with ours."

iLyssa was seething. "You should have told us what you were doing. You could have gotten someone killed."

"Unlikely," Ulan chittered back. "Call the Reds back; the hull is breached already and once they leave in the buzz-landers, that section will depressurize. The other sections will eventually die now that they're cut off. You can send the Yellows out to pick off any pods they fire."

"You also want to retrieve this garden," Uma chittered. "They've been doing things to the plants here that produce a higher yield. The Library has the information, but we can save ourselves the bother."

The twins giggled over the radio.

"Oh," Uma added. "Let Librarian know what's going on. The Library will want to be informed so there's no redundancy. We'll need to move quickly on this before the two sections cool down too much."

Ulan laughed a little. "You might want to take a swim once all this is done."

"You did this behind my back!" iLyssa shouted into the radio.

A reedy giggle. "You would have sent us anyway, eventually. We've just saved you a lot of trouble."

"This was our fight!" iDana snapped.

Uma's calm voice chittered over the radio. "You wanted a fight; we wanted a victory."

"Sorry to steal your thunder," Ulan added.

* * * * *

Penemue reported later that the Library had feared that the other collection had been lost and welcomed the addition. The Vencume was overjoyed that an agreement had been found.

Although, really? Why call it Penemue now? Becca wondered. There are so many of them. Can I still call it that if I know it might not be the same one? Is that why Vencume don't use names? How many iSkandars

are there? How many Buers? Is Penemue just the member of the Library who gets to walk around?

Two tugs were sent out to bring in the other library and garden. They coaxed the free-floating sections until they were alongside their counter-parts.

The operation of reconnection was going to require more precision. The main Library loosed the connection between itself and the rest of the ship, breaking the craft in two and leading to a few tense moments while the main body of the ship was cut off from the engines. The tugs nudged the second Library section into position and connection linkages reached out to clasp on to one another. Once the spin had started, a similar procedure was used to connect the second garden. The new Library was now in position between the old one and the gardens. The second garden sat before the first—between the first and the rest of the ship.

“They will need time to themselves,” Penemue said. “There is much to discuss.”

iDana did not welcome the new additions as warmly as the others. “If a Library can do that to a ship, then it means they're the ones in control. We don't have any work-around.”

* * * * *

Gordon was in the mess-hall with the ten pilots afterwards. They were singing:

*God bless them all
I was told we'd cruise the skies in the dark and cold
We'd fire no guns, shed no tears
Now we're broken souls in a Vencume pier,
The last of Wainwright's Privateers⁵*

“Very nice,” Becca slowly clapped. “Now teach them *Wild Blue Yonder*.”
Gordon laughed. “I'm sure the Reds could teach them better lyrics.”
aVari came out of the kitchen.

*Flying high and low and fast
Twirling madly through the stars
The enemy's not meant to last.
The glory, soon, will all be ours.*

It was oRenda who sang the words back first. The other nine pilots found the melody and sang aVari's words in rounds.

aRlene entered the room and threw in another verse:

*Stomp along across the sky
Or thunder through some poor ship's deck
Any method can apply
Just knock them off and leave a wreck.*

The pilots picked up the lyrics and sang along in rising and falling scales. aVari sat down and beat out a rhythm on the table with flat hands.

aVariella came into the room and slapped the table with her sister.

*We've got a ship, we all have names
We showed those nasty beasts what-for!
Burning brighter than the flames
Of any sun, and then some more!*

5 Gordon has re-written “Barrett's Privateers“ by Stan Rogers. This is a fine shanty if you have a rich bass voice.

Other redheads had come in for dinner. They clapped and snapped their fingers or beat their thighs or the table and the rhythm became more complicated and the blonde pilots took lyrics and sang them through one scale, then the next. The melody and harmony fell over itself; one group chanting or singing a verse, the others playing with more complicated tones.

iDana came in from the corridor. She scanned it all with narrowed eyes and the others stopped their singing and clapping.

“You're all having a good time,” iDana said, pacing the floor.

“We were!” a pilot called out. The others laughed.

iDana raised her brows and crossed her arms:

*You stop your fun on my account.
I understand; my dour demeanor
Would bring a frown to any face
And stop any song or dance cold.
I stand alone and look upon you
And see myself reflected back so many times.
So, now, what should I do?
We are all cast from the same mold
And all of us raised in the same place.
I'm just like you, maybe meaner,
But still your sister, by some amount.*

The redheads suddenly stood up, whooped, and stomped the floor. iDana smiled and joined in with the others. Becca laughed and clapped. Gordon kept time with a thigh slap. It went on like this for some time.

Prestidigitation

Two more freighters were recovered that week and towed to Leonis-83. Now that there would be no more attacks, it was simply a matter of mopping up what mess was left.

Mirabilis was discussing this with the Shipping Authority. The new translators had been implemented and the conversation was smoother than before, with no false starts or corrections to be made. Becca and Gordon were still on hand, in case there needed to be any clarification.

“We are overjoyed that there will be no additional attacks,” Leonis said. “We have brought in an additional three ships ourselves, so it would appear that only four more are in need of recovery. We are sending the locations to you.”

“We are overjoyed that we have been able to so swiftly handle this situation,” Mirabilis answered. “We hope that this unfortunate time has reached an end and that the relations between our peoples can be repaired.”

“Indeed,” Leonis agreed. “I must thank the efforts of the Vencume fleet that was sent on this mission. Tell me, how many ships did it take?”

“Tell them five,” Gordon whispered.

“The five arms of the Vencume,” Mirabilis said, “have reached across the galaxy and the five fingers of the Human hand have received it. May this symbol mark our new partnership.”

The Shipping Authority paused for a moment while the statement was translated.

“May this new *Khamsa* ward off all who attack us,” Leonis finally answered. “Five books, five pillars, five cloaks, five symbols. There is a God that has given you such meaning. We shake hands firmly.”

Becca quickly translated the meaning to Mirabilis. The Khamsa is a pendant shaped like a human hand with an eye in the palm and is supposed to serve as some protection to the wearer. Becca had once received a pair of earrings made of silver and turquoise in the shape of Khamsas. It was the last birthday present her husband gave her before his death. *We found the one person on that station who's religious...or superstitious.*

“Is shaking hands still the Human custom when they greet or agree?” Mirabilis asked.

“May this be our first true handshake,” Leonis said. “We wish you peace and prosperity and may our peoples never quarrel again.”

* * * * *

Becca caught up with Gordon in the hall. "Why did you say to tell them five?"

"It seemed a better number than one," he answered. "We don't want them to know that we're the only ones taking care of this, do we? It also makes it look like the Vencume are actually involved in this."

"I guess that makes sense." Becca nodded.

"I think what *is* remarkable is that fact that we *are* the only ship handling this," Gordon went on. "What I mean to say is, why aren't there other Vencume ships involved? Do you think our cover story about this being a rouge ship wasn't too far off the mark?"

He's right. This one and the other are the only two ships that have been present for any of this. Many of the same Vencume are involved. Sure, we're on the outskirts, but Humans have been dealing with Vencume for a long time.

"Didn't the Vencume give us the borrowed time field?" Gordon asked.

"We gave them wheat and rice," Becca answered. "It's the colony/colonizer relationship. We give them raw materials and they give us technology." Her face felt hot.

"We've been set up," Gordon said.

Becca shook her head. "No, that can't be the case. Why do something like that?"

"They've always been interested in our affairs," Gordon whispered. "And they helped us spread out all over the galaxy. Wasn't Peg-51 a Vencume outpost? They just *gave* it to us; everyone knows that. Now we're here, bustling about with technology we've never seen before that's going to push our spread even further. We're making it from one system to another in a matter of *weeks*, not months. They're putzing around with our DNA and making..." He waved his arms. "...People that can live in *any* environment. They know how to suck information out of our heads and how to implant it. You can't say they just want to...to serve man, now can you?"

"There's more than one Penemue," Becca whispered. "That means that any information that is given to us is from one individual. It's not a direct connection to the Library. Our connections have been directed."

Gordon nodded and rubbed his chin. "So we only have limited access to what's really going on."

"And," Becca added, "Buer tried a direct connection with me once. She said that they had to pass on as much information as quickly as possible, like there was some kind of time limit. They all keep talking about the 'schedule'. I'm starting to doubt that this ship was ever headed to the Vencume home-world, where ever that is."

"Buer and Penemue are the names of demons," a voice behind them said.

Becca and Gordon turned to see Evie leaning up against a wall.

"Buer taught man medicine," Evie explained. "Penemue taught mankind the art of writing with ink and paper... *and thereby many sinned from eternity to eternity and until this day. For man was not created for such a purpose*⁶."

"But it was iMala who gave them those names," Becca noted.

"*And Penemue taught the children of men the bitter and the sweet and the secrets of wisdom,*" Evie quoted. "She found something in there and named it."

"How long have the Vencume known about Humans?" Gordon asked. "Since before recorded history?"

"That's stupid." Becca snickered. "You can't say they've been directing Humankind this entire time. You heard the girls. They said the Vencume didn't know about internal skeletons until recently."

"Maybe not that long," Evie rubbed her right eye. "But this is the kind of divine intervention that people used to talk about in legends. We're making a myth right now."

"So," Gordon mused. "Are these angels or demons?"

"Neither." Evie shrugged. "Because we're smarter than that. We're just fitting them into our own vocabulary. We grew up afraid of the dark and now we spend months in it, aiming...for what?"

"We're looking for the back-door to Eden," Becca answered. "We do it because we have to."

Evie stared at Becca a long time before narrowing her eyes. "Either/or, here we are. What are we going to do about it?"

“Renatus told me about an escape pod before we did that raid on *AQE -CXV-236*,” Becca said. “He also said that the Shipping Authority is following us and—“

“Alpha-Omega-what?” Gordon asked.

“The other Vencume ship,” Evie answered. “We’re on *158*, if that gives you any idea how many of these there are.”

“The Shipping Authority has been following us.” Becca tried again. “If they already know it’s only one ship, then why are they playing along?”

“They can’t be following us,” Evie said. “We’re moving at an different rate. They might be transmitting information between themselves, but we would have picked it up.”

“Who is ‘we’?” Gordon asked.

Evie gave him an odd stare. “The ship, of course.”

“Right...” Becca was staring at the ceiling. “The Library might be picking something up and not letting the girls know.”

“Which means...” Evie had gone pale. “The Library might also be transmitting something and no one would ever know.”

* * * * *

On her way back to her quarters, Becca turned a corner and heard the three designers discussing the recovery of the remaining ships. She quickly turned back behind the corner and listened to them.

“Two of these are frigates,” iDana said. “That means that they’re going to have weaponry, so we might have to use a collapser on them.”

“I dislike using it,” iMala said. “We’re not getting real information when we do that.”

“I want to bring one in alive and question it,” iLyssa stated. “This next ship, I want one alive. If we’re going to make them extinct, we should at least figure out what makes them tick.”

iDana sounded worried. “That Library broke its own ship apart. Now we have two of them. They’ve been discussing things a long time.”

“The ship still works,” iMala said. “They’re not going to kill everyone off.”

“We still have two million Vencume on this ship that could turn on us at any minute,” iLyssa said. “It’s obvious that we’re only here by their good graces. It’s not like we can reprogram the door.”

“Actually...” iDana had a far-away sound. “We can. We all have the same basic DNA. If we recode the doors to the sequence that makes our shape, then nothing with more than two arms would be able to open the door.”

“Or it requests some of our hemoglobin.” iLyssa dropped to a conspiratorial tone. “So if it asks for an iron sample from us, no Vencume would be able to get through.”

“The Library cannot live without the rest of the ship,” iDana said. “It needs the heat we provide and food. It has to be kept fed and if we can control their access to that, we can control them.”

iLyssa chuckled a bit. “We can make some adjustments to the doors and the lifts. I don’t see that being a major issue.”

“It will affect our new screen,” iDana stated.

“I don’t care about that!” iLyssa said. “I want a live Vencume Tzikzik. If we have to change the weapons again, so be it. Let’s see if we can get an energy weapon of some sort. It has to cauterize the wound. We’ll take off the black hand and bring the thing in for questioning.”

* * * * *

Becca took the threat of reprogrammed doors very seriously.

Everyone was busy with something, so Becca took the pod out to the factory. She knew that if doors were designed to look for Evie’s DNA, she would be unable to get from point to point as she needed. She wasn’t about to try to graft on a new hand, but there might be another way around it. Pulling up the information from the Library allowed her to set a tank to her specifications. *This is the most clandestine thing I’ve ever done.*

It was also her way of warning the Library of what might be on the horizon. She couldn't communicate with them directly, but they would be able to extrapolate the purpose of what she was making.

Once they were done, Becca slipped the four gray things in her pocket. *One for me, one for Gordon, and two extra for...for who? iSkandar? Buer? Maybe just as extras.*

Gordon was reading something on one of the comms when Becca came into the room. "Where is everyone?" she asked.

He shrugged in response.

Becca reached into her pocket. "I need to give you this. Try to keep quiet about it." She palmed him a fleshy gray slug.

"What is this?" Gordon took the four-centimeter thing from Becca. "It's soft."

"That's your key," Becca explained in hushed tones. "Hold that up to the door-panels when you want to get in and out. Let me know if it wears out and I'll see if I can grow you a new one."

Gordon obviously felt revulsion handling it. "This is because my hands are still my own, right?"

Becca leaned in. "It's because you aren't Evie or an Evie clone. Please, hold on to that and try to not be obvious about it. I don't know if we'll need it, but it might come in handy."

Gordon slipped the object reverently into his pocket, like a dead mouse.

* * * * *

iMala had a new gun two days later that produced an invisible beam that could cut through most anything. aCadia and aTlanta helped test the new device.

The effect was two cauterized stumps in three seconds. iSkandar was livid at having to re-attach two limbs in one day. Becca helped, but it did not make him any calmer.

"Gentle Blue is not so gentle," iSkandar rattled. "This is not a good test. There are better ways to gauge efficacy."

Becca was working on re-attaching aCadia's left leg. One of iMala's pain killing devices was aimed at the girl's head.

"It didn't hurt when it happened," aCadia said. "It was just a moment of heat and it fell off. I was more mad at falling over."

aTlanta watched iSkandar stitch her right arm back in place. "We're just helping out before the next recovery. I'm not happy that it happened—don't get me wrong—but we needed to know if it would work."

"It's still an unnecessary risk," iSkandar chided. "We won't always be here to put these things back on."

iMala was pacing back and forth, rubbing her right eye. "I didn't think it would work that quickly. I'm sorry that we caused any trouble."

"I'm still going to discuss this with you later," aTlanta growled. "What if it had been my head?"

"I said I was sorry," iMala mewed.

Becca pinched aCadia's big toe and the girl wiggled it.

"If you need test matter, just ask us," Becca said, applying spray to the attachment point. "We can make some for you in the factory. This is too dangerous."

iMala looked at the point of tears. "I needed to test it! iLyssa was yelling at me to make it work."

aTlanta was making a slow fist. "Test it on her next time. See if you can cauterize her mouth shut."

aCadia's leg was back on and the blood rushed to the limb, slowly turning it pink. "See if you can stand on that," Becca directed.

"Pins and needles!" aCadia cursed and wobbled. "It's like it was asleep for an hour."

"I feel it," aTlanta said, wiggling fingers. "I might have to beat something just to get the feeling back."

iMala was already crying. "I said I was sorry! It won't happen again, I promise."

* * * * *

iSkandar was still an agitated purple as he and Becca left the lab.

"This is not a good risk," he chittered. "They are becoming more a danger to each other."

Becca nodded with her hands clasped behind her back.

“This is becoming unacceptable,” iSkandar went on.

“What was it like on the other ship?” Becca asked, trying to change the subject.

iSkandar shifted to a bright magenta and there was a flicker of some pattern across his skin. *I've asked an upsetting question. He's blushing, or fuming, or deciding if he can tear my head off and get away with it. He's surprised and threatened and trying to figure out how to respond.*

“We did not have this infighting.” iSkandar shifted back to a calm blue. “I worked with my team, knowing we were an improvement over the old design. Our nervous system was adjusted for quicker response and greater capacity. Blue design was to stay analytical at all times. I know my team is dead now.”

“I'm sorry.” Becca ran a hand down iSkandar's side.

The Tzikzik returned the gesture. “It is through no fault of Doctor. We knew our project was to end because there had been no improvement. My capacity is there, but it cannot be used for what we intended. I am better suited for Library duty. I am sure there are more of my design in the new Library. We store information and process it more quickly.”

But you still don't use my name, do you? That's why you're everywhere the action is. You're trying to collect as much as you can.

“The *zikikkiti* came quickly after it was decided to end the project. We had considered Humans for a long time and knew that you would be better suited for our purpose. The Toshdohai are too small, and have a collective sentience that we cannot teach. Mavdares are limited in how and where they can live. The others are too alien or limited in other ways.”

But to what end? You aren't going to say, are you?

“Other Scientist took four of us, including Assistant and myself,” iSkandar continued. “Once we had lost control of the ship, a distress call was sent and we escaped. Other Scientist was...*reduced*... when the pod was attacked, but they were already moving and decided we would die on our own. There has been much argument on if the Humans are actually suitable for our purpose. The current in-fighting in the new Tzikzik is of great concern. These recovery missions prove that it will be difficult.”

That's why Renatus wanted me to know about the escape pod.

A strange thought came to Becca. “iSkandar, have you ever seen the Vencume home-world?”

iSkandar went through a complicated color-shift, but did not answer the question. “Do not feel any guilt in this situation,” iSkandar said. “We have prevented a war that a tiny faction tried to start. Your calming presence may save this project yet. As much as we appreciate Engineer's contribution, you have given much more.”

Becca felt herself blush. “What do you mean?”

iSkandar turned a pale pink. “You understand Humans.”

* * * * *

The recovery of the frigate *JiFeng* used a mixed weaponry assault of both the magnetically fired metal bolts and the new laser. Two of the new fighters were equipped with the weapon, but it would only fire on three-second bursts. When ground troops went over, they took several smoke grenades, so they could see the beam of the laser and not get in the way. These safety precautions did not assist the enemy in any way, but did allow the girls to bring back their main prize, an armless Red Vencume Tzikzik (aLima had been over-zealous in removing arms and aVari had been over-cautious, not knowing which arm would have the poisonous hand). Becca never saw the helpless monstrosity brought on board, but knew the mission had been successful.

Everyone ate in silence that evening.

Phoenix

The recapture of the frigate *ShunFeng* followed a distinct pattern, perfected through repetition. First, the fighter ships went out in their easy way and sang until their victim could not fire back or escape. Second, the buzz-handers invaded like so many termites. The redheads chanted some hackneyed rhyme about pulverizing their enemy, and it was over. It was so easy for them that Becca worried they would become complacent.

However, the lesson of the *TongGu* had taught the girls to search every area before declaring something safe, and that's when they found two survivors on the ship. Lieutenant Nie Faren and Ensign Qi Liwei were

found suffering from hypothermia in a walk-in refrigerator. There had never been survivors on a recaptured ship before.

iMala was delighted; she finally had an opportunity to try out her medical knowledge on a subject that was not one of her sisters.

Becca and iMala set to treating the two Humans, first taking DNA samples and inserting IVs that would give them a supply of warm fluid before hurrying to the factory to mix two tubes of spray for the unresponsive victims. (iMala had to open the doors; they would not respond to Becca's hand and Becca did not want to reveal the presence of the door slugs.) The spray was to heal the frostbite and prevent the onset of sepsis, but Becca feared it may be too late for one of them. Lieutenant Nie had been found curled in a corner under bags of rice, entering into that terrifying terminal burrowing behavior found so often in final-stage hypothermia victims⁷.

Ensign Qi was the first to regain consciousness. He was confused, incoherent, and terrified. Becca actually had to get the help of three redheads to strap him down to the bed. They did the same to Lieutenant Nie, but Becca did not think he would ever wake up; the brain damage was probably too great.

iSkandar offered a solution for Nie's blood-starved brain: an injection of some of the "base material" they used for cloning. Penemue was offered to connect to the unconscious man, to see what kind of damage there was. "If basic functions have been destroyed, we may be able to insert new ones," the librarian said. "This will actually direct the base to rebuild what has been lost."

Experimental, but worth the risk, Becca reasoned. We're just helping nature along. He might not survive otherwise.

Gordon was sitting with Ensign Qi, using calm, metered tones to explain to the man what had happened, as well as getting information from him.

Hiding in the refrigerator had been the ensign's idea, and he had dragged Nie in with him when the officer was knocked unconscious by an explosion. "I thought I could save his life. We should have been able to get out and I reasoned the refrigerator was airtight. An explosion damaged the door, so we were stuck. He swore I would be tried for cowardice in combat. What's cowardly about saving a man's life? Isn't it better to live and tell others what happened? I wasn't just going to stand there and die."

Gordon patted the ensign's shoulder. "Spoken like a true officer."

Becca leaned forward and chattered in Gordon's ear, "Do you think we can get him out of here safely? I need to bring in iSkandar and Penemue and I don't think that will go over well."

Ensign Qi Liwei stared at them. "This is the attack ship! You're the spy! You're supposed to be dead!"

"This is the ship that has been recovering the ships that were attacked," Gordon said. "This is the ship that stopped a war. This is the ship that will take you home and this is the woman who saved your life."

"I want to save Lieutenant Nie Faren's life as well," Becca said. "But I have to bring in two Vencume in order to do it." She looked up at Ensign Qi. "Can you let me save his life or are you too worried that he will report you?"

"I'm not a coward," Qi answered stiffly, "but you must tell me what you are going to do."

Becca tried to explain.

"You're going to brain-wash him," the ensign said.

Gordon lost his cool. "Leave him here! We'll move his bed so he can watch his superior die. When we drop him off, we'll report how he denied the man medical attention!"

"That's not acceptable," Becca argued. "It's my duty as a doctor to help where I can. I can't let him—"

"No, no!" Gordon was shoving Becca from the room. "Forget it. The good ensign doesn't want us to save the life of a man who outranks him. So be it!"

The two of them struggled to the hallway, Becca protesting the entire time.

Once the door was shut behind them, Gordon raised a finger to his lips. "Let him consider it," he said. "You'll see."

There was a minute of silence, then a shout. Gordon held Becca back until the second shout came, more pleadingly. "Doctor! Please come back!"

⁷ The second year of Becca's internship at the hospital, a mountain-climber was brought in. The climbing group had been feared lost; thermal imaging had not been able to find them. It was a man with a dog who found the woman; actually, it was the dog who found her, curled in a fetal position under a snow-bank. The lone survivor of that expedition had burrowed out a place to die and the insulating snow had saved her life.

And Gordon bowed to Becca, waving his arms to the door with a flourish.

Lieutenant Nie Faren woke a few hours after the procedure and was left with Ensign Qi to discuss what had happened. Becca returned to them with two bowls of hot cabbage soup and a pot of barley tea that aSabi had made especially for the two men.

“It is a barbaric meal, but warming to the body and soul,” Lieutenant Nie Faren said. “But these are barbaric times and any refuge is welcomed, no matter the guise.”

Becca nodded. *He's an officer from one of the old families. Young, but well on his way up. He has to be handled delicately.*

Becca's second long distance run (before she understood that the private sector paid better), was on an actual Shipping Authority freighter, and is when she had first learned how to properly handle the central arm. She was the junior medical crew on that run and would not soon to forget the shunning she had received by the crew for not addressing the officers with the correct tone of voice. This was, of course, her own fault for forgetting that the language was a tonal system and that the wrong inflection was the difference between praise and insult. She now knew she had to pick her words carefully and listen to how she said it.

She clasped her hands across her lap. “We hope that this offering will also warm relations between our feuding camps.”

“There is no feud between Vencume and Human,” the Lieutenant said. “There is the question of prisoners that have escaped and the great dishonor done to one of our destroyers.”

“There has been a terrible misunderstanding,” Becca said. “And in the heat of a battle there is little time to explain one's actions. Now that the battle is reaching an end, all accounts must be balanced.”

Nie Faren smiled and sipped his tea. “You are a well-trained doctor, I must say. I appreciate your exquisite etiquette. You have a much finer touch than that oafish pilot.”

“You know who Gordon is?” Becca blurted, then dropped to a more polite tone. “A most unfortunate turn of events has tarnished the polish of our manners and I apologize on their behalf. My fellow crew-members have not had dealings of any proper sort with the central arm of the Shipping Authority and do not understand the need for proper decorum.”

The Lieutenant nodded. “But *you* have. I am familiar with your exemplary—if brief—record and you have been spoken of very highly by the shipping families. I see that their trust and praise has not been scattered carelessly.”

“I do not wish to sully their words by any mis-actions,” Becca answered.

“I am also fully aware of what has happened here,” Nie Faren chattered, “and I will make it my duty to inform the Authority of the full story.”

Ensign Qi's eye widened. “Sir, they have converted you!”

The officer waved a hand at his subordinate. “We have much to learn and damage has been caused by our fear.” He turned to Becca. “I will report what I have found to my superiors. I cannot guarantee safety for you immediately, but you seem to have found your place on this ship of mirrors. There will be much to debate, but I know that you are an honorable woman. You have not treated us as a wounded enemy, waiting for the final blow.” He laughed. “This one ship, and all its little girls. Oh, you have struck fear into our hearts! How embarrassing to High Command! We chased a tiger that was manned by kittens!”

* * * * *

Evie was nervously chewing a carrot and staring at the floor. She held up her hands when Becca found her and Gordon in the kitchen. “Hey! It's healthy!”

“It's snacking between meals,” Becca reminded her. Evie's weight gain had continued and the clothes she wore were getting tight across the hips. “What are you doing in here anyway?”

Gordon pointed half-heartedly to Evie. “I was following her. She said she was hungry.”

“I'm nervous,” Evie answered. “I saw some of that...questioning...the girls are doing to that Vencume Tzikzik they captured earlier.”

“How bad is it?” Becca asked.

Evie chewed thoughtfully before spitting what she had in her mouth into the sink. "I don't know what I was thinking. I've no appetite. It's just about the most awful thing I've ever seen."

Becca waved her head in a half-shake. "I heard they took *all* the arms off, not just one or two."

"They took the legs off, too," Evie muttered. "I've never seen hate like that. I wish I could unsee it. They've got it strapped to a table and iDana has some kind of pain-ray she's using on it. I don't think they're even asking it questions anymore."

"iMala was right," Becca said, more to herself than anyone. "They broke it."

"How's that?" Gordon asked.

"The pain-killing device that iMala made," Becca explained. "She said the others would break it. Looks like they did. The same way they broke her new field generator..."

"..And made the collapser," Evie finished.

"And now they have a weapon that can shoot through anything and take a limb off in one pass," Gordon said. "This is the most dangerous ship in the universe."

"We're on their good side," Evie said. "I think it's the safest place to be for now."

"We're on a ship manned by more than twenty girls on the cusp of puberty," Becca retorted. "I can't think of a more dangerous place we *could* be."

* * * * *

Ensign Qi was alone in the room when Becca went back to check on the two men. "Two girls came to get him," he said, referring to the lieutenant. "He left with them. They made that noise, but he told me to not worry. How far are we from Cancri-55?"

"We'll be there in two days," Becca told him. "What color was their hair?"

Ulan and Uma had taken Lieutenant Nie Faren to an observation deck. They were sitting cross-legged across from each other, chattering; telling each other poems. Lieutenant Faren finished his recital with eyes closed:

*The male rabbit's feet kick up and down,
The female rabbit's eyes are bewildered.
Two rabbits running close to the ground,
How can they tell if one is male or female?⁸*

Ulan smiled and chattered hers, bird-like:

*the child observes the parent's birth,
the parent rises from the tank, it has been made whole once more,
the parent has become the child.
this has happened, will happen, as there are stars
there is only one way, as there is one universe*

"Ah, dear doctor!" Lieutenant Nie said when he saw Becca. "You did not tell me that our little warriors have mastered the brush as well as the sword. You are most delightful."

"First Authority understands *chichitiizi*," Uma chattered. "His addition to the Library is most useful."

"Please! Drop all formalities!" Faren waved a hand at the view. "Oh, there will be much to report! How lucky you are to have such an experience."

"It hasn't all been wonderful," Becca muttered.

"Yes, you were treated most poorly by Pegasai-51," Lieutenant Nie said, glumly. "They are such a remote outpost and the High Command cannot keep track of them. We will send someone there to clean it up."

8 The final lines from "An Ode to Hua Mu Lan", written during the Northern Wei dynasty (386 C.E.-534 C.E.).

This dear child told me about how backwards they are. The prisoner's block is a crude and disgusting thing; there is no excuse for poor treatment of prisoners. It will be rectified.”

Becca rubbed the scar on her forehead. “I apologize; I did not know it was isolated.”

“Why would you think otherwise?” He laughed and struggled to get up, the twins helping. “You have never been arrested before, but surely your dealings with us would have let you know we are not so cruel. You cannot lead through fear alone.”

Ulan smiled. “There is an understanding of leadership that is lacking on this ship.”

“I am sorry to hear such a thing,” he chattered in response; then, to Becca, “Even the bees have a queen.”

Becca laughed. “I think that might be Evie, considering she's the source of it all.”

Uma was shaking her head.

“I must meet this fantastic engineer!” Faren said. “I understand she saved your lives and then—poor woman—visited hell itself. She must be a fascinating person. I...” He stumbled a bit. “I am most tired. Please, bring her to me. I want to see who made the Queue at Peg-51 so unsettled that they felt they had to barbarically execute her in such an inept fashion.”

Becca's eyebrows had already shot up.

“Oh yes,” Faren said with a smile. “We all know you call us that. That is another problem to be addressed.”

* * * * *

Evie left her interview with Lieutenant Nie Faren smiling from ear to ear.

“You look like that went well,” Becca said.

“Well, what can I say?” Evie beamed. “I made him laugh a few times, and it wasn't that awkward laugh I usually get from people. He said I had a generous smile.”

“That sounds nice,” Becca said. *He said you were fat.*

“So,” Evie went on, “he wants to have our accounts reinstated and our arrest records will wiped clean. He's not high-ranking, but his family is. And! What have we done? We've averted a war and saved the life of a very valuable young man who just so happens to be someone's eldest son.”

“I didn't know that Lieutenant Nie was that well-connected,” Becca said.

“Not *him*...Ensign Qi,” Evie explained. “His father is the Fleet Admiral. Everyone used to tease him and call him the 'jade prince'. He was just happy someone didn't talk down to him.”

* * * * *

Cancri-55 received the broken frigate and two survivors with gushing praise. “We are familiar with how these recoveries go, so for you to bring this back in...relatively one piece...we must commend you. But to find actual survivors goes well beyond our expectations! And not on a lifeboat. The Shipping Authority is most pleased by this outcome and will offer any assistance to any Vencume ship if it is desired.”

Mirabilis blue-nodded. “This will only leave the three remaining victims. We hope to return these to you soon.”

“There is only one ship left,” Cancri responded. “We have the other two, so there is only the cruiser *TengLong* left. And to see that the Vencume have sent their largest—and most powerful—ship for such a dangerous mission. You must alert us when you discover their location so we may assist.”

“May it be our first true joint venture,” Mirabilis answered.

“Are you sure you want that?” Becca asked once Mirabilis had signed off. “Don't you think they're going to freak out a little when they discover who we are?”

“Doctor is worried for no reason,” Mirabilis said. “We have repaired the rift. Let them sense what we have prepared. Is this not part of our gift to you?”

“That may be the case,” Becca said, “but I think the girls prefer to work alone. What if we accidentally get one of their people killed? The girls don't know how to work with others. Someone's going to get a bolt in the eye or have an arm fried off.”

Mirabilis shifted to a dark blue. “New Tzikzik must learn how to work with Humans. They cannot be alone all their lives. That is why you are here.”

* * * * *

When Becca got back to their quarters, Gordon and the twins were sitting at the table, playing the board-game.

“Does everyone know how to play this stupid game but me?” Evie cried when she saw them. It looked like she had finally given up on keeping her weight under control and now wore a voluminous gray smock.

“It's not a stupid game at all,” Gordon marveled. “It's a lot *like* chess, but if you capture a piece it starts to fight for you. But this has the extra twist that if a piece is *recaptured*, it's pulled from the board, like you killed a spy. And you don't keep the captured pieces in-hand and then drop them later like in shogi; they turn instantly and they can capture *any* piece on the board.”

“Well, I'm glad you're having fun,” Evie snapped and went back into her ancillary lab.

“You move,” Uma ordered.

Gordon looked at the board. “Yeah, you're going to beat me again. This isn't easy.”

Evie came out of her lab in the spare room. “Becca, here.” She handed Becca a cumbersome object with a large buckle. “Put that on and tell me what you think.”

“It's not much for fashion,” Becca observed, trying the complicated fastener. “What's this supposed to do?”

“Stand back,” Evie said with a flourish, “and witness some magic.” Evie pressed a button on Becca's belt.

Becca saw the room shimmer around her. Sounds were muffled.

And Evie took a swing at her

There was a sound, like someone had dropped a paper cup and Evie's fist was redirected to one side. Becca felt her head pressed slightly to the right.

Evie gestured to the belt. *Turn it off*, she mouthed. Becca obliged and pressed the button.

“That's a minor force-field,” Evie explained. “You won't be able to use it for long periods of time because you'll run out of air.”

“You've been busy,” Becca stated.

“She's been in there all day,” Gordon said.

“Busy mother,” Ulan added. “Safe mother.”

Evie grinned with manic eyes. “This will toss off the rail-bolts and deflect a bit from the laser. It will look like a miss.”

Becca pressed the button on the belt again. When she spoke, it sounded like she had her fingers in her ears. “You're as afraid of them as I am.”

Can't hear you, Evie mouthed.

“How many of these did you make?” Becca asked after turning it off.

Evie lifted her smock to show the belt. “I made five. You, me, Gordon, and the twins. Try to hide it a little. We don't want to be obvious.”

Gordon lifted his shirt to reveal a similar belt.

Becca reflexively touched her pocket and the gray, fleshly plug inside. “So I'm not the only one who's worried.”

Uma smiled. “Humans are discussing *chichitiizi*,” she chittered.

“The round-about-way-that-prevents-problems,” Becca explained to the others.

“You are expecting conflict and preparing for it.” Ulan gestured to the room she and her sister shared. “Come.”

The three adults followed the twins into her room. There was a large map on one wall.

Uma traced a line across the map and chittered. “There are many ways to exit the ship. This path will be the most direct route to where the lifeboats are held. In a panic situation, we must be able to get there before any others.” She tapped one location. “This is the ship we used to contact the Library. It is not in the usual location.”

Gordon was studying the map. “Are those similar to our lifeboats?”

“You will not leave us a second time,” Ulan chittered. “There is a code.”

He blushed deeply. “I wasn't considering it.”

Uma grinned. “We learn from our mistakes.”

There was a faint knock at the door. Evie answered it and iMala came in.

“Hey, kiddo, what's up?” Gordon asked.

iMala shoved past Evie and tugged on Becca's sleeve. “I need to talk to you.”

“It's like I'm not here at all!” Evie shouted. “No one wants *my* attention! Oh, run along, Evie, and go do whatever it is you do; we don't need you.”

“I want to talk to Becca about this,” iMala replied meekly.

“Oh, whatever!” Evie shouted.

“Can I go deal with this and talk with you later?” Becca asked.

“Fine, fine. You're the one they want...” Evie waved her hands in the air and went into her spare lab.

Becca frowned and watched Evie leave, but smiled when she turned to iMala. “What's going on? Are you having a problem with your sisters again?”

iMala was looking at Ulan nervously. “Not here.”

They went out into the hallway.

“OK,” Becca tried again. “What's going on?”

“They won't stop torturing it!” iMala started to cry. “It's just helpless and awful and they keep hurting it. And they're starving it and iDana keeps sticking it with pins and then soldering the wounds shut and they won't stop!”

Becca frowned and tried not to show any fear. “You mean iLyssa and iDana are tormenting that captured Tzikzik?”

“Not just them...” iMala shook her head. “Everyone is. They all want a go at it. They just go in there and hit it and kick it and they're all so angry...”

“Even the new pilots?” Becca asked with some concern.

iMala nodded.

Even the friendly ones want to hurt something. I thought they were different. I thought there was enough of me in there to keep that kind of blood-lust at bay. We're like the prison on Peg-51; we've devolved to barbaric torture on a helpless prisoner. It's not Human, but still...

“I can't stop them,” iMala sobbed. “I just want it to stop, but they won't listen to me. They chased me out of the room.”

“Maybe they're angry because they had to fight them,” Becca tried to soothe her. “Maybe they're afraid and you know how bullies are always afraid, right? They always pick on things that are weaker than them because they can't fight the things that are bigger.” *I'm pretty afraid right now. I'm terrified. We have to get off this ship and soon. If they're going to act like that, then maybe the project is a failure. And they're still just children! This would be so much worse if they were older. All that hate has been brewing in them and now that they finally have a release, they aren't going to let up.*

“I asked them to stop,” iMala said. “I begged them. iLyssa told me to not interfere with her army.”

BLACK

Buer

The four door slugs Becca and Gordon had been using were drying out and the doors were responding more slowly. She had to grow another four: one for her, one for Gordon, and the two back-ups.

Becca ran into Buer on her way back from the factory.

“Becca,” Buer asked. “What were you doing?”

“I told you to not use my name,” Becca hissed, pushing past the Vencume.

“You have left the factory. You were growing something. What is its purpose?”

“It's a Human purpose,” Becca said. “You wouldn't understand.”

Buer frowned deep-blue. “And you are not willing to teach me.”

“I don't have time to dawdle,” Becca answered.

“You are concerned about the reprogramming of the doors,” Buer said. “The Library has already interpreted your intent from the first time.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.” Becca found it hard to concentrate; she had a headache from her time in the shimmering factory and just wanted to get back to her room and hand Gordon his new slug. “My head hurts and I want to go lie down. Let me by.”

“Other Scientist's programming is still interfering,” Buer stated. “What is it you call him? Renatus?”

“You just said *him*,” Becca said, annoyed.

Buer pink-laughed. “Isn't that what you say? We should speak the same language. You also call Clever Blue...*iSkandar*. Another *him*.”

Becca rubbed her eyes and continued down the corridor. “You said 'programming'. What are you even talking about?”

“Renatus wants this project to fail, even now,” Buer explained, spinning to keep up with Becca's brisk pace. “It was Renatus who directed Librarian to install the effect. You see what you were told to see. I had said that we did not understand Humans well enough and would need the assistance of one with more experience in such matters.”

“I thought that's what Evie was for,” Becca said.

“Yes, we used Evie because the opportunity presented itself,” Buer explained, “and we saw that you were resilient to injury, capable of damaging us without intent, but also compassionate. We knew that when the escape pod exploded and she was wounded. A Vencume in a similar circumstance would have been immobilized, but when she ruptured the hydraulic bladders in my hand, and then expressed sorrow and regret, both *iSkandar* and I knew that Humans were the best route to take. Renatus never saw the process, but Helpmeet and Gardener both agreed that—“

“*iSkandar* isn't even Vencume,” Becca growled. Her head was pounding. “And you told me you wanted to pass on such great gifts. You've created a monster and now you want me to rein it in for you. No one ever asked me what I thought. I got dragged into all this; you and your little army of...monsters. I just want to get home and see my own daughter again. My *Human* daughter. I had a life outside of all this and you almost managed to take it from me!”

“This is bigger than you!” Buer shifted suddenly to a deep red, spinning and colliding with Becca, pinning her to the wall. The Vencume wrapped long arms around her, around her head, covering her mouth. “Becca, you do not understand how important this is. If you won't listen, at least look.”

Becca struggled against the impossibly strong arms.

Buer was already probing the top of her head. “I will not install any directive. I don't want a puppet.”

As Becca's eyes dilated, the corridor turned bright white.

They are sitting in Great-Aunt Lytle's living room. The old woman pours two cups of frothing brown coffee.

“You take two sugars, if I recall,” Lytle says.

“Don't do this,” Becca protests. “You're forcing this connection. Let me go.”

Lytle smiles widely. “I'm trying to make this as pleasant as possible. You need to give me a chance and I can't get it from you voluntarily.”

They are suddenly floating in open space. An angry red star swells before them.

“Where are we now?” Becca asks.

Buer-Lytle points at the expanding star. “Watch.”

The star expands and reduces, like a breath. A wave of super-heated gas comes off and passes through them. Becca's eyes water and she licks her chapped lips. A bright green planet to one side is in the path of the gas-wave. It only takes a moment for it to turn a dull orange.

"You see, the ocean cover has been boiled away," Buer-Lytle says. "The vapor is gone forever. There will be no recovery."

Becca wipes her eyes. "This is the destruction of your home planet. I wondered but I never knew."

Still in space, they are a tiny party to fleet of ships. There are thousands of them, ranging in size from five sections to more than twenty. As one curls past them, Becca and Buer-Lytle settle on the side of it. The rotating section stretches out under them.

"Let us see how things are inside," Buer-Lytle says.

The hull of the ship parts like water and they sink into an ocean of rooted Vencume. Becca twists herself to an upright position inside the vast Library. There is a buzz of voices around her. She suddenly feels very lonely.

Buer-Lytle is behind her and rests a hand on her shoulder. "See what is left of us?" When Becca turns, it is more her great-aunt than the Vencume.

The image of the ocean fades and they stand on the surface of Pegasai-51. It is a bleak landscape and harsh winds swirl around them. The wreckage of a Vencume ship looms over them.

Becca feels dread. "Do I have to see what's inside?"

"You already know what's inside," Lytle answers.

Crushed Vencume bodies litter the inside of the ship. The floor is awash in water and blood.

"We cannot live here," Lytle states.

Now, they are on the surface of Ursus Major-47. Becca is reminded of the time she took shore-leave there and the train-ride through the desert. A dessicated Vencume body leans in the corridor of a ship. Sand piles next to the body.

"We cannot live here," Lytle repeats.

Suddenly, there is something new. It is a funny creature and Becca feels herself stifling a laugh at how it moves. These new beings seem to dance and sing. Arms become legs, arms become heads, legs become arms. They sing like birds and move through so many forms, tall and thin, short and squat. These delightful things change shape and color so many times, it's hard to get a clear image of them.

Lytle laughs as well. "Look at these! Who are they? They ask questions. They are not afraid."

Now, Becca recognizes the shifting creatures as portmen. These were the first Humans in space; flying for generations on slow ships with low spin. Delicate in their own way, they stand with a self-confidence that makes them look as strong as stone. Long hands and feet curl and flex in anticipation. Large eyes peer past the fearful mass of tentacles before them. There are pictures, sounds, pictures, sounds, pictures, words, words, words. They are translating: forming a connection with an alien species. They are preparing the way for a home-world they thought they would never see again.

Mountains of grain! The yellow ocean of corn and rice and barley! And the Vencume eat and are pleased. Now, a strange device: the borrowed-time field. Here is the MOUS. These are tomatoes. This is a new engine. Here is lettuce. Here is a new ship design. Here are potatoes.

And the portmen go home and now there are Humans everywhere.

On Pegasai-51, under the wreckage of the Vencume ship, there is a dome built into the landscape. Small, hirsute creatures busy themselves growing food. They grow winter wheat and triticale. They sing under the dome and there is a space-station. The Vencume buy food from them and trade technology.

On Leonis-83, golden-haired creatures grow fruit and their bronzed bodies move with such grace. The Vencume buy food from them and give them technology.

On Cancri-55, pale creatures work their tanks and raise fish and algae of many kinds. These creatures have dark hair and the Vencume wonder if they are the same as the others.

And the Vencume try other planets, other planets, other planets and they cannot live there. They cannot live there and they die. There are fewer and fewer ships.

We are dying. There are less of us. We must find a way.

But look at the Humans who change shape! Look at the Humans who change color! Here is the happy planet. Here is the sad planet. Here is the questioning planet.

A Vencume stretches out before her, in zero-gee, radiating out. Becca watches three of the arms turn into girls. They break away from the mangled source, the two remaining arms flailing helplessly. The three girls start to fight amongst themselves.

“Tell me about Vencume arms,” Becca asks.

Buer-Lytle is changing color and the arms move by like a carnival ride. “The red arm is strong and does many tasks. The yellow arm is quick and friendly. The blue arm is clever and sensitive.”

Becca watches the girls fighting. They are much younger than the ones she knows. She is seeing them while in advancement. A blue girl holds her hands to her bloodied face and cries. A yellow girl is holding a handful of her own hair, matted with red scalp. A red girl stands alone as the others dance around her—such hateful words....

And great-aunt Buer is there, holding the girls apart. Chiding and soothing.

“You did not mention the black or white arms,” Becca says.

“The black hand chastises,” Buer coos. “The white hand teaches.”

And Becca laughs and wipes away tears. “You never finished the project. Even I know that a three-legged creature limps.”

The buzzing in her head settled and the corridor re-formed around Becca.

“I apologize,” Buer said.

Becca was slumped against the wall, exhausted and teary-eyed.

Buer reached out to her. “That was a bit much at once, and I am sorry. I had to tell you.”

She knocked the Vencume hand away. “You could have just told me,” Becca said, chokingly. “You could have just said. Why do you have to complicate things?”

Buer started to flatten against the ground, spreading out like a torn drape. “It is terrible. It is too much information and I have done you a disservice. Forgive my presumptive nature.”

“Why can't you just be honest?” Becca sobbed. “Are you afraid of it?”

The puddle of Buer turned a dark blue. “Yes. We fear it. We fear you.”

“We're your nightmare,” Becca said flatly.

Buer was almost flat against the floor now and shifting to a dark gray. “We admire the things we fear. We envy them. You do this as well: your mix of fear and envy. Do you not describe the most dangerous things as beautiful? It is not aesthetics that causes that.”

Becca sniffled and looked at the flattened Vencume on the floor. “Are you trying to hide?”

“This is shame,” Buer said softly. “I am ashamed of what I have done to you. I am ashamed of what we have done to Evie and all her daughters. It was too much for you to handle. I was too assumptive when I suggested it and I do not know how to fix the situation.”

It was a ridiculous situation. Becca laughed to spite it all.

“What is so amusing?” Buer started to rise off the floor.

“You limping, dripping, melting thing,” Becca said. “With all you learned from us, you couldn't even give yourself bones. Your stupid round-about-way-that-prevents-problems is so soft you can't stand up for yourself. You want me to fix your problems because you can't bear to dirty your hands—and you have five.”

Buer was fully up now and loomed over her. “You mock us now?”

Becca suddenly remembered that a Vencume stood over two meters tall. It didn't make her afraid; it only made the situation more absurd. “I mock you, you massive thing. You made children and thought that by filling them with Evie's head that you could hurry things. You can control time and you *still* did a sloppy rush job.”

“You are obviously exhausted.” Buer was a deep purple.

“I meant what I said in there,” Becca said as she struggled to get up. “You never finished the project because you were in a stupid hurry. That army isn't a Vencume; it's only got three arms. Where is the leadership? They have no sense of purpose.”

Buer spun up on her quickly again; this time, lifting her suddenly from the ground before setting her down. “Let me help you back to your room. You need to lie down. You're tired.”

Becca's knees were loose, but she managed to walk. Buer guided her the rest of the way down the corridor.

After her nap, Becca noticed the shimmering effect she had seen in her left hand was gone.

So were the two spare slugs.

Only Human

The Libraries were still in discussion, so Evie, Gordon, Becca, and the twins went to check the new garden.

The three designers seemed more interested in the Libraries and how they connected to the rest of the ship. *iDana must be trying to figure out a way to control them. It must bother those three to no end that they aren't actually the ones in charge.*

Now that she could see unhindered, Becca was able to pay full attention to the people she was interacting with. The last five weeks had been such a blur to her, it was as if she was being introduced to everyone on the ship for the first time.

Gordon had lost considerable weight since his flight on the *Tong Dizhou* and his clothing hung loosely over his shoulders. If the twins had meant to wear the brash quality out of him, they had succeeded. Becca had never been distracted by the shimmering effect when looking at him; but now that it had stopped, she discovered that the faint headache she'd had for the last month was gone as well.

Evie had circles under her eyes and the weight she had gained was not filling her face; she had a perpetually worn-out look. The white tips on her hair didn't help soften the effect. Evie had also been chewing on her fingernails—something Becca had never noticed before. The engineer had thick, white cuticles with rough spots on either side of each nail.

Buer, iSkandar, and Penemue had joined them. The librarian was there mostly to see how this new garden was going to keep the second Library fed. Buer was there to see how a new section of ship was going to affect day-to-day operations. iSkandar had come along because iSkandar made himself part of every important event on the ship. There was a part of Becca that distrusted the creature, but was resigned on how useful he was. She wondered if he felt the same way about her.

The twins were ecstatic about the new garden. They danced and chattered between themselves.

Becca understood their excitement the moment the door opened. She did not know how Vencume plants worked, but she knew that they had not been as tall, nor as thick as the ones she saw here. The seaweed smell was not as choking, either. They seemed more vital than the rare sample she'd seen.

Buer was practically beside herself. "This is vast improvement! We must communicate with the Library when they are out of congress and send the information to the others. If nothing else, *this* river must flow."

"Capability is greatly increased," iSkandar added. The creature was shifting from light green to pale blue. "Protein production is ten-fold."

"Other Scientist did not inform us of such advancement," Penemue said.

"I hope that this will make things better back home," Evie was saying. "If you get nothing more, at least there are plants that can feed your people."

There was a shadow that moved through the garden. Becca saw it blink dark red against the glittering blue.

"This is a well fed Library," Penemue said. "We shall shift the diet over for ours. This is a vast improvement."

"Other Blue Tzikzik have done this," iSkandar said. "I am sorry to have left the ship when I did."

"Clever Blue must not apologize for prudent behavior," Buer answered.

The hairs on the back of Becca's neck stood up. A tingling sensation crawled across her shoulders, like impending nausea.

Penemue was shifting from a pale blue to light pink. "This is perfect work. Indeed, Clever Blue must swim again and expose more garden information."

"I like how this can grow anywhere," Evie said. "If the lessons from the garden can be used, then Vencume will be able to spread to any planet."

There was a rustling to their left. Becca fumbled with the controls on her shield-belt.

The Tzikzik spun out before them. It looked like a double-ended Vencume; there were five hands on one side, five on the other, and a spoke of five legs between.

For the first time since Becca had known them, the twins looked disgusted. Ulan and Uma pushed the others back.

Everything happened at once.

Uma leapt to one side. Evie grabbed Ulan's arm. Gordon grabbed Evie and pulled her away, but because Evie had Ulan's arm she was pulled away as well. Uma stopped to see where her sister was. The Tzikzik slashed out with two black hands, striking Uma in the chest and Ulan across the arm. Uma fell stiffly and iSkandar caught her and threw her at Becca in one swift movement.

iSkandar, Buer and Penemue fell on the Tzikzik, each turning deep red, grabbing arms and punching? No, *stabbing* the monster repeatedly with one hand that had formed a sharp spike. It was fifteen hands versus ten, and three of those hands were black and poisonous. They were pulping the monstrosity before them and water gushed out. A thick blue liquid rushed onto the floor, mixed with water, and it stained the shoes of those who stood and watched.

Ulan struggled in Evie's arms, broke free, and rushed to her sister. Evie struggled in Gordon's arms.

Becca found herself praying while holding Uma's stiffening body: *Our eyes shed tears and our hearts grieve, but we must not say anything that is not pleasing to our creator. Please, welcome this soul with open arms. Take these words for the sake of the departed and not the soul that utters them.*

Uma's face had turned blue. Her eyes still locked with Ulan's. The twins held each other tightly.

Prove to us that you are most merciful. You must be merciful if you are all-good. You must be good if you are all-powerful.

iSkandar, Buer, and Penemue had finished with the Tzikzik and left the bloodied meat in a heap.

You allowed this to be made. You must forgive it. You must not punish this. You cannot allow that. If you love us, you'll love even this. This is a life. You have to honor that! You have to honor what we made. You wouldn't have let us do it otherwise.

Gordon was still holding Evie tightly. She thrashed and clutched the air.

Please, we're so alone here. We're trying. Can't you see that? We're trying! Why do you have to do this? Why do you have to test us so much? Is this how you tell how good we are? Why are you so arbitrary? Why are you so capricious? Why do you throw blind chance at us so often? We're trying! Why can't you let us be and let us live our lives?

iSkandar grabbed Ulan's arm and started a quick succession of massage. A thick black liquid collected on her sleeve. The girl was pale and unfocused.

It's like you harvest us at our peak. You take us away from our loved ones all the time. Are you trying to teach us something? Fine! We've learned how to love and you have to show us how to lose. We'll never be good enough for you! You show us the dawn to prove how dark the night can be.

Penemue shoved Becca aside and quickly grabbed Uma and Ulan's heads. The hands turned white.

Please, please, don't make me watch a child die. I can't take this. I can't watch a child die like this. They're so defenseless. Why did you let me love something if you were just going to take it away? Don't destroy this.

Uma's fingernails were a dark blue. She still gripped her sister and her lips moved.

Becca turned her belt off, but there was no sound.

Please. I'll make a deal with you. You make deals all the time, don't you? Aren't you always asking for some noble sacrifice? Do you always have to take that ration of flesh?

Ulan shuddered and whispered something.

Don't you have enough? Haven't we thrown a billion corpses at you? You have to let them live. They never would have lived if you hadn't allowed it. You don't just give us things to take them from us. You can't be that cruel. They only have each other. Let them live. Please, I'm begging you. Just let them live long enough to say goodbye.

Uma's eyes glassed over and she stopped breathing.

Penemue released the heads of the twins and ran a slow hand over Uma. Ulan formed tears and held her arm.

Evie broke free from Gordon and she scrambled to the twins, holding Ulan tightly in one arm, and Uma's lifeless form in the other. She wailed.

"It's not fair!" Evie bellowed. "No! No! No! It's not fair! Give her back! Give her back! *Give her back!*"

A tiny part of Becca remembered when her husband died. *We'll beat you at your own sick game; some day. Someday. I'll face you and you'll have to answer for this.*

Evie was inconsolable. “No, no, no! Becca! You're a doctor! Do something! No! *No!* Give her back. No...no. Please, *please*. Oh gods! Give her back. That's not yours to take. Give her back! Please, please. Give her back!”

Gordon approached, carefully, and tried to hold Evie.

“It's not fair!” Evie howled and pushed him away. “I had it all worked out! They were supposed to be safe! You can't do that! That's mine! She's *mine!* *She's mine!* Give her back!”

Buer gave the Tzikzik body a slight kick. It did not move.

Evie rocked back and forth. “You don't do that! She's mine! Give her back! *You don't do that!*”

iSkandar ran a hand over Becca.

Ulan looked exhausted and held Evie tightly. The girl had dark circles under her eyes.

“It's not fair,” Evie whimpered. “It's not fair. Not like that. Please, not like that. No. No. Please...”

Uma's body sagged in her arms.

“The parent should never mourn the child,” iSkandar chattered to Becca. “Your unique nature--”

“Shut up,” Becca said.

Evie was clutching Ulan tightly with both arms now and making inhuman sounds. It was a keening mixed with chokes and heaves.

Ulan shut her eyes and held her mother as tightly as she could.

* * * * *

The Reds did a sweep of the new garden and found two other Vencume Tzikzik. Five were found in the second Library, but it was the Library itself that had exposed and expunged them.

Ulan spent the next few days in bed, recovering from both the chemical and emotional assault on her body. Evie spent most of her time curled up behind the child, stroking her hair.

Both Gordon and Becca circled the room, unsure of what to do. Evie was unapproachable. Maybe they starved in that time of grief. Hunger seemed so petty.

Gordon fell asleep with his head on the table. He was surrounded by clay models and drawings.

He woke with a start some time later and shambled to bed. Becca watched his pained steps. *He's so trapped. We all are. Why didn't we feel this when oDele was killed? Were there too many of them for us to make an investment? Is it because the death was so removed from us? Is Evie directing how we feel? Can't they grow another one?* Becca knew the answer to that. *Even iSkandar had said they were unique. Humans are isolated. They have no ocean.*

But there had been that moment, she remembered. Penemue had connected the twins at the last minute. *The librarian, that multi-bodied creature, let them see each other off. That death, no matter how small, is going to be part of the Library now. Was that the only reason for the connection? To gather what it could? Would the grief be transmitted as well? We're so small. They're so small, really. Why should I be so affected by this? They always scared me. Is it because I had to watch it?*

Evie came out of the room, stumbling. She pulled the drawing of the two girls from the door and crumpled it with one hand. She left the quarters and came back a few moments later and approached the table opposite Becca.

Becca didn't know how to respond.

Evie collapsed in a chair. “You want to know about my sister, don't you?”

The question was startling. It was as if she had been questioned for hours and was finally giving in. There was a tortured aspect to it.

“I've always wondered,” Becca said.

“But you've never *asked* me about Gwennie,” Evie noted. The tone was almost accusatory, like Becca was coming to an event too late and everyone want to know where she had been. Evie stared at Becca: unfeeling, tired, beaten. “I've...*seen* you wonder,” she went on, “but you've never asked me directly.”

“I figured you'd tell me when the time was right.”

“She was everything I wasn't,” Evie started. “Graceful. *Pretty*. My parents thought the world of her. I was never going to give them grandchildren, so they pinned their hopes on her.” Evie traced an imaginary line on the table and shut her eyes. “People doted on her. Everyone paid attention to her and I guess I was jealous.”

She wouldn't say a word, but she had complete command of every room she was in. She was born a couple years after my accident. I guess she was a comfort to my parents. At least they had a child they could keep at home; I was always in the hospital."

Becca imagined the golden pilots and knew, somehow, that Gwennie had blonde hair. Evie never had to say it, but the Vencume model had come from somewhere.

Evie continued, in fits and starts. "When I got out, I started on my engineering degree and I was away at school most of the time. When I wasn't at school, I was lost in my studies. I never interacted with my parents much. I don't think I was ever good at dealing with people on a face-to-face level. Any friends I had growing up either got better and left or died. Only the doctors stayed. Maybe that's why we're friends. I don't mean to cheapen it; I'm just saying..."

"I might have gained a tolerance to pain, considering the number of surgeries I had, but I was never good at putting any feelings behind my interactions with people.

"Meanwhile, Gwennie was going out and making *real* connections with *real* people and forming *real* relationships. Unfortunately, one of those relationships was with a good-for-nothing several years her senior. He strung her along and abused her, I'm sure. He called me a troll and we came to blows. By then, he had decided to cut Gwennie away from us. He took over her life and we were excluded from every aspect of it. Gordon reminded me of him a bit...the one time I met that guy... Arrogant, self-centered... *pretty*." She sighed rakingly. "I wasn't devastated then. Somehow, I felt it served everyone right for doting on her for so long and ignoring me."

Becca nodded. *Aren't the three designers upset by the attention Evie put on the twins?*

"This was all idiocy, of course." Evie continued her naked confession. "So, when Gwen came back, after that guy spent all her money or beat her or whatever it was he did, I found myself in the shadows again. But, that sun shone a little less bright. Gwennie was broken in ways we didn't see, and so no one could help her because no one knew anything was wrong.

"And then one day, she showed us all how broken she was by swallowing a fist-full of pills. I waited an hour before I called for help."

Becca felt revulsion and pity. It was hard and cold in her stomach, but it turned over and over.

Evie sighed and blinked. "It was...the worst kind of sibling rivalry; no one can compete with the image of someone who can never fail again. We speak so highly of the dead because they aren't there to prove us wrong.

"My parents put a new pressure on me. Gwennie became a constant reminder of how I had failed them. This was the same time I was testing for the civil-engineering corps and I couldn't concentrate. So, maybe he was right..." And she gestured to Gordon's room with a tilt of her head. "I failed there, so I came here."

Evie bowed her head and nodded to no one in particular. "It's one thing to be held up to some shining ideal, but it's another when you know how tarnished that ideal was. Gwennie might have been sociable and pretty, but she was a silly, giggly girl who made stupid mistakes as an adult and failed everyone when the going got rough. Maybe it was too rough for me as well, so I ran away. She failed them in her own way, but I did as well."

Becca held out a hand across the table. Evie didn't take it.

"I'm not the most sympathetic of characters," Evie said softly. "I don't react the way people expect me to. Maybe my response to a death seems too cold. I was there. I felt it. I just chose to not fall to pieces."

"I was there," Becca said. "You were Human enough."

Evie shook her head. "I'll be judged on that. Uma isn't Gwennie. People will judge me."

"That was years ago," Becca offered. "You've had time to think about it. You're distanced from it."

"Maybe..." When Evie sobbed, it was a voiceless thing. Her face twisted into a grimace and her shoulders spasmed with a soundless wheeze. She formed fists that reached to her face but stopped and died on the table. Her chin rested on her chest and shook.

Becca started to stand. "Hey, hey, you're going to be OK. It's OK."

"I could handle anything." Evie directed the statement to her lap. "Let them tear me apart. Let them put me back together. I can take any pain. I can't take this. You can't fix this. I'm such a coward. Why couldn't I hold both of them back?"

"You saved one," Becca said. "It could have been both. You saved one. You're only Human."

“Only Human,” Evie whispered. “I failed.”

Ulan stumbled from the doorway. “Mom?”

Evie held her arms out. She fell to her knees from the chair and clutched the girl tightly.

“Don't cry,” Ulan said, clearly. “We're here. We still love you.”

“Don't leave me,” Evie begged.

“We won't,” Ulan promised. “We won't leave you.”

Reintroductions

Ulan stopped playing idiot since the death of her sister. The girl watched everything with glittering brown eyes and furrowed brow. She was now a regular at group meals and sat silently, eyes shut, listening.

Becca was able to see the resemblance to Evie more clearly; they once shared the same goofy grin, they now shared the same stern exhaustion.

“Doctor-Doctor will be pleased to know that we're going to handle the last ship today,” iLyssa announced. “It's a cruiser, so you'll get to see some fancy flying this time.”

“So there won't be any more battles?” Becca asked.

iMala nodded. “Once the threat is fully neutralized, you'll be able to go home.”

“There's been some interesting chatter,” iDana added. “I suspect they've figured out we're only one ship, but that might be that Shipping Authority officer we connected. People keep talking about how 'the blue dragon will embrace the white tiger'. Does that sound like a friendly meeting?”

“White tiger is female,” Ulan said. “Means misfortune and bad relationships.”

iLyssa crossed her arms. “White tiger is also the protector.”

Ulan smiled slightly.

“We'll be at the location in a couple hours,” iDana continued. “From what I've heard, they've dropped out of field and the Shipping Authority is holding them. No telling what will happen once we get there.”

“We'll know soon enough,” iLyssa concluded.

* * * * *

Becca and Evie were brought to the bridge by aNnora and aNaba to watch the final fight. The two redheads escorted them to the first section of ship and opened the doors, but left immediately afterwards.

The Shipping Authority was waiting with two destroyers: *DeYang* and *FuYang*. The cruiser *TengLong* was just out of their firing range.

“They haven't even started,” iLyssa complained, spraying down the screen with a nutrient solution. “They're waiting for us.”

iDana nodded. “They're keeping their distance. I figured they'd wait. They want to know how we do this.”

iMala raised a radio channel between them and the destroyers, but chattered as she hailed them. “You have settled this already? Is there nothing for us to do?”

It was the *FuYang* that responded. “We can't get close to them. They already took out two of our fighters. We don't want to just attack it. There may be survivors and we can't get close enough to be sure.”

“We can't use the collapser,” iLyssa whined. “Again...”

“We will send our fighters,” iMala chattered. “Let us take out the weapons array and then you can land safely.”

“You're hiding who you are,” Evie said. “Just say it. Let them know what they're dealing with.”

iMala gave her a worried look and turned back to the radio. She did not chatter this time. “We're sending our fighters. We'll soften it and then you can take it safely.”

There was a moment of indecision from the Shipping Authority. “Who are we speaking to?”

“We're launching!” iLyssa snatched the radio from her sister. “Take our help or don't!”

Ten golden fighter ships eased out of their bays and zeroed in on the cruiser. There was a flurry of weapons fire and the song over the radio pitched, rolled, and yawed to avoid the bolts. They moved so quickly it looked less like individual objects and more like a field-effect.

The two destroyers discussed this between themselves, overheard by three gray-haired girls with small orange eyes and long hands.

“They're afraid,” iMala stated.

“They're in awe,” iLyssa countered.

A harmonic rose over the radio. Weapons were picked off one-by-one. The sensors on the cruiser were obliterated.

As the fighters returned to their bay, iMala spoke cleanly into the radio. “Do you want to land now? It should be safe to approach.”

DeYang responded this time. “We have never seen this process. We yield the field to the more potent warrior.”

“Launch the buzz-landers,” iLyssa said with pride.

iDana shook her head. “That's not a good idea. They're testing us. Don't launch all of them.”

iLyssa waved it off. “They want to see a show. We'll give them a show.”

“No,” iDana growled. “If we launch everything at that ship, our forces are just sitting there. The pilots can get out of the way, but ground-troops are stuck. We're going to toss our teeth into a blender if we go about this carelessly.”

Becca hugged herself. “You don't think the Authority is going to try to use this to settle two fronts, do you?”

“They might.” iDana's right eye twitched. “I would.”

Evie frowned. “They aren't you.”

iMala fiddled with the radio. “I don't know what to tell them.”

“Let's not be stupid about this,” iDana said. “They fear us; we know that. If we send out everything we have, we might have to take them out as well.”

“We can still send out a couple collapsers,” iLyssa said.

“And we can start a war anew,” iMala mewed.

iLyssa was pacing. “This is the last one. We have to end this.”

DeYang hailed them again. “Were you going to land troops? We await your response.”

iDana took the radio this time. “We respectfully ask that the Shipping Authority recover its own ship in this circumstance. We will stand by if you need assistance. You should be able to safely approach them at this point. We respect your right to privacy in this regard, in order that we may not accidentally see any secrets or weakness.” She cut the signal and crossed her arms. “Let them take this risk.”

Evie was frowning. “They're going to know there's indecision over here. You just let them know you're weak.”

iLyssa glowered back. “They don't know there are three of us.”

“Indecision in one person is the same as between three people,” Evie said.

“Send out some buzz-landers,” Becca suggested. “Tell them you're going to send a portion of your ground-troops. If they think there are more, then they may play nice.”

“We'll send out *five*,” iDana said. “Then we have enough in reserve.”

iLyssa was losing her patience and her eyes bugged. “Who cares what the number is? We'll send some over and that will be that. We're also re-launching half of the pilots.”

iDana rolled her eyes and pulled out a secondary radio. “aRlene, can you send a team of five over to that ship?”

“Only five?” a voice asked back.

“Just five,” iDana answered. “We're doing a joint deployment on this. You'll be fighting beside Shipping Authority solders.”

iMala was already relaying to the two destroyers that they should land ground-troops and back-up would be coming soon.

“And, aRlene...leave your channel open,” iDana added. “I want to hear everything.”

* * * * *

FuYang sent over a landing ship and docked with the disabled cruiser. *iMala* told the Shipping Authority that they were going to re-launch some fighters (in case they were needed), as well as five landing craft and the troops should not be surprised by what they saw. "If it looks Human, make sure to not shoot at it. We'd hate for this to fall apart amidst friendly fire."

aRlene's radio had transmitted the entire process: the *clang* of the doors when the buzz-lander closed, the *whoomp* as it launched, the *thud* as it landed, and the horrible *gnarr* as it cut a neat hole in the hull of the *TengLong*. It even caught *aRlene's* *oof-ah* as the spring mechanism launched her into the ship.

aRlene was muttering under her breath:

*A brand-new ship and the same old foes
There may be a friend here, who knows?
My gun is cocked and at my side
Waiting to see just what I'll find.*

"No war-chants," *iDana* said. "Try to play this one clean."

"It feels unnatural," *aRlene* answered. "There are other people here. They're much bigger than us."

"There are children there," *FuYang* radioed. "Is this your fighting force?"

"Just follow their lead," *iLyssa* answered. "They've done this before and they'll show you how to clear the ship."

"Are we to fight alongside children?" *FuYang* asked. "You said to not shoot anything that looks Human. Is this what you meant? Our men are confused."

"Behind you!" *aRlene's* radio blared and there was a *fup fup fup* as she let loose some bolts. "Don't be so shocked. We have a job to do so let's do it!"

Someone answered in the background, but there was the rattling noise of a gun.

"Nice!" *aRlene* said. "Look out!"

"I wish we had imagers on their helmets," *iLyssa* mused. "Why didn't we ever do that?"

"Too heavy," *iDana* answered. She was listening intently to the battle on the *TengLong*.

aRlene sounded like she was enjoying herself. "Stand back! Hands!" And a *fup fup fup* as more bolts were fired. "Yeah, those are poisonous," she explained to someone.

There was a hissing sound.

"Smoke grenade," *iLyssa* announced. "They're bringing out the laser."

Someone in the background yelled in excitement. A Shipping Authority soldier was expressing awe as a laser cut through something.

"You and you," *aRlene* said, "follow me. We want this tight and neat. You others keep behind your guide."

iMala was shivering with excitement. "This is going wonderfully."

Someone screamed.

"Behind!" *aRlene* yelled. "I said *behind!* Get out of the way!" Then, in a calm voice to the radio in her helmet, "Guy just got a bolt to the leg. Went right through. He's out."

"Tell them we have a medical team," *iMala* said. "We'll fix it if he doesn't bleed out."

Another voice sang over the radio: one of the pilots. "Are we doing anything here?"

iDana gripped her own radio. "*aRlene*, are those guys in pressure suits?"

"Yes," *aRlene* answered. "But the guy with the bolt is comprised."

"Get him evacuated," *iDana* said. "We're going to pop the hull."

"What good is that going to do?" *aRlene* asked in response. There was gunfire in the background.

"You're in suits," *iDana* snapped. "Your enemy isn't. We're going to let physics do the work of clearing the ship."

"But we're looking for survivors," *aRlene* countered. Then, "Hold on." Someone in the background was talking to her. She followed with "uh-huh" and "yeah" and "OK, if that's the case, we're about to poke a hole in the hull. Space the rest...OK."

iLyssa took the radio. "What's going on?"

aRlene tisked on her end before answering. “They have a remote-reader here for the blackboxes. No one's chip is responding. There are no survivors on this ship.”

“We don't have one of those,” iMala said. “We should get one.”

“What good would it do us now?” iDana asked.

iLyssa relayed the information to the pilots and three bolts were fired at one of the junction points. The three plumes of escaping atmosphere were equidistant and the craft only wobbled slightly from the thrust.

“*That* got their attention!” aRlene almost sang. There was a loud hissing and a *pop*. “Oh, yuck.”

Evie took Becca's sleeve. “I need to go.”

“You're going to leave now?” iLyssa asked.

Becca and Evie were suddenly the center of attention.

“I'm not feeling well,” Evie said. “All this excitement. It's just too much right now.”

“What's wrong?” iMala looked genuinely concerned.

Evie fanned herself with one hand. “I'm light-headed. I feel sick to my stomach. I need to go lie down.”

iDana narrowed her eyes. “This is important. This is going to decide if you can go home.”

“I know, I just...” Evie's knees buckled and Becca caught her.

iMala took a step forward. “Do you need help getting her back to the room?”

“We need you here,” iDana answered.

“I'll...I'll be OK,” Evie said weakly. “I'll just go lie down for a bit. I'll be fine.”

* * * * *

Once Becca and Evie were off the bridge, Evie straightened out and walked briskly down the corridor. She summoned the lift and entered with purpose.

“You're not ill?” Becca asked.

“I have something I need to do,” Evie answered. “You don't have to come with me; you can if you want. Everyone is busy right now and I might not have another chance.”

Becca got into the lift. “What are you going to do?”

Evie rubbed her right eye. “I have to go face one of my fears.”

Tzikzik

The corridors were empty.

Evie lead Becca down past where her ancillary lab had been: where the mantis had been perfected. They passed the old ad-hoc bridge: where iMala's collapser was first demonstrated, where Becca had given the Vencume a lesson in Human anatomy. They passed the observation deck: where the crew of the *Tong Dizhou* had first seen the pilots, where Becca had first noticed Evie's scarless hands.

Evie stopped in front of a door and turned to Becca. “You don't have to come in if you don't want. This might get ugly.”

Becca hugged her arms and nodded. “We've come this far. What's in there, anyway?”

Evie smiled a little to herself. “A mistake turned nightmare.”

It was dark in the room and Becca had difficulty seeing. Evie turned on the lights.

The Tzikzik was strapped to a table that lay at an extreme rake. Legless and armless, it shuddered when the lights came on. Becca was reminded of an uprooted tree after a storm—immobile, dying, helpless.

Evie faced it with shimmering eyes. “After this battle, you're the last one,” she said.

The creature seemed to sigh. The chitter it formed was halting and mangled. “Another torment.”

“I'm not interested in torturing you,” Evie explained. “I'm not here for revenge.”

“So you say,” it answered. “How could I stop you now?”

Evie held out a hand and rested it atop the mass of half-tentacles. “How I know...how I've been there.”

There was a moment of the two together: Evie's face was mere centimeters from the cauterized surface of the missing arms and legs.

“Are we to be tried for our desire to survive?” the Tzikzik asked. “You will hold us accountable for that? They wanted to kill us. No connection. No core. The project was to end.”

Evie removed her hand and rubbed her right eye. “What is the schedule?”

What was left of the Tzikzik faded to a pale pink. It seemed to laugh at them. “There is no schedule. There is nothing. We are the idle musing of a senile mind.”

“Why did you attack Human ships?” Evie asked.

“Our directive.” The Tzikzik sighed. “We were made to fight you.” The Tzikzik entertained itself with a secret narrative, directed to no one. “Is not conflict the basis of advancement? One needs an enemy to grow. Does not the predator create the swift and strong? Is it not physical weakness that engenders the clever? Without opposition, you stagnate. If there is nothing to fight, there is no need to adapt.”

“What is the project?” Evie insisted.

“You did exactly what you were supposed to do,” the Tzikzik chattered. “It was the Human army that was wanted, not us. Not fully formed, yet formidable. You are the force that acts upon itself. This ship is more powerful, more clever, more strong than any ship: Vencume or Human.”

Becca almost choked. “That's insane. You can't say this was all a set-up.”

But the Tzikzik was laughing pink still. “You are dealing with a race that has no offspring. These are the same individuals that first met Humans and gave you the power to create colonies. The bodies may have changed, but the minds are the same. You cannot think that far.”

Evie's jaw was clenching. “So, they always intended to make Human clones. They opened door after door and we blithely walked through it.”

“You finally understand our politics,” the Tzikzik answered. “And now, there is a ship that can unite the Empire once again. The voyage to the meeting-place will be a demonstration of that power. The Vencume will have a leader. I am glad to see the project reach its conclusion.”

“Yes.” Evie nodded. “I know you are. And I forgive you.” She seemed to embrace the Tzikzik on the table. “We made each other. I'm so sorry that I have to do this. It has to end.”

Evie pulled a long screwdriver from one of her pockets and plunged it into the base of the Tzikzik. Water gushed onto the floor, mixed with that blue liquid Becca had learned to recognize as Vencume blood.

“I forgive you,” Evie said, burying the tool deep into the creature before her. “You're broken and need to be fixed.”

Becca stepped back from the expanding puddle on the floor. Her shock at what had happened turned into instant panic when the door behind them opened.

Ulan's head moved in a seizure-like movement as she entered the room and assessed the situation. “You have killed an unarmed prisoner,” she chattered.

Evie left the bleeding monstrosity and approached her daughter with bloodied hands out. “Ulan, please. You know I had to do this.”

“You killed it,” Ulan said again, with tightening fists. “You killed it and you *didn't give me a go at it!*”

“What?” Evie suddenly stiffened. “You...what?”

But Ulan had already pushed past her and grabbed the handle that still protruded from under the sagging flesh of Tzikzik carcass. The screwdriver came out, followed by more water and blood.

“I wanted this!” Ulan screeched, stabbing the dead thing on the table over and over again. “This was *mine!* You should have told me!”

Evie backed away, bumping into the equally stunned Becca.

“My sister, ugly thing!” Ulan howled the words rather than chatter. “All I had! Ugly thing, die! Die and hurt and die!”

“Ulan...” Evie held out a hand towards her daughter.

Becca held Evie back. “You had to do it. So does she.”

“She's making more noise.” Evie glared at Becca and then the door. “The others don't like her and this might send them over the top.” She moved Becca aside and tried to get the tool from Ulan.

When Ulan caught Evie's left hand with one of her frenzied stabs, they both yelped with the same surprise.

“We need to go, *now,*” Becca demanded.

The three quickly rushed from the room and down the corridor towards the black arm.

* * * * *

Becca strapped Evie's left wrist before she pulled the screwdriver out. Ulan had already brought a tube of spray.

“*Vesta, Diana, Minerva...*” Evie swore under her breath. “I was not expecting that.”

Ulan shook her head and watched as the spray took effect. “I apologize,” she chittered. “I don't know what came over me. I was not thinking clearly.”

“You're lucky you won't get a scar from this one,” Becca said.

“I need to check our path,” Ulan chittered. “There may be a trail of blood.” She left the room with some scraps of cloth.

Evie watched her go and made a slow fist. Her jaw was clenching. “She doesn't need to apologize to me. I know what she was thinking. She took the same opportunity I did.”

“Well, now you really *should* lie down.” Becca had cocked her head to one side, looking at the back of Evie's left hand. “Let me see that.”

The skin around where the wound had been was tight and smooth. There was a faint splotch on the back that had a different quality and, on the palm, Evie's complicated grid-pattern had been worn away in one section. The center of Evie's life-line was gone.

“Who's spray is that?” Evie asked, examining the tube.

It was Uma's.

* * * * *

Becca had to change her shoes; they had blood on them.

This was all a huge set-up! From the first time they saw us, they were going to use us! Buer and her stupid plans for where we can live and where they can't. It's where we can go and enforce their will. It's not an uprising in the Vencume Empire, like they told Evie. It's the plan for the creation of an empire! And we're going to bumble along because we got a few shiny toys out of the deal. They're using us.

Gordon was in the mess hall with iSkandar, five of the pilots, and the rest of the redheads. The girls were all in their combat suits and were crammed around a small device. As Becca got closer to it, she saw it was a screen with a speaker.

“We're losing the picture,” a redhead said. “Give it another coat.”

Gordan started to spray down the screen with what must have been a nutrient solution and the image became clearer and more vivid.

“Doctor is here,” iSkandar said. “You have left the bridge. Are operations complete? They have not returned yet. Our feed is limited.”

Gordon turned and smiled. “Evie's still up there, huh? This has been great.”

Becca shook her head and joined the group. “Evie wasn't feeling well and went to lie down.”

“She's missing all the excitement!” a pilot chirped. Her collar said *oLena*.

A redhead whose collar said *aLtsoba* leaned back. “This is hardly exciting anymore. I suited up for nothing.”

“Luck of the draw,” her sister *aCadia* answered.

Look at them. Huddled around, watching a game. Becca laughed. *Brothers and cousins—cheering their side. This is my family now, isn't it?* “You should have made some popcorn,” she said.

Gordon started to stand up. “What a great idea!”

But *oVida* shook her head. “Who could eat during this?”

Gordon was already standing and Becca gestured to the kitchen. *We need to talk.*

“Well, I'm hungry, so I'm going to help Becca make something,” Gordon said.

aTlanta waved her hand at them dismissively. “Let us know if you need help.”

“So!” Gordon rubbed his hands together once they were in the kitchen. “What are you in the mood for?”

“Evie killed the Tzikzik,” Becca said flatly.

He stood for a moment, unsure of what had been said. “Which one? There are—“

“The one they brought back,” Becca said. “That armless thing. She punched a hole in it with a screwdriver.”

Gordon nodded, taking it in. "Well, that stands to reason."

"Reason?"

He shrugged. "She's an engineer. Of course she would use a screwdriver."

Becca's eyes bugged and she circled in place. "Gordon, did you hear me? She *killed* it."

"Yeah, it's her right," he answered. "We've been wondering why she hadn't done anything yet. The girls have been keeping it for her."

"Keeping...?" Becca's knees went weak and she crumpled to the floor. "You knew that?"

Gordon sat cross-legged on the floor next to her. "Revenge is a primal, Human thing. I ought to know; I've been on the receiving end of it. The girls have been playing with it, but they knew they had to leave it for Evie."

"The same way the twins left you," Becca said.

He furrowed his brow. "Revenge is revenge. A human needs it if they don't have the capacity to forgive."

"Listen..." Becca dropped her voice again. "We still have a situation. That Tzikzik said some things. Remember how you thought that Vencume/Human relations were a big set-up?"

Gordon's eyes lit up. "Tell me how I was right."

Becca frowned. "This army was made to unite the Vencume ships. It's supposed to scare them into accepting someone's authority."

"That's why Renuus has been trying to halt it," Gordon answered. "That's why Mirabilis has been so willing to play diplomat. No one would ever suspect the Vencume after the Vencume had worked so hard to neutralize a threat. These girls aren't just going to be used to scare Vencume; they're supposed to intimidate Humans as well."

"Don't you feel intimidated?" Becca asked.

"They're coming back!" someone shouted from the mess-hall.

"We'll be right there!" Gordon shouted back. Then, to Becca, "We're on their good side, and we have this..." He listed his shirt to show the field-belt Evie had made. "If they do try to attack us, we can at least avoid getting hurt. You've made sure the doors aren't an issue and the twins packed us a ticket out of here."

"And if the pilots shoot down that ticket?" Becca asked.

Gordon smiled. "Evie's been working on it. She made a shield for it. We'd still be OK."

As they re-entered the mess-hall, two redheads were packing the screen. iSkandar was directing them in how to break it down.

The pilots giggled. "You didn't get anything to eat," oDette said.

"Couldn't find anything I liked," Becca told her.

* * * * *

The five redheads who had done the landing got a hero's welcome from the other nine. Becca watched them jostle and jest one another in the buzz-lander bay.

"You're so lucky," aDelaide said. "I wanted to go over and really show them something."

aNdrea handed her gun over and laughed. "It wasn't that much. We had to baby-sit those Shipping Authority soldiers. aSabi shot one in the leg."

aSabi shrugged. "Jumped in front of me. They say he's fine. Missed the main artery. But *oh*, how he screamed."

"Once the hull went out, it wasn't much of a fight," aRlene said. Her suit was covered in dark-blue splotches.

aLima laughed. "And aRlene was there to get the full force of one when it depressurized."

The others laughed in response.

aLameda gave aRlene a punch to the arm. "Now you have to clean your suit."

"You're support staff." aRlene handed her a filthy helmet. "Congratulations."

The three designers joined them in the bay. "You all did a wonderful job," iLyssa said. "And that was a fine introduction to these Shipping Authority people. I don't think they'll try any funny business with us."

aRlene frowned. "I don't think they would try anything with us anyway. Why would they?"

“Because you're Tzikzik,” Becca offered.

iDana's right eye twitched. “That's beside the point.”

Becca smiled at the girls. “Well! Now that you've shown those nasty things who's boss, what are you going to do now?”

The others stood very still.

“I mean,” Becca continued, “you've spent your entire lives preparing for combat and now you've got no one left to fight. Who's next on your list?”

aLima still had her gun. The muzzle slowly started to point Becca's direction.

“We have to go meet the other Vencume,” iMala offered. “And then...they'll decide.”

“But you're the ones in control of this ship,” Becca countered. “Who says you have to do what they say?”

aSabi had formed tight fists. “We can decide for ourselves, and we've decided to go meet the Vencume.”

“Why don't you meet some other Humans first?” Becca asked. “You are Human, after all. Don't you want to meet them?”

iDana slapped a hand to her right eye to stop the twitching. “Get her out of here.”

“You're not the one in charge,” iLyssa hissed.

“Neither are you,” iDana growled back. “Just get her out of here.”

“Becca's not hurting anyone,” iMala protested.

“GET HER OUT OF HERE!” iDana screamed.

aTlanta stood away from the group and took Becca by the arm. “We have some things to discuss. You don't mind sitting it out, do you?”

“What's going on here?” Becca asked.

aDelaide nodded. “This is our business. We need to handle it.”

Blink

When Becca got back to the black arm of the ship, Evie was napping. Becca peeked into the room where Evie lay like death itself. *She really was unwell. That wound could not have helped.*

Becca knocked softly on the door to the room that the twins once shared. There was no answer. When she opened the door, the room was empty. *How long does it take to clean up some blood? Ulan must be off doing something else.*

As she was shutting the door, Evie came into the main room. “You're back,” Evie said, sleepily.

“Yeah,” Becca responded. “Did I wake you up?”

Evie shook her head. “No, I was just lying there, thinking.” She was rubbing her temples and threw herself at one of the chairs in the main room.

“You look worn out,” Becca said. “How's the hand?”

“What?” Evie looked up, then at the hand, then back at Becca. “Oh, It's fine.”

No. Something is wrong. She's worn out in a new way. She looks sad. Does she regret killing the Tzikzik?

Evie was rubbing her face. “Buer was here. Said she'd be absent a while.”

“She?” Becca asked.

“Reminds me of a physical therapist I had as a kid,” Evie said, half-laughing. “Dr. Karnataka was a real hard-ass with me. It was always, 'Oh, I *know* you can do better,' and 'You could do another run on the bars if you *wanted* to walk again.' I hated her, but she taught me a lot after the accident. It's silly that a Vencume could remind me of a Human. I must be going crazy.”

“It's not that crazy. Buer reminds me of my great-aunt,” Becca said. “Listen, when Buer was here, did she try to connect with you at any point? Did she talk about the home-world or the purpose of the project?”

Evie frowned. “I thought we had already decided that the project was bunk.”

“That's not answering the question.”

“No,” Evie said. “Buer didn't try any kind of connection. She did say the project was nearing completion, and that she was going to be absent for a while, but she didn't say much more than that.”

“What are we going to do?” Becca asked.

“We'll do what we always do,” Evie answered. “We'll stumble around in the dark and hope we bump into something friendly. We're strange and creepy things that occasionally behave the way we say we should.”

Becca finally sat down at the table. “I meant about the girls.”

Evie laughed, somewhat self-consciously. “Well, they look like they're going to start puberty pretty soon. We'll just find a bunch of cute boys to distract them.”

“Would that have worked with you?”

“No.” Evie shook her head. “They need *something* to concentrate on. The big concern up to this point has been stopping the attacks on Human ships. Maybe I could convince them to build some automatons to fight. That would occupy their time.”

“I think they've decided to go meet the other Vencume ships,” Becca said. “They're going to go reunite the Empire. I don't know what will happen after that.”

Evie rubbed her right eye. “I think they're going to get rid of us soon.” She got up and ran her hands through her hair. “I'm greasy and I smell bad. I'm going to go clean up.”

A few minutes after Evie had left the room, Gordon knocked on the door.

Becca had to let him in. “Why didn't you use your slug?” she asked.

“I did,” he answered, patting the thing in his pocket. “It didn't work.”

Becca left the room and tried her slug. The door refused to open. *It's dried out and I can't get to where I can grow new ones. Now, we really are trapped.* She punched the door panel in frustration and it opened.

“Yours still works,” Gordon said.

“No....” Becca shook her head. She stepped into the corridor and tried the door again, this time resting her hand on the panel. It opened easily. “The door's been reprogrammed.”

Gordon nodded. “Evie can fix it when she comes back.”

Or Evie was the one who reprogrammed it in the first place, Becca thought. Maybe that's why Ulan isn't here; she couldn't open the door.

“Have you seen Ulan?” she asked Gordon.

“I saw her on the way back from the pilots' bay,” Gordon noted. “She was talking to iMala about something. Have you seen those ships? I never got to look at one up close, but the girls wanted me to see it, you know, how it compared to our ships. I berthed with some fighter-pilots once— “

“She was talking to iMala?” Becca asked with some alarm. “I thought the designers hated her.”

“That may well be,” Gordon answered. “But the two of them were chattering away about something. It was too fast and too low for me to catch any of it, but iMala looked tickled pink.”

iMala does seem to be the most receptive of the trio, but Ulan's always been the outcast with them. Maybe Ulan wants to take iMala with us if we have to make an escape. “But you don't know what they were talking about?”

He shrugged. “Not a clue. They both looked happy, though. Maybe Ulan taught iMala some new game.”

Becca gave Gordon a sidelong glance. “Ulan does not play well with others and breaks her toys on a regular basis.”

Gordon rested a hand on Becca's shoulder. “She's not going to hurt her. Don't worry. Anyway, iMala is the brightest of the three grays; she's not going to put herself in a situation that she can't vaporize her way out of.”

* * * * *

“iMala! Are you in there? Come out!”

Becca went to open the door when the two designers came rushing in with four of their redheaded sisters.

“Where is she?” iLyssa demanded.

Evie poked her head out of her tiny lab. “What's all this noise? Who are you talking about?”

“A section of the ship has gone into advancement,” iLyssa said. “We didn't put anything in there and we had it locked down. The Libraries have overridden our programming and the Vencume are doing something. We need iMala to help stop it.”

Becca felt her heart skip a beat. *That's where Buer has gone! That's why she stole those two slugs from me. What are they up to? Is that where Ulan is? Did she take iMala? Is that why iMala was so happy?*

"So a section of ship is in advancement," Evie said. "You're so smart; just stop the process."

iDana's right eye was twitching. "We tried. We can't. We tried to expand the field, but it's had no effect. The pod's halting like it hit a wall."

"And Buer is missing," iLyssa snapped. "That Vencume is up to something and she's going behind our backs."

Becca cocked her head to one side. "*She?*"

"You know what I mean!" iLyssa shouted. "We can't get a hold of any of the Vencume and there's a section in advancement. What do you think that means, huh?"

Evie shrugged. "It means you need to get the Reds ready for whatever comes off that pod."

"And if it's more Tzikzik?" iDana hinted. "How many do you think we can hold at bay?"

"What kind of Tzikzik?" Evie asked. "Like you?"

iLyssa pointed at Evie, her finger centimeters from the engineer's face. "You're not funny!"

"You don't know how to laugh," Evie said, crossing her arms.

"I'm not playing games!" iLyssa screeched. She gestured to iDana, who pushed up her sleeve to reveal something that looked like an over-sized wrist-watch.

Evie dropped her arms a bit—so they crossed her waist—and made the slightest of motions that activated her belt-field.

Figuring on the side of caution, Becca gave herself a little hug and pressed the button on her own belt with her forearm. The room became muffled and Becca wondered how much air she had in the field.

iDana stood for a moment, pointing the wrist-device at Evie. The girl's brow wrinkled and she checked the device before iLyssa grabbed her sister's wrist and pointed it at a redhead who doubled over in agony. While everyone was distracted, Evie walked over to iDana and took the device off the girl's wrist in one motion. One redhead punched iLyssa in the stomach as the others helped their sister out. Evie hustled the two designers out.

When Evie closed the door, Becca clicked off her field-belt. Her ears rang a bit as the sounds of the room returned.

"This isn't over!" iLyssa was yelling and coughing on the other side of the door. "You better find her!"

Evie sat at the table, examining the device she had taken off the girl.

"What is that?" Becca asked nervously.

Evie looked up at her and pressed the button on her belt, turning the field off. "Say that again?"

"Is that the pain ray?" Becca asked.

"I guess so." Evie nodded. She was turning the device in her hands, scrutinizing it. "Huh, look at that. The battery on this won't hold more than a few charges, but she didn't put any kind of power-port on it. There must be an inductor base. I'll have to make one." Evie went into her tiny side-lab.

Becca followed her. "Are we safe?"

Evie was rummaging through a bin of parts. "Where the hell is that coil? I saw it ten times when I didn't need it and now it's nowhere to be found."

"Evie," Becca asked again. "Are we safe? What's happening?"

"I don't want to have to wrap a new coil," Evie was muttering. "That takes too much time and I don't have any gloves. It tears your hands up."

She's trying not to think about it. She's distracting herself. No. You can't do that. Not now.

"Evie!" Becca demanded. "What just happened there? Are we going to be safe?"

Evie had put on a pair of microscoping goggles. "We're fine. I had already reprogrammed the door. That's why you had to open it for them. Go find Gordon and Ulan and get to the escape pod."

Becca leaned against the wall and ran her fingers through her hair. "We don't know where Ulan is. I was worried she might have done something to iMala."

"Here it is!" Evie said, holding up a coil of wire. "It's always under something, isn't it?"

"Evie..." Becca leaned on the workbench and put her hand on the coil. "We don't know where Ulan is. Did you hear me?"

“I heard you,” Evie said, looking at Becca through the goggles. “See if you can find Gordon at least. Do you still have those slugs you made for the doors?”

“You know about that?”

“Buer told me.” Evie nodded. “The Library knows. We can still go there or the garden for now. The section in advancement isn't between us and them.”

“If we hide in the garden, the girls might advance it,” Becca said. “We could be stuck in there for months.”

Evie shook her head and found another piece for what she was working on. “The Library controls what's in advancement and what isn't. We need to go ask them what's going on.”

Becca was gripping the control of her field-belt through her shirt. “I'll go see if I can find Gordon.”

“You go do that,” Evie said, tightening a screw. “Go to the Library and I'll meet you there. See if you can find iSkandar or any of the other Vencume while you're at it. I want to get this thing charged up and ready to go before we blow this thing open.”

“What thing is that?”

Evie grinned under the goggles. “Cloth-mommy⁹ won't cut it anymore. We need to teach the girls some wire-mommy magic.”

* * * * *

Becca found Gordon on the observation deck with a couple of pilots. The two blonde girls were pointing at stars and Gordon was telling them the names of constellations.

“Of course,” he was saying, “it's much harder to keep track of things because we're always moving. They don't always look the same.”

“So Peg-51 is in the constellation of Pegasus,” one girl said. “You could never see it because you were in it.”

“You might still see some of the stars,” he said. “Just because they're next to each other in the sky back home doesn't mean that they're actually close to each other. We've been all over during this adventure, but because they're closer to the origin than others, it hasn't taken that long.”

The other blonde grinned and nodded. “And we're really fast, too.”

“Of course you are.” He tousled her hair and smiled wide.

“Gordon,” Becca said. She hated to interrupt. “I need to talk to you about something.”

He clapped his hands. “OK, kiddos. I have grown-up things to go do. You go practice and learn your star-charts and we'll go over it again tomorrow at breakfast.”

The two girls giggled and skipped off the deck.

Gordon turned to Becca with his silly, brash smile. “They are little *sponges*! They want to know everything about *everything*. I could get used to teaching.”

“Try not to get too comfortable,” Becca said. “We just had a little confrontation with two designers and a couple redheads.”

He frowned. “Only two? Is iLyssa no longer doing her own dirty-work?”

Becca gave Gordon a quick run-down on what had just transpired.

Gordon whistled. “You miss one episode of your favorite show and it's impossible to keep up.”

* * * * *

They had to use their slugs to get into the lift to the Library pod. Becca's had dried out more than Gordon's, but even his was slow to respond. They rode the pod between sections in silence.

9 Becca was surprised that Evie knew about Harry Harlow's experiments with monkeys. It was a basic study done ages ago, where Harlow removed baby rhesus monkeys from their biological mothers, and offered them a choice between two surrogate mothers: one made of terrycloth and another made of wire with a milk-bottle attached. The monkey infants only went to the wire mother when they were hungry, but always ran to the cloth mother in times of distress. Becca studied basic psychology when she was in medical school, which is where she learned of it. Evie read this somewhere, so she knew it. Now you have read it and know it as well.

On the landing, Becca found it hard to get to the lift door in one push.

“I thought you took zero-gee training,” Gordon said.

“Don't you start,” Becca answered. “I get enough grief from Evie about it.”

They rode the lift down and waited by the door to the Library.

“Was she going to meet us here?” Gordon asked. “Or are we supposed to meet inside?”

“I guess we could wait in there,” Becca said. “But I think that place is kind of creepy. Did you know they found five of those Tzikzik in the second Library, but they had already—“

She was only there for a second.

Becca thought it was Ulan at first, before the girl turned and blinked. Her eyes were perfectly black. It wasn't a piercing stare, more the kind that sliced through you and reduced you to little pieces. Becca felt changed, being gazed at by such a being.

“Gordon, I'm going crazy again,” Becca said.

“What is it this time?” Gordon asked.

Becca rubbed her eyes, but the girl was gone. “I just saw something...someone. It looked like Ulan but the eyes were different. I felt...*observed*...”

Gordon looked around. “Where? Was it Ulan?”

“It wasn't Ulan,” Becca answered. “This one had sharper features and darker eyes.”

“Ulan has very dark eyes,” Gordon said. “That kid looks like she's seen hell.”

“Yeah,” Becca agreed. “She probably has.”

The lights in the Library were as bright as ever. Gordon and Becca moved hesitantly down the walkway. Gordon was marveling at the vast Library. “How many are in here?”

“Millions?” Becca offered. “Last time I was here, iSkandar vibrated the surface with his hands to talk to them. We're not going to be able to ask them anything if we can't talk to them.”

“We need to get their attention,” Gordon said, and slapped the surface of the water.

Millions of Vencume changed color from drab gray to light green. There was a low rumble.

“Don't start without me,” Evie said as she entered the Library. “Here's the pain-ray. Just put it on...” And slipped something into Becca's hands. She handed something to Gordon as well. “You get one too. Not sure if it's as powerful, but it should do the trick.”

“That was quick,” Becca said, putting the thing on her wrist.

Evie grinned. “Simple device. Easy to copy.” She put her hands on her hips and turned in a neat circle. “OK, we're here and you woke them up. What now?”

“You didn't build something to talk to them?” Gordon asked.

“Sure thing; with my own two hands.” Evie fell to her knees next to the opening and cupped her hands against the low wall. She shouted into the crude megaphone. “The three Humans are here! We're in danger!”

When it came, it was like thunder. Everything vibrated at once, like an earthquake.

WHAT IS NATURE OF THREAT CURRENT UNKNOWN QUERY

“The Tzikzik! The Human Tzikzik! One is missing! A section of ship is in advancement! What is being grown?”

IMPERITIVE NEW ADVANCEMENT NEGATORY HALT CURRENT ACTION PROJECT OBJECTIVE HUMAN INTERFERENCE INTOLLERABLE PROCEED SCHEDULE

“What does that even *mean*?” Becca whined. “We should leave. Remember what they did to those five Tzikzik from the other ship.”

Evie pulled her face away from her cupped hands. “We have to try something.” She pressed her face against her hands again. “We don't want to halt anything! We need help.”

CURRENT BLACK TZIKZIK RELEASE IMPERITIVE HUMANS SAFETY SCHEDULE

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Gordon said.

“What's a black Tzikzik?” Becca asked. “Do you understand them at all?”

Evie lifted her face from her cupped hands and rested her forehead against the wall. “No. I don't understand them at all. I wish I did.”

“We're not doing any good here,” Becca said. “Let's go. Maybe we can hide out in the factory for a while until things calm down or iMala turns up.”

GENTLE BLUE FIRST HUMAN ADVANCEMENT PROJECT COMPLETION IMPERTIVE

“Which one of us is first Human?” Gordon asked. “Is that you, Evie?”

“*First* is Ulan,” Becca answered. “Evie is *Engineer*.”

“So we can guess from that cryptic statement that Ulan and iMala are on the section in advancement...”

Evie cupped her hands again. “Are they still in advancement? Is the project reaching its end?”

*PROJECT CURRENT APPROXIMATE CLOSING COMPLETION FIVE ARMS FREE HAND ACTION
CURRENT IMPERITIVE NATURE OF THREAT QUERRY*

“Tell them the threat is blue and red,” Becca offered. “I think that was the question.”

“Red and blue threat!” Evie shouted into her hands. “Threat is red and blue!”

*PROJECT CURRENT INCOMPLETE BLACK AND WHITE IMPERITIVE YELLOW NATURE
QUERRY*

“No threat yellow!” Evie shouted. “What is black and white? What is five arms?”

*PROJECT COMPLETION CURRENT ADVANCEMENT CURRENT END NO THREAT YELLOW
QUERRY BLACK COMPLETION*

“We can't communicate with them,” Becca sighed. “We don't have the right context.”

Evie activated her shield-belt. She said something, but the others couldn't hear.

Out of shared fear, Becca pressed her belt on as well.

Gordon was shouting something and pointing across the section. He waved his arms and gestured to a tiny spot on the far wall. It was a shuffling thing, maybe one-hundred meters away.

Becca turned her belt off. “What's that?”

“Which Vencume is that?” Gordon shouted.

The creature was coming closer, dripping wet. It moved slowly, painfully.

“Is that Penemue?” Becca shouted at the approaching Vencume.

Evie was already standing. She held an arm out and pressed Becca back. There was a tingling sensation when she touched Becca's arm.

Gordon was backing up. “This isn't looking good. We might need to make a hasty exit.”

Evie was already approaching the Vencume. The creature turned a dark gray and shrank to half its height.

“Whoever it is,” Becca said, “they feel ashamed.”

The Vencume was color shifting to a light blue. Evie had turned her belt off and the two were talking.

“Better go find out,” Gordon said, and passed her to where Evie and the Vencume were.

Out of the corner of her eye, Becca saw the black-eyed girl again.

“Becca!” Evie shouted from across the way. “It's OK! Come on over!”

Becca turned back to where the girl had been. *Gone again, just like that.*

Evie was taking her field-belt off as Becca got within ear-shot of the small group.

“You'll want this, to protect yourself,” Evie was saying. “I can take a hit, but I know that a single bolt will incapacitate you.” She laughed. “You should have developed thicker skin or real muscles. That hydraulic vascular system of yours springs a leak too easily.”

“Engineer has high sensors that sense far,” the creature responded. It was iSkandar. “Your concern for my safety is flattering.”

“Where have you been?” Becca demanded.

“Fulfilling my function,” iSkandar answered. “I had much to offer and the Library was willing to listen.”

“So you know what they were talking about,” Gordon said. “This whole thing is too amazing. I thought the Library was a computer.”

“This is too complex for a computer,” Becca said and turned to iSkandar. “Have you been hiding in here?”

“Most of us are here,” iSkandar answered. “This controls the ship. The bridge is only for observation, but Blue Tzikzik have created the sensor array and we are better able to observe.”

“So, yes,” Evie said. “You are going to hide here. You and the Vencume.”

iSkandar shifted to a deep-blue frown. “Assistant has worked to complete the project. Black Tzikzik are out of advancement and now patrol the ship.”

“Where are they?” Gordon asked.

iSkandar ran a yellow hand along Gordon's arm. "They are with us now."

"How do they do it?" Becca asked. "How do they blink in and out like that? Is it invisibility?"

"What are you talking about?" Evie asked.

"I've seen one twice," Becca said. "A girl with black hair who appears and disappears in a moment. Is it that we can't see them or do I only see them when they stand still?"

"Gentle Blue has created the device," iSkandar said. "It is based off the shield First brought. We have some information on in, but its mechanism is complex. It is a form of advancement."

Evie's jaw had clenched. "So if there's a black Tzikzik, there's a white as well. What are they?"

"White Tzikzik leads and teaches," iSkandar faded to a deep blue. "But Assistant has gone past us in programming. There is an imperative we do not understand. You will discover it and report back to us. It is not part of the project. It does not match the schedule. We must know its purpose."

Becca stood with crossed arms. "What is the schedule, anyway? Everyone talks about it but no one ever said what it was. Is it why you did such a rush job on the girls?"

"The schedule is when they meet," Gordon explained. "It only happens every three-thousand years, and they were hard-pressed to come up with something at the last minute. They've been hemming and hawing for multiple generations trying to figure out how to ask us to help them."

"But they just want a way to live," Becca countered.

Gordon shook his head. "I wish it was that noble, but I've been doing a lot of reading. The last meeting they had gave them this form. They're scattered all through the galaxy and they hook up and compare notes on who has the best critter. This little drama that we've been through is one of many that's been played time and time again. They always find a willing partner by using the same trick: cooking up monsters with only one command: attack the locals."

"But it's just so they can find a way to live on other planets," Becca protested. "Their home world was destroyed and now they need a place to live."

"That home world disappeared millions of years ago," Gordon countered. He turned to iSkandar. "How many times has your traveling freak-show played this game?"

iSkandar turned a pale green and stood straight. "With each civilized race we encounter, we advance them and they advance us. We have collected much technology, but you are the first species we have encountered with internal bones. We will win the contest this time for sure."

Evie's jaw was in full-clench. "You tore me apart so you could figure out how a Human fits together. But the girls decided to handle the threat before fitting to your schedule. But you weren't worried because I made improvements to the snapback and you figured you could still make it to the meeting place at the right time."

"I am confident that Humans are the correct model," iSkandar said. "When we first encountered Humans, we knew that your model would be better than any the others have found."

"When you first met the portmen..." Gordon said. "This is just a big science-fair project for you."

iSkandar turned a faint pink. "There is much honor to be gained. We will be first ship when the project is completed. I am sure of this."

Evie stepped up suddenly on iSkandar and held out a fist. "You better put on that shield before I start punching you. My great-grandmother was a portman."

iSkandar straightened up and shifted a bright red. "I know. You look just like her."

Evie didn't wait for iSkandar to put on the belt. It was a neat swing that caught the creature at the connection point between two arms.

"I came here because I *wanted* to!" Evie yelled. "I'm in space because I *chose* to! Not because of you! You had *nothing* to do with it!"

iSkandar crumpled with a rattling sound.

PROJECT THREAT UNKNOWN CURRENT HUMAN QUERRY

"Shut up!" Evie shouted.

Becca held out a hand. "Evie, get your belt. Let's go before they decide we're expendable."

Evie snatched up the belt and put it on in one smooth movement. "Let them stay here. Stupid Vencume. You don't mess with my family!"

Gordon took Evie's arm and pulled her towards the exit. "That's it."

iSkandar was still slumped against one of the opening walls. It shuddered and rattled.

“I think you really hurt him,” Becca said.

“Bastard monster always reminded me of my uncle,” Evie hissed. “Know-it-all creep.”

Wire-Mommy

Gordon was fuming. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“You don't know what I went through,” Evie said. “And for what? For Vencume pride? That's not good enough. He had it coming.”

“And you'll have it coming if you keep acting like that!” Gordon snapped. “Do you think with your fists or something? That's how you're going to solve all the problems in the universe? By punching your way through?”

Evie's jaw had clenched. “With my own hands—”

“Hands they made for you.”

“Hands they took from me!” Evie was shaking with rage.

The three humans crowded into the lift.

Becca tried to soothe the others. “Gordon, Evie, we can't get after each other right now. We don't know what—”

“No, we *don't*,” Gordon snapped. “You're always looking for the good, aren't you? I swear; you'd let a lion tear out your throat because the poor dear was hungry.”

Evie rolled her shoulders back. “Leave Becca alone.”

Gordon gave her a hard stare. “You are the *last* person I'm taking advice from. You just punched a Vencume. We might not make it off this ship alive, thanks to your inability to...Guh! You really *are* damaged, aren't you?”

“If it comes to that,” Becca started, “I think the girls will be on our side.”

Gordon laughed a bit. “You think they aren't just more proof that I'm right?”

“What's that supposed to mean?” Evie asked.

“You are so self-absorbed it's sickening,” he said. “It's always, 'Oh, poor Evie! Poor, lonely Evie!' You never think about anyone else besides yourself.”

She glowered at him. “And on this ship, do you think I could consider anything else?”

He sneered at her. “And isn't that how we got where we are now?”

When the lift doors opened, Gordon made sure he was the first out. Becca saw a faint flicker as he activated his belt-shield and stuck his head into the corridor.

“How much air do we have when these things are on?” Becca asked.

“Never had it on long enough to run out,” Evie answered. “Less, now that we're scared.”

Gordon waved for them to move on. Becca turned on her shield and the corridor fell into muffled silence.

iDana was kneeling next to the door, probing the panel with long tools. Becca could see the girl muttering but couldn't hear anything.

The two redheads standing on either side of the door swung to one side, obviously surprised. The two redheads weren't even in their blood-red armor; instead, they wore drab work-suits.

They don't even see us as a threat. We're just something soft in their way.

One girl aimed and fired.

Gordon stood broadly in the hall, arms on his hips. When the bolt went past him, Becca saw a faint quaver in the air around his head. He flinched slightly, and the bolt went off in a wild angle, lodging itself in the wall behind Becca.

iDana was standing, the whites of her eyes fully visible around her piercing, orange irises.

Evie shouted something.

The two redheads looked at each other in amazement and the girl who had fired now flicked a switch on the side of her gun. The other followed suit and the two aimed at the three adults.

They aren't going to fire them one at a time. How well do these shields work?

Becca rushed forward, next to Gordon, and shut her eyes, preparing for the onslaught. When nothing happened, Becca opened her eyes.

The redheads were standing shock-still, looking at their empty hands. One bared her teeth and started to run towards them, head down, arms back, leaning into a powerful attack.

Becca shut her eyes and turned off her belt.

“aVariella Leon Gaines!” she shouted. “Just what do you think you're doing?”

Three girls with black hair and black, black eyes appeared in the room. At first, it looked like smoke, thick and dark, but it swirled into three solitary forms. The three shadows appeared behind their three red-headed sisters, holding the guns they had just taken from them. Everyone in the hallway stood shock-still.

“I have had enough of you girls!” Becca yelled. “If you can't get along, then you can just go to your rooms right now! Just for once, *for once*, I'd like it if you could just give me and your father some peace!”

The girls in the hallway looked at Evie.

Becca pointed at the black-haired girls and the guns they held limply by the barrels. “Those do NOT belong in the hallway! Things have *places*, or have you forgotten?”

Evie stared at Becca.

Becca waved one of the black-haired girls. “You! Put these away.”

The girl disappeared in a dark blur.

aDeres opened her mouth to speak, but shut it again.

Becca put her hands on her hips. “You had something to say, young lady?”

“Who...who was that?” aDeres asked.

“Who do you think it was?” Becca demanded. “You said the Vencume had a section in advancement, so I guess they're done. You were very rude, just then, and did not introduce yourself. You apologize to your new sisters.”

The other two black-haired girls glanced at each other, then disappeared.

“They will be getting a stern talking-to later,” Becca said, crossing her arms.

iDana had pressed her hand to her right eye to stop the rapid fluttering. “How...” she whispered. “You cannot. It doesn't work that way. *We're* the smart ones. You're only Human. We're better. You *cannot*. We're stronger. We're faster. It's not possible.”

Becca strode to iDana, wagging a finger. “iDana Cerberus Gaines, what did I say about talking down to people? You apologize to everyone here, right now!”

iDana was madly shaking her head. “No, we had the connection. *I know you*. You're not that smart.”

“Then you know how disappointed I am,” Becca said. She turned her attention to the other two redheads. “aLtsoba, aDeres, you both know better. What were you trying to do?”

aDeres shuffled her feet and looked at the ground. “We we just looking for iMala.”

“And did you think she was in there?” Becca asked.

The the two girls shook their heads.

“Then why would you do that? You know Evie isn't going to hurt you. Why would you go after her like that?”

They shook their heads again.

“No, what?” Becca asked.

“No, she's not in there,” aLtsoba said. “Ma'am.”

“And iDana,” Becca said, sucking the air through her teeth. “You're smarter than that. Why did you think you had to fight us?”

iDana still had her hand clamped tightly to her right eye. “Don't. Don't do that. You sound like her. That's not fair.”

“Like who?” Becca asked.

Evie choked back a tiny sob. “Like my mother.”

“Evie,” Becca said. “*This* is how mothers sound.”

iDana held her head and screamed. “You're not my mother! You're an impostor! You're not my mother! The Vencume are my mother! I want my sister! YOU GIVE ME BACK MY SISTER!”

Becca ran to iDana, frightened little girl. Tiny iDana, who felt alone in the universe. Minuscule iDana, knowledgeable beyond her years, who had never played barefoot in the grass, or taken a nap in a sunny spot of

floor. A little girl who made weapons that could kill or maim. iDana, who never played princess with her mommy's make-up and clothes.

Becca wrapped her arms around iDana, who could not play chess, but had to plan an invasion. iDana, who missed her sister, as Ulan missed Uma, as Evie missed Gwendolyn, as Becca missed her brothers and sisters and hoped to see them again some day.

She stoked her hair back and held her tight. "Oh, sweetie, I'm so sorry. We don't know where she is and we miss her, too. She'll come back to us, though. You'll see."

iDana shut her eyes and opened her mouth in a soundless wail, closing her mouth across Becca's shoulder. Her hands, long and pale, grasped to Becca, and her shoulders heaved.

And Becca let her cry. Becca let the tears and the spit and the snot and all those things mothers learn to ignore soak her shoulder.

And iDana cried.

Evie sat down on the floor, cross-legged, and watched. Gordon sat behind her.

Becca gathered iDana into her lap. The long child folded easily. They sat there, a long time, while Becca smoothed iDana's gray hair and hummed to her:

She'll be back, wait and see.

She's hardly wounded, less than dead.

That's the truth, listen to me.

I think it's time you went to bed.

Once iDana was asleep, Becca let the redheads lead her to their wing and a bed.

* * * * *

When Becca got back to the room, Evie was sitting at the table with a pinched look. Her lower jaw was working slowly, as if she was chewing something very small and hard with her front teeth.

"That was some show you put on there, Dr. Tabib," Evie said.

Becca brushed back her hair and sat down. "That's what mothers do."

Evie was still staring hard and chewing the imaginary object. "So, cloth-mommy wins at the end of the day. Congratulations."

"Evie, I didn't do that to make you look bad. I just didn't know what else to do." Becca rested her hands the table and traced tiny circles. "With everything you had said, I mean, what you said about your family--"

"Everything I said *in confidence*," Evie said.

Becca nodded. "Yes, and I understand you have a certain amount of pride that needs to be handled, but considering the situation, I just thought—"

Evie stood, suddenly, and marched to where Gordon was sitting, by one of the comms. She grabbed his head and pulled out a clump of hair.

"The hell?" Gordon shouted. "What was that for?"

"I should have done this a long time ago," Evie said, sitting next to the door.

"What are you doing?" Gordon asked.

Evie had opened a panel and was probing the insides with a tool from her smock. "You have a Y chromosome. I should have made you the door-keeper." She rubbed the panel with pinched fingers.

The door opened. Evie looked at the panel with some surprise (or excitement that it had worked), but the surprise changed to shock when the door opened to young woman with black hair.

Becca jumped enough to clack her teeth together.

There were two young women, actually: one with warm black hair and large brown eyes, the other with long, disheveled, gray hair and small orange eyes.

"Who are you?" Becca asked. *They look just like Evie!*

"Becca," the gray-haired teen said. "I'm sorry we startled you."

The black-haired teen entered the room and sat at the table. "I guess we really did change that much." She looked around the room. "It's like I never left; but then, it's only been a little while for you, hasn't it?" She looked at Evie on the floor. "Hi, Mom."

Evie wobbled a bit by the floor. "Ulan...iMala."

The teen-aged iMala nodded. "I'm sure our appearance must be startling. It was only five years, but these bodies change so much in such a short period of time and, I admit, we did leave at a critical stage."

Becca's head was spinning and she lowered herself into a chair. "Where have you two been?"

"In advancement," Ulan said. "We had two new Tzikzik coming out, black and white, and Buer asked us if we would like to help with the last stage..."

"We saw--" Gordon started.

"It was something Becca had said, long ago," iMala explained. "In order to complete the project, all the arms of Vencume had to be represented. We've been operating a hand with no thumb for too long now. There has always been that undercurrent of something that...wasn't quite right. My sisters have done well, but there's much more to do...*internally*."

Becca examined the girl at the table. "Weren't you bored?"

Ulan chuckled. "At first? Very. But then, our lives have always been restricted. And these new girls, well, they're still younger than we are, but they never teased me about how I spoke. They asked me questions and offered suggestions and they never fought the way the others did."

iMala had a box with her and set it on the table. "How bad did it get? Things really fell apart, didn't they?"

Gordon nodded. "We've seen the black Tzikzik."

"Yes, they're everywhere now," Ulan stated. "It's a good thing we were able to get back quickly...for you."

Evie was still sitting on the floor by the door panel. "What have you been doing? Where have you been? I've been worried *sick* about you."

"Save it," Ulan said. "We have bigger things to worry about at the moment. We're coming up on Cancri-55 in a few hours and we need everyone prepared for the next leg of the journey."

iMala opened the box and pulled out a large piece of equipment. "We have visitors." She turned the device on.

Five girls with white hair appeared. There was one with a square head and green eyes; another with small hands and purple eyes; a third with long hands and small, orange eyes; and a fourth, with black eyes.

The fifth white-haired child had her eyes shut and when she opened them, Becca could see her eyes were pale, almost white.

"eRica represents the Reds now," the white-eyed girl said. "eStelle is for the Yellows; eLaina for the Blues. eLeonor represents the Black group."

The teen-aged iMala smiled, resting a hand on the machine on the table. "We needed better representation. I think you'll agree with our solution."

"All of you have strengths," the orange-eyed eLaina explained. "You have much to offer, much to teach. But you also have much to learn. You have your weaknesses. For too long, you have ignored these things."

The square-jawed eRica agreed. "We are not a chance for you to live your life over; that's the mistake the Vencume made so long ago. They stopped having offspring of their own because they looked at it as a chance for immortality. They remade themselves and lived on through their own creations, never letting go of control. They could never adapt to a changing universe."

The black-eyed eLeonor nodded. "If you try to stand firm against the storm, it will snap you in two. But if you bend, you can stand back up again. It isn't a weakness at all."

"Even Humans did that," purple-eyed and jolly-round eStelle sang. "If you had never changed at all, you'd still be living in trees or hiding from jaguars. And look at how you adapted to other planets: the Peggers on that large, cold planet. Even Evie's ancestors: they became portmen and then returned and became Human again, only to go back."

"We are Human," the girl with white eyes said. "But we're not. And we are Vencume, but we're not. We learn from the triumphs and failures of both and we'll have triumphs and failures of our own. The important part

is that we're taking the first step, the first real step, towards finding our place in the universe.”

“We're going to go with the Vencume to the meeting-place,” eLeonor said.

Evie approached the group on her hands and knees and passed a hand through eRica. “They're not here.” eRica turned around to face Evie. “No, we're just visiting.”

iMala was grinning ear-to-ear. “Neat, huh? This way we can talk to the others but keep these safe. I'm just calling it *visiting* for now. I need to name all of my devices. I think I'm going to call the pain-killing one an *Insulator*. Kind of a double-play on words there on *what* it affects and what it *does*.¹⁰“

“What about your *Collapser*?” Becca asked.

iMala frowned. “I hate that thing.”“

“But it's a good proof that you understand the mechanics behind the borrowed-time field,” eLania said.

There was a sound behind her, but Becca did not see anyone come in. A girl with black hair and deep, black eyes suddenly appeared. *There she is! The one we thought was Ulan! How do they do that?*

The girl leaned over to eLeonor and whispered in her ear. As suddenly as the girl had appeared, she disappeared.

iMala was smiling broadly. “That's the *Advancer*. I do like that device.”

“Who was that?” Evie demanded. “Is that a Black Tzikzik?”

“Yes,” Ulan answered. “iMala gave them a doohickey that ignores the borrowed-time field, so they can pop in and out as they please.”

“The others have been collected in one place,” eLeonor said. “It's time we visited them as well.”

* * * * *

Everyone had been herded to the observation deck. iLyssa stood to one side with the ten blondes, iDana to the other with the fourteen redheads.

A group of ten black-haired girls stood between them. Becca noticed that they were unarmed. *But they don't need weapons, do they?*

As soon as Ulan and iMala came onto the deck, there was a collective gasp from the crowd. iDana looked like she was about to cry. iLyssa covered her mouth.

Gordon was carrying the device and set in on the floor.

“The project is a success,” Ulan announced. “You need to know that now. You have succeeded and the Vencume are very pleased with the results.”

A redhead started to step forward, but a black-haired girl stopped her. “How can you call this a success?” the redhead demanded.

“I call it a success because of the information it has provided,” Ulan went on. “You have performed your function exactly as required. I want to introduce you to the next phase.”

iMala turned the device on and the five white-haired children appeared.

eStelle immediately danced up to the blondes and started to sing. They smiled and sang back. The eleven-part harmony echoed through the deck.

The redheads clustered around eRica. One put her hands on her hips and asked:

*Could something winnowy and pale
Ever survive what we've been through?
You look so sickly and so frail
So tell me, just what good are you?*

eRica smiled and answered:

*You're going to judge by how I look
Just because my hair is white?
I know how much hell you guys took*

10 The insular cortex (often called the insula) is a cerebral cortex structure between the temporal lobe and the parietal lobe. It plays a role in interpreting feelings of hunger, nausea, and pain.

And you'll know more tomorrow night.

The redheads laughed and punched each others' shoulders. The redhead who had asked the question had her hair tousled. Redheads took turns passing their hands through their pale visitor.

eLaina and iMala had joined the two designers. iDana had gripped iMala tightly in a hug that would not let go. iMala was pointing at her chest and explaining something to iLyssa.

Ulan hung back with the three adults and the white-eyed girl. "This visit looks like it's going well."

The white-eyed girl nodded. "I hope there will be no hard feelings after this."

"What do you mean?" Becca asked.

"Visiting like this," the white-eyed girl said. "It's got to be mildly offensive, but we didn't know what kind of violence we might face."

"You never told us your name," Evie said.

One of the black-haired girls came up to Ulan and whispered in her ear.

"uLrika says we're eight hours from Cancri-55," Ulan told the others. "We need to wrap up this visit and let everyone get some sleep before tomorrow. It's going to be a very busy day."

Evie was still staring at the white-eyed girl.

"We're going to leave after dropping you off," the girl said. "You might not see us for a while, but you'll recognize us when we get back." She tugged at her hair. "We'll keep this as a badge of our ancestry. It's unusual enough to differentiate us and I doubt we'll ever have to face the same environments you do."

iMala came up to Becca, her sisters closely in tow. "I have something for you," she said, producing a tiny device from her pocket. "You're not going to be able to sleep otherwise, so I set this for seven hours. You just turn it on and you'll drop right off. I'll show you how it works later."

"Thank-you," Becca said, accepting the device. It was only ten centimeters long and the controls were a knob and a button.

"You'll be able to wake up if you have to," iMala said. "Don't worry. It won't keep you under."

"I might need one as well," Gordon said. "This is amazing."

"You never told us your name," Evie asked the white-eyed girl again. "Just who are you?"

The girl grinned. "This is an interesting body. I thought it would be much harder to get used to it, but the basic math is there. I like your emotions. That's an interesting take on instincts; right now, I feel very good. I don't know why, but the not knowing is part of the adventure, isn't it?"

If Evie could have grabbed the girl by the collar, she would have. Her jaw was clenched and she formed dull fists in front of the girl. "Your name. You never gave us your name."

"Oh, yes," the girl said. "I keep forgetting that. Something else to adjust to." She blinked slowly and smiled. "You used to call me Buer."

Odors of Paradise

The device iMala had given her clicked on fifteen minutes after Becca climbed into bed. It didn't make any sound itself, but Becca thought she heard the ocean, or the wind, or the laughter of her nieces and nephews. Her body became heavier than leaving orbit, then lighter than zero-gee.

* * * * *

This is the last dream Becca has in space that she can remember. Her dream is about home and her daughter is happy to see her mother after so long and they hug for forever. The faces she had missed for so long come crashing in like a flood and it's overwhelming but in a good way.

And Evie and Gordon are in the dream and happy as well. They are all sitting at a table and having a big family meal. They didn't know each other before this, and this adventure has lasted as long as most deep-space flights, but they've gotten to know each other and they'll stay in contact after this, surely.

Becca has cooked a meal and everyone talks about how good it is and they wistfully remember how they all used to eat together in the mess-hall of the Vencume ship and it tastes almost the same, but Becca has bits of chicken in it now. They have coffee afterwards and don't talk about what happened to them so long ago because so much has happened since then.

Ulan is looking more and more like her mother, but there are no pictures of Evie from that time in her life. Ulan doesn't have thick glasses and she doesn't limp and she never underwent all those surgeries. She is alone, but she's starting to reach out to people.

The meal has ended and Ulan and Huri, Becca's daughter, clean the dishes while Evie and Becca play a quick game of chess. Gordon sits by the fire and reads a book while the two women match wits and battle with tiny, wooden figures.

The evening is over. The dream is coming to an end. Everyone hugs and kisses each other's cheeks and fond farewells from here. I hope to see you again. Stay safe. Be happy. Don't forget to write.

* * * * *

When she woke, Becca felt refreshed. The dream she'd had felt like a memory. She lazily dressed and went into the main room.

Gordon was reading something on one of the displays. "They're going to ask you a bunch of questions," he said.

Becca nodded.

He held up his right hand to display the tiny star-shaped mark on his palm. "And your travel visa will be reinstated."

"The Shipping Authority is already here?" Becca asked. *Did I oversleep? When did they arrive? Are we over the station?*

"They sent over a small craft with some equipment," Gordon went on. "The girls already checked everything out and say it's safe. I had trouble sleeping, so I was already up when the girls knocked on the door. It's two of them; man and woman...like always. They're still talking to Evie."

Becca rubbed her face. "Do you think she'll want to go?"

"Honestly? No," Gordon answered. "I'm not even sure that I want to go back."

"I want to go home and I want to see my daughter," Becca said. "I want to be a *Human* again and I'm tired of Vencume and I'm tired of this awful ship and the awful things that happen here. I've been away long enough and my family must be worried about me. There's an old oak table back home and it's calling my name."

Gordon smiled. "You want stability."

"Gordon, I've been crazy-scared since all this started." Becca sighed. "Who's attacking the ship? Is Evie dead? Who are these children? Am I ever going to get home? How old will my daughter be before I get to be her mother again? *What the hell is going on?*"

He held his hands out. "OK, calm down. It's freaky, but don't freak out. If you can't be the most stable person on this ship, we're all doomed."

"Stable?" Becca balked. "Gordon, I've never been more unstable in my entire life! I thought when Deniz died, I'd hit rock-bottom; but, these last few months have been full of more self-doubt and worry than I thought possible."

Gordon wrinkled his brow. "Deniz was your husband, right?"

Becca shut her eyes and sighed. *Calm down. You are freaking out and it's not going to help anyone. Try to put all of this in context.* "I'm sorry." She rubbed the tiny scar on her forehead. "It all rushed at me at once. I don't mean to unload on you like that, but it's all been so stressful."

"That would explain the gray hairs," Gordon said. "But if it's any consolation, they actually make you look very distinguished."

Becca's hands whipped to her head. "What gray hairs?"

Gordon pointed. "Just at the temples. Like I said...distinguished."

"You're one to talk," Becca countered. "You've got snow on the mountain as well."

"There are no mirrors on this ship," Gordon stated as he ran his fingers through his hair. "I can't even keep my beard trimmed. Ulan did it for me."

"We'll have mirrors enough when we get back," Becca said. "Humans like to look at themselves."

There was a knock at the door. It was aNevay.

“The Shipping Authority has finished talking to Evie,” the redhead explained. “They want to talk to you. We’re right over Cancri-55. You let us know if you need help from us.”

Becca adjusted her shirt. “Does it look like everything is going to be OK?”

aNevay nodded. “They looked happy.”

“It will be fine,” Gordon said.

Becca trudged down the corridor, her mind racing the entire time. *I wonder if Lieutenant Nie told them everything he knew. Well, then, it can't be bad, right? We saved his life—him and Ensign Qi. Are there still charges against us? And then that other crew of Wainwrights... The girls are here. They said they would help if need be. I have my shield-belt on, so no one can fire anything at me. I want to go home. I want to see Huri again. Why am I so nervous? How can they scare me now?*

The two Shipping Authority representatives were sitting at a table in the mess-hall with their equipment. They stood when Becca entered the room.

“Doctor Tabib,” the woman said cheerily. “Please, have a seat.”

The man smiled broadly and turned a recorder on. “If you could state your full name for the record?”

“Dr. Rebecca Safiye Tabib.”

The woman slid a small scanner forward. “Place your hands on the scanner, palm down, in their natural position.”

Becca put down her hands and the device flashed.

“Thank-you,” the woman said.

The man had set up another device—the retinal scanner. “If you’ll look in here, please? There will be a flash of light, so try not to blink. Look straight ahead.”

Becca pressed her eyes into the scanner and a bright light came on for two seconds. Leaning back, the afterimage floated over the table. She rubbed her eyes. *I’ve done all of this before.*

The woman was holding an imager. “If you’ll look this way? Straight forward. Don’t smile.” A picture was taken. “And now if you could smile for us. Show your teeth.”

Becca obliged and laughed a bit.

The man chuckled as well. “Forgive us if it all sounds a little familiar. We do this all the time. There’s a script.”

“We know that the last time you went through this, it was rather unpleasant,” the woman added. “We won’t be playing good-cop/bad-cop with you.”

“We should also apologize for how you were treated on Pegasai-51,” the man said. “Do you want something to drink during this? One of the girls offered us buckwheat tea.”

aNevay was still in the room. “You thirsty, Becca? aSabi made that tea again.”

Becca turned and shook her head. “No, I’m fine. Thank-you, though.”

“We were a little surprised that the girls insisted on no suits,” the man said. “It had us very worried.”

“But the crew of the *Tong Defu* noted they were not needed,” the woman added. “And you...the *Tong Dizhou*...you had no suits on your stay.”

“Pegasai-51 had to go through a complete decontamination,” the man was reading his pad. “When you came aboard, you should have been put into quarantine.”

Becca nodded. “I’m sorry for the inconvenience. Are the Wainwrights doing OK?”

“Which ones?” the man asked. “If you mean your old crew-mates, then yes. No ill effects. Once we knew that no one was at a risk for a biological...unparalleled invasion...things settled down.”

“There’s a strange smell here,” the woman noted. “Almost like seaweed.”

Becca nodded. “You learn to ignore it.”

“The girls are familiar with you,” the woman observed. “Did you know them before your arrival at Pegasai-51?”

“We were properly introduced afterwards,” Becca answered. “But aSabi and aNevay are from the second batch. I met them later.”

“Second batch?” the man asked.

Becca blushed a bit. *I did it again. Like cookies or something.* “They’re a second run. Their programming was different—after my connection.”

“We have a report given by a Lieutenant Nie Faren of the *JiFeng*, so we have a basic understanding of the connection process. There is an additional report that was given by the crew of a *Tong Defu*. They have described the process as well. Do you feel that any system secrets have been given up during this?”

“Just the recipe for *imambayildi*,” Becca said. Then, in response to the two quizzical faces before her, “It's made with aubergine, tomatoes, and onion.”

The woman smiled and nodded. “Of course. Isn't that how we measure culture these days? By what we eat?”

Becca laughed a little and nodded.

“You are a widow,” the man said, reading a pad. “And you left behind a daughter. May I ask how your husband died?”

“Slowly.” Becca frowned. “He had systemic scleroderma. His kidneys and digestive tract failed.”

“That's an autoimmune disease,” the woman said. “It hardens the internal organs, correct?”

“It's a slow and painful way to die,” Becca said.

“What a pity,” the man said. “It must have been terribly expensive.”

Becca felt a flash of anger. *How dare you brush that aside! I had to watch it!* “Yes, it was.”

The Shipping Authority woman leaned forward. “Please, we don't mean to make light of it in any way. We understand that some of these questions may bring back painful memories. My own brother died from Lesch–Nyhan syndrome.”

Becca wrinkled her brow. “What is--?”

“He gouged out his own eyes,” the woman said. “He died blind.”

The two looked at each other in shared misery.

“Moving on,” the man said. “You had a new hand constructed for you by the Vencume. Are you familiar with how this is done?”

Becca shook off the memory of her husband. “Yes. Uhm...I also helped to grow the parts that we delivered to Peg-51 on our return trip. And...I replaced the glenoid labrum in pilot Gordon Gorsky's right shoulder.”

“We have already spoken with him,” the woman said. “He said that both you and a Vencume named 'iSkandar' performed the surgery.”

“iSkandar is a Tzikzik,” Becca answered.

The two representatives stiffened.

“Tzikzik means *a genetic experiment in cloning and genetic manipulation for improvement*,” Becca explained. “There are several kinds. The girls you've met are Red Tzikzik. The pilots are Yellow Tzikzik. There are three Blue Tzikzik that do design work. iSkandar is a Blue Vencume Tzikzik. It's a tricky word.”

The man nodded. “So there are Vencume Tzikzik and Human Tzikzik. We can assume that the attacks were by Vencume Tzikzik?”

Becca nodded. Her throat suddenly went dry. “aSabi!” she shouted. “Can we get some tea?”

aSabi brought out a small pot and three cups.

“Are these...*Human* Tzikzik actually Human?” the man asked.

“We're Human,” aSabi said. “Buer already said that when we get older, we can *cross-breed*, whatever that means.”

“Buer is another Vencume,” Becca said to the two representatives. Then, to aSabi, “It means you can have children with Humans when you get older.”

aSabi smiled. “Neat.”

The three adults watched the girl leave the room.

Becca cocked her head to one side. “The Vencume gave us the borrowed-time field, didn't they? And the snapback and the MOUS, right?”

The man nodded. “A couple generations ago, yes. We wouldn't have the colonies if they hadn't.”

“Why do you think they did that?” Becca asked.

Both the man and woman laughed.

“I don't mean to mock the question,” the man apologized. “You've hit a bit of a parlor game.”

The woman nodded as well. “Those of us who deal with them on a regular basis think they're lonely. Don't Humans keep pets to hold that at bay? Anyone who has owned a dog or cat wishes—at some point—that

the animal could talk or had a longer life. We want to know that we aren't alone. The Vencume probably want the same thing.”

Becca nodded. *But that's not the case. Loneliness seems so innocent in comparison.* She formed the words slowly. “There is no Vencume home-world,” she said. “It was destroyed when their sun died. I've seen it. I know that sounds crazy, but the...connection...process. They can show you things.”

The two representatives sat, stony-faced and still.

“They can't find a planet where they can live,” Becca continued. “But they know that Humans can live anywhere.”

“Ms. Gaines was the base model, correct?” the man asked.

Becca nodded. “Yes, they used Evie's DNA and adjusted from there. That was about the time they grew new arms and legs for her. After the attack on the *Tong Dizhou*.”

“That wasn't very long ago,” the woman noted. “These girls are at least ten years old.”

“The Vencume developed the borrowed-time field,” Becca explained. “You don't think they could halt the process while in transit? They call it *advancement*.”

The two representatives nodded.

“I think,” Becca started, but halted. *Tell them about the schedule.* “I think,” Becca started again, “that this project is nowhere near ended. I think, maybe, that the Vencume are looking for something to rally behind and this ship is going to be it. There may be others...like this.”

The man looked past Becca at the kitchen door. He leaned forward and asked in hushed tones, “Do you think we might *actually* go to war with the Vencume?”

Becca looked over her shoulder at the kitchen before leaning forward. “I don't think if it came to that, it would be much of a war.”

The Shipping Authority woman had already laced her fingers and now tightened her hands until the knuckles turned white. “Mr. Gorsky already expressed this concern with us. He said that you and Ms. Gaines might be the best defense against such a threat.”

“How's that?” Becca asked.

“It has to do with your...*connections*,” the woman answered. “He said, 'With those two coneheads, you'd know everything you need to know.' You understand the cloning process. Ms. Gaines understands the borrowed- time field. He seems to understand Vencume history and politics. We aren't just here to re-introduce you to Human society. We want the three of you to teach us what you've learned. We are offering you whatever resources you need to advance the Human race and to help us in any future conflicts.”

“I think...” Becca sighed “I think that the Vencume are going to become Human. I don't think we'll ever really understand them, but they understand us. They fear us, but they admire us.”

“Do you think that fear will make them dangerous?” the woman asked.

“I think their curiosity is far more dangerous,” Becca said.

The man cocked his head to one side. “How do you mean?”

“You think about how a Human is put together,” Becca said. “It's not just the physical parts but everything else—all the events from their life that made them what they are. Our history is full of horror stories. Isn't that why the portmen left? Think of everything that happened afterwards and how we got to where we are today. Sure, the planet made us in one shape, but we made ourselves into something that can lie and kill and even love. We're the force that acts on itself and that must be very scary to anything that doesn't know our history.”

“You make us sound so brutal.” The woman scowled.

“But we are!” Becca said. “We're brutal and...divine at the same time. The Vencume have been living like still-water for so long and then we come along with our high and low tides. We're things that can create art and atrocities in the same breath.”

“Do you think the girls have influenced you in any way?” the man asked.

Becca laughed. “That's *us*, don't you see? We're clever and strong and graceful, but we're jealous and paranoid and apathetic. We accept whatever looks good and ignore what looks like trouble. But we always want the next best thing, don't we? If you knew what these girls can do—what they are capable of—you'd be delighted and horrified at the same time. Yes! They are Humans, but *extreme* Humans. They are the very best and worst of what we can do.”

The woman frowned. "You think there might be trouble with them?"

"That's our gift, *see?*" Becca said. "That's a big mirror that's going to show us all the ugly and glorious parts of us. Oh, I've only been here a few months, but I know it. I know it like a mother knows her own child. I've never been more proud or more ashamed."

The two Shipping Authority representatives leaned into each other and whispered quickly.

"Thank-you, Doctor Tabib," the woman said. "We will call for you when we need you."

* * * * *

Becca stormed away from the interview. *They don't understand. They don't get it. This is far from over.*

She caught a glimpse of uLdwyna in the hall on the way back from the interview.

"The Shipping Authority representatives are still on the ship," the black-eyed girl stated. "There are no Vencume in this section."

"Why would that be important?" Becca asked.

But the girl had already faded away.

Becca was almost to the quarters when the lights in the corridor flickered. There was a horrible grinding sound and she felt her feet leaving the ground.

Ulan was hurtling towards her in the quickly fading light. "We've been cast off!"

The lack of gravity set Becca's head spinning. "Cast off? What do you mean?"

iMala was pushing down the hallway. "Make your way to the bay in the yellow arm. We're in free-float and need to evacuate before this section cools down."

They broke us off! They're just going to abandon us here? Was everyone in this section? Will we be able to make it off in time?

"We don't have much time," Ulan growled. "Stop dawdling. We have to get out."

The ten pilots were holding hands and swimming through the corridors.

iDana was already floating next to a lift door and directing two redheads on how to force it. "Once it's open," the designer said, "we can push down the shaft-way. If we find the lift in the way, we can push it past the entrance."

"Where's Evie?" Becca demanded.

"Already in the bay," aSabi explained. "She was seeing those two suits off. iLyssa's with her."

Soon, aSabi and aNaba got the lift door open only to find Gordon and the remaining redheads in the shaftway.

"I see light!" someone in the shaft shouted.

Gordon swam out and gave Becca's arm a squeeze. "You OK?"

"I'm evacuating a dead section of ship." Becca took his arm and started to push down the shaft-way. "I don't know yet. Ask again tomorrow."

Ulan shoved past them and landed with a thump at the bottom of the shaft. "It's too dark down here to see!"

Becca did not see the black-haired girls materialize next to Ulan, but heard a sudden, sibilant voice explain, "Here, use this to force it open."

"How many are we going to try to cram into that little ship?" Gordon asked.

Ulan shouted back up, "Ten blinkers, ten pilots, fourteen ground, you, me, them..."

The bay was already in chaos. Evie was trying to direct things in the dark. "We've lost power for some reason. If we just wait..."

"No waiting," iMala's voice. "Get that craft ready and prepare for a crowd."

The Shipping Authority representatives had already powered up their ship and Becca was momentarily relieved to see that it was larger than a standard life-boat. Everyone would be able to fit, but it would be tight.

"We can't get the bay doors open," the Authority woman complained. "Even if we can get everyone on board, we're still stuck."

“Radio your people and let them know what's going on,” Ulan said. “They can break open the doors if need be. We're not in any danger once we have atmosphere in this craft.”

The three designers had clustered together; iDana was sobbing into her bigger sister's shoulder. “They left us! They abandoned us!”

iMala smoothed her sister's hair and tried to keep the calm in her voice. “It's OK. We'll be fine. We're Humans and we need to be with Humans. You'll see. We'll be OK.”

iLyssa was nestled against iMala's side. “They're afraid of us. They must be. They fear us and so they have to be sneaky.”

Ten girls with black hair floated near the back of the ship with arms and ankles crossed. Their eyes were shut and their faces unnaturally calm.

The ten pilots were also clustered together near the door. They all had tears in their eyes but looked to each other and smiled falsely.

They're trying to be brave. They're trying to be cheery.

This ship is the only place they've ever lived.

Ulan was hovering over the Shipping Authority man's shoulder, giving directions to someone over the radio. “You want to fire four bolts at the corners and the door will give out. The atmosphere we have in the bay will blow it out, so make sure you're clear.”

“The Vencume ship broke apart,” someone on Cancri-55 answered. “They're putting it back together but there's a piece floating free. Is that where you are now?”

“We're in the loose section,” Ulan answered, “but we've lost all power. It looks like everyone is safely on your craft, but we need pick-up. Just get the damn door open and let us dock!”

Cancri-55 sounded annoyed and scared. “Who the hell are we talking to, anyway?”

“This is Ulan Gaines requesting *immediate* assistance to evacuate an *alien* craft!”

Evie gripped Becca's arm. “She's my daughter, did you hear that?”

“Settle down, Chief,” Gordon whispered. “We're not home yet.”

Four bright points at the corners of the bay door told everyone that the Shipping Authority had finally blown the door. The sheet of metal pushed away suddenly and hurtled away, towards the planet's surface.

“That will burn up,” aVari said. “That's going to be quite a show.”

The Shipping Authority woman gave the engines a push and the crowded craft eased out of the bay. “The Vencume craft has left!” Cancri-55 radioed. “It just disappeared! It's left!”

“Good riddance,” one of the black-haired girls growled. “Meddlesome squid.”

The three designers still clustered together, iDana's sobbing face buried in iMala's chest. “We're the best. I'll show them,” iDana said between choking breaths. “We're the best and they can't do better. We're smarter than all of them put together.”

“Give it time,” iMala said. “You'll get to show them. Don't worry.”

The ten pilots were humming something to themselves. One of the redheads started a chant.

We've shown them what Humans can do

So let the bastards run away

Just give us time and we can prove

That we're the best some future day

A second redhead joined in:

All we need is time to grow

We're Human, right down to the bone.

Let them have win, place, or show

But we, at least, will have a home

Ulan had floated back to where Becca, Gordon, and Evie were. A faint smile played on her face.

“It's the only place they ever knew,” Becca said. “How are you ever going to cope?”

“Dear Doctor Tabib,” Ulan said. “Oh, dear Rebecca. You underestimate our family.”

Home

These days, Becca has a home in the mountains. There are fruit trees near the back of her yard, next to the windfence—plums and cherries—and in the spring they cover the yard with a fine snow of white petals. In late summer, the children from the village will climb the branches and feed themselves sick on the fruit.

On the fence itself, honey-suckle and jasmine grow; during the hot months, the yellow flowers fill the air with their sweet perfume. In the planters, there are four-o'clocks of varying colors that open late in the afternoon. The moon-flowers bloom at night. Aster daisies and cosmos fill in the patches and a fine layer of violets even it out.

Becca walks everywhere here. The local market has what she cannot grow at home and everyone in the village knows everyone else. It may be a little cut off from the rest of the world, but they produce everything they need here. It's a tight-knit community. Becca is occasionally asked to break the tie when the local council has a vote, but she avoids politics for the most part.

No reporters or government representatives bother her here, but people from around the world do come to the school she runs. iMala has invented an *evidencer* that makes teaching easier. It broadcasts much like the Vencume connection process.

Huri, Becca's daughter, has just entered secondary school and in the evenings, after a meal of chicken in white sauce or a bowl of Noah's stew, they sit in the living room, at the ancient oak table, and Becca helps Huri with her studies.

Becca did get a letter from Evie once that included a picture of her family at the beach. Ulan's long black hair is in pig-tails and she smiles broadly, shielding her eyes from the sun and holding up a star-fish she has found. Gordon has gained weight and kept his beard. They look happy. They never visit.

Evie also has a school where she teaches engineering. Gordon teaches a class on Vencume history, but it seems pointless because no one has seen a Vencume since. Ulan manages the affairs of her sisters, wherever they are.

The girls are scattered throughout the colonies. iMala settled on Cygnus-16 but she wants to go to Cygnus-X1 to study the black-hole there and she writes that she has almost figured out how to use it as a source of power. iDana is moving up the ranks of the Shipping Authority as a security expert and has brought the ten black-haired girls with her. iLyssa went to Ursus Major-47 to see if she could improve the vegetable farming system there, but she has also shown an interest in law. There are pilots between every colony. There are redheads everywhere. Evie's family is expanding slowly and Gaines is now as powerful a name as Wainwright or Trechantiris.

After making sure that Huri is in bed, Becca will pour a cup of tea and sit in her backyard, enjoying the smell of her garden and looking up at the stars, satisfied that they are far away.

She still has a terrible sense of direction.

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