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For Family

by Steve Medcroft

Marsh and his team left Alpha for Delta Camp before sun-up. They hiked all morning without incident, but three hours after their lunch break, Garvin signaled danger and the three of them darted into the underbrush. From cover twenty yards off the trail Marsh, a three-share in the company, whispered, "What's the problem?"

"Something is coming down the path," Garvin said. "Right at us." Garvin was a nine-share, a true executive, a member of the secretive board of directors. He was older than most people in the company, but still vital and strong. A leader. This was *his* mission.

"Some-*thing*?"

"I heard voices. I can't make out what they're saying, but it was definitely voices."

"Scaff?" Hatch, an edgy one-share and the youngest member of the team, said in a nervous whisper. "Oh man. I knew this would happen."

Swirling gusts rustled the tree tops and made it hard for Marsh to hear. It took concentration, but he finally detected the voices; two men in casual conversation. As they grew closer, he picked up the stilted dialect of the company's only competition for the resources on this planet.

Scaff was the slang term for the group, a name they used for themselves as well. Just like lower-level staff members referred to the company as a family because of the way the executive board exerted parental-style control over member's lives. Meaning, you were asked to put the company first, above everything else in your life. Also because the company operated on insular networks that took loyalty and maneuvering to penetrate. Marsh had no taste for maneuvering. And the word family had too much meaning to him to use it so casually.

The scaff were really separatists. Mostly service staff - cleaning, kitchen, and maintenance crews - the scaff were a tight community of men, women, and their children who broke away from the company when they all became stranded on the planet. The scaff rebelled for the right to live free from company rule,

a right they would never have earned on their shared home world. Marsh didn't blame them, they were second-class citizens because they chose to work in service of the company class, marginalize and ill-treated.

The scaff were about to the section of trail where Garvin's detail had jumped for cover. Their conversation seemed to be about a women they both knew. Intimately.

"They've been tracking us." Hatch said, his body rigid with tension. He was propped over the top of a boulder. His rifle was aimed toward the trail.

"Shut the fuck up, or they'll hear you," Garvin hissed and yanked Hatch's belt to pull him down. "Stay focused and let them pass."

The conversation on the trail stopped. One voice asked clearly for the other to wait. Marsh listened as someone stumbled off trail in their direction. Then he heard the whoosh of urination. "Hurry the fuck up," the other man said from the trail. Only when the first man finished, and his heavy footfalls began to recede, did Garvin relax his grip. "I *am* thinking of the mission," Hatch hissed. The footsteps stopped. The two scaff exchanged words in a low and urgent tone. Garvin put a finger to his lips and shook his head slowly.

They listened for two minutes to wind noise and the scittering of wildlife. Then Garvin nodded at Marsh and Marsh unholstered his pistol. He cocked the trigger, muffling the

sound with the palm of his hand. He edged to the corner of the boulder he had hidden behind. He peeked until he could see the trail. It was empty. He nudged forward. Still no scaff. He stood and leaned forward to get a better view. Satisfied, he turned back to his teammates. He got halfway through the phrase "All clear" when he was tackled from behind.

He hit the dirt with a slide, the weight of a large man furrowing him into the ground. A strong hand tattooed in an intricate pattern of whorls and dots trapped his wrist and hammered it against the ground until he released his pistol. He resisted as best as he could, but was immobilized by a thick forearm at the back of the neck.

"Relax, fuck face," the man said, then started to rifle the pockets of Marsh's jacket. Marsh thought of the satchel, which he wore under his long coat, and of what it contained. He wriggled to keep it trapped under his body and out of reach.

"Take what you want and be on your way," he said to the man on his back.

"Shut your mouth," the man barked. Then, to his companion, said. "Herc. Get those other packs."

The second man, smaller than the the first, had Marsh's teammates at rifle point. He ordered Garvin and Hatch to drop their packs. Like most scaff men, tattoos covered every exposed patch of skin.

"Where are you all going?" the man on Marsh's back said.

Garvin started to answer but Marsh held up a hand. "Delta camp," he said. "I'm a doctor. I'm needed there."

"You from Alpha?"

"Yes."

"There are no medical provisions in your pack?" Marsh kept his mouth shut and his body against the satchel under his coat. The two men exchanged a look. "You look like an executive."

Marsh forced himself to not look in Garvin's direction. "I'm just a medic. A member of staff."

The bigger man narrowed his eyes. His hand hovered over the butt of his pistol. "What's an executive doing traveling between camps with an armed escort?" Marsh focused on his breathing. He had sworn to protect the information in the satchel with his life if necessary. He didn't want it to come to that.

"What do you think Herc? Is this the guy we're looking for?"

Marsh formed his next sentence carefully, but then Hatch was already in motion, rolling toward his rifle. He came up in a crouch and got a shot off at one of the scaff. He missed, but not by much. The younger man sprinted for the nearest boulder. The man behind Marsh scrambled and started to bolt toward the trail. Hatch fired two more shots. One exploded a sapling just to the right of the running men. The second spat up a dramatic puff of dirt between the smaller man's legs. The young scaff paused and returned fire. His shots pinged off the boulders and

trees all around Hatch. Hatch retreated behind a rock, hugging his rifle.

"Stand down, dammit," Garvin yelled.

Hatch took a deep breath, re-positioned his rifle stock against his shoulder, and steadied his aim against the rock face. He lined up on the running figures. Marsh hissed at him, "Boss says stand down, man. Don't shoot." Hatch calmly pulled the trigger twice.

#

"Here," Marsh said, rubbing a patch of dark earth on the trail. "Blood drops." He turned back to his team mates. "One of them is hit, but not bad enough to slow him down."

"Dammit Hatch," Garvin said tightly. "I told you to stand down."

Hatch looked to Marsh. "It had to be done, right? They ambushed us. Threatened us. They were going to steal our supplies. If I hadn't acted, they'd have put bullets in our skulls." He lowered his voice to a murmur. "I did it for the family. He should be thanking me, the way I see it."

Marsh adjusted his coat and repositioned the satchel. "They're going to report this, Hatch," he said gently. "All you've done is put us in more danger, not less."

"But..."

"But nothing," Garvin barked. "You took an unauthorized

risk. You jeopardized the mission. And you put me in a position to have to justify this to the board."

Hatch's expression contorted as if he had something to say but Marsh could read the understanding in his eyes. They both knew damn well what the board could do to someone not as protected as Garvin. "Well," Hatch said finally. "I guess. I'm sorry."

"Damn right you're sorry." Garvin squeezed the young man's shoulder and sighed. "But what's done is done. Put the supplies back together and see if we can salvage this mission."

#

They got back on the trail. They walked until well after dark, then bedded down in a clearing.

Marsh waited until his teammates were sleeping deeply in their bedrolls before slipping away from camp and getting back on the trail. The moon was bright enough that even under the thin forest canopy, he was able to jog along the path. He ran for half a kilometer then heard a call and moved off-trail. He clamored up a short slope and paused. He spotted footprints, clear in the damp earth, that tracked down the back side of the hill. He followed them. They led between a dense stand of thin trees with silvery-white bark and into a gully.

In a hurry, he shrugged out of his long coat. He unclipped his belt and set the pistol and the satchel against a rock at

the edge of the clearing. He dropped into the gully and laid his overcoat on the ground. It just about filled the cozy space. From under his shirt, he removed a red handkerchief, which held rations he'd sneaked from his pack. He froze as a twig snapped in the forest above him.

"Jonathan," she said in a whisper from somewhere in the dark.

"Here," he called back.

She moved through the trees. A long stretch of leg was the first part of her to come into view. That one leg was enough to make his heart race.

"You came?" He said and helped her down into the hideaway.

"How could I not?" She said and slid her arms around his neck.

Jonathan Marsh smiled. Every muscle in his body was warm from the run, but also because he'd known he would see her tonight; he had sensed her tracking his team along the trail.

He pulled her close. They kissed, long and lingering.

"Are you okay? After today?"

"You saw that?"

"It was... Scary." She tightened her embrace.

He clung to her for a long moment. "Were they with you?"

She shook her head. "They are from one of the other camps. It was just an unplanned coincidence."

"One of them is hurt."

"Yes. I tracked them for a while. He treated the wound and they made it away." She squeezed him tighter then said, "I have something for you." She removed the wrap that covered her shoulders and dug into a deep pocket of her long tunic. She brought out a swatch of muslin. She unwrapped it and showed him the three broken pieces inside.

"Chocolate?" He hadn't tasted chocolate in months. He knelt in front of her. She picked out one of the pieces with her thumb and forefinger and brought it up to his mouth. He closed his eyes. Just as the bitterness hit the taste buds at the sides of his tongue, her felt her lips on his and her weight pressing him down onto his back.

#

Jonathan Marsh met Janelle by what he assumed was chance three months ago.

After the event that brought their ship down on this planet, the company was reduced to executive staff and a mere ten percent of the original workforce. Less than a thousand viable souls survived the loss of the ship. None of their technology survived. Only after order was restored, and the scaff separated to establish their own camps, was the company able to function as a cohesive organization again.

Despite his lack of experience, Marsh was initially assigned to the survey crews sent to map the network of trails

and footpaths in the region. The trails and broken roads were the only remnants of whatever life had taken hold, then ultimately self-destructed, on this lush planet.

He came to know the trails so well, he would occasionally take off on overnight trips of his own. Just exploring really. The excursions were completely against the rules, but he leveraged his three-share status to get a blind eye turned to his outings. The long hikes left him lean, strong, and bronze from the sun.

Twenty miles into one trip, exploring a rarely-used mountain trail that rewarded him with fifty-mile views over the countryside, he met Janelle.

Walking down the ridge after camping in a cave one morning, he caught a flash of movement just off the trail. He thought at first it was one of the many small brown bears the survey crews were constantly running into. But there was something about the way this bear moved that made him stop, cock an ear, and pay attention.

He was staring right at her before he even registered that he was looking at a girl's face; his brain still interpreting shape and shadow as foliage until she moved and he suddenly found himself staring into those amazing dark eyes.

Janelle was a scaff. He hadn't known her before the split, when her family had been part of the crew. She had probably been young when the ship went down. She was an adult now though. And

she was beautiful; lean and lithe, her face a perfect oval. Innocent and curious.

"Sit with me?" she asked then led him through the forest to a quiet and hidden natural clearing. "I love this place," she said, lowering herself onto the grass. She patted the ground opposite her.

"Where are you from?" he asked as he sat.

She reached under her wrap and freed a ceramic medallion that hung on a cord around her neck. "Saba camp," she said. The medallion was decorated with an intricate symbol.

The scaff had established seven camps when they split from the company, all in a cluster along a gorgeous alpine valley about thirty miles from the crash site. All scaff wore medallions, each one unique to the scaff's natural-born or adopted family, and the camp tribe they belonged to. The medallions were like passports in that they were a person's ticket to travel freely throughout the scaff community. They announced who you were and who you were connected to. The fact her medallion was red and gold meant her family was leadership in her home camp.

After that first encounter, Marsh and Janelle found many opportunities to run into each other in the wilderness. At first, she was a way to pass the idle time before the company put together its final strategy for dealing with their current situation. Then he grew fond of her, and even allowed himself to

fantasize about a life together with her. She had him thinking that it was possible to belong to a family again. It pained him when he learned of the company's long-term strategy for escaping this planet. It meant that he would certainly lose her friendship.

He would also lose any future with her.

#

"Did you enjoy your chocolate?" she asked.

"I did." He pulled her back on top of him and wrapped her in the wings of his overcoat.

"No more of that," she said and wriggled her naked body to his side. "I have one more piece." She reached out from under the covers to her pile of clothes and came up with another swatch of muslin. "This is the last one," she said as she fed it to him.

Intellectually, he knew that what he was doing was completely wrong; against every rule and ethos of company life. He had left his team without his support. He was cavorting with a scaff against company rules. He had allowed himself to be vulnerable to what was a planned future company asset, simply because she was beautiful and sexually charged and had made herself available to him. But at that moment, his mouth bitter from the last piece of chocolate, her warm skin against his, he was at peace.

He pulled Janelle closer to him again, but his movement felt out of sync; muffled and thick. It was as if his body was responding to an echo of his desire to move, not the original thought itself. Puzzled, he tried to sit. He struggled. His muscles refused to respond.

"Relax," Janelle said softly and stroked his cheek. He searched her eyes for understanding. "This is safer," she said. "Just relax. I'll take care of the rest."

The most alarming thing he registered before his world went black was that she didn't seem to think anything was wrong with the way his body was shutting down.

#

He woke with a shiver and pulled the long coat tight. He looked around the hollow. Janelle was gone and there was no sign of her left behind; no clothes, no scrap of muslin from the chocolate they shared. He reached for his trousers and sweater, then remembered the pistol. A frantic search located it behind the rock where he'd propped it. He then searched for the satchel. It was gone.

He cursed Janelle's rash decision and was pulling his clothes together when a familiar voice called his name from the direction of the main forest trail.

"Marsh?"

He cursed Janelle again. He was now going to have to face

his 'family' about the satchel. He called out, "I'm here, Garvin. I'm coming."

#

On the way back to camp, he had worked out what Janelle was up to and thought through out a way to keep moving his mission forward. It meant adjusting to a new scenario, but he felt confident he could pull it off.

At camp, Hatch was working to coax embers from the previous night's dinner fire into something that could cut the chill off the moist morning air. "We have a mission to complete," Garvin said. "So gear up. We need to get on the trail."

Marsh hesitated. And squirmed. He needed to play this next part just right. "What is is?" Garvin said.

He took a deep breath, straightened his posture, and dove in. "The satchel, sir. It's gone."

"What! What do you mean, gone?"

"Stolen sir."

Hatch shuffled to the far side of their encampment, making himself busy stuffing his pack. Garvin gritted his teeth and turned his eyes skyward. He said nothing for a long breath, then he brought his stare to Marsh. "Tell me."

"I haven't been tolerating the rations as cleanly as I would like," he said, grabbing his stomach for emphasis. "I

moved away from the camp to try to get relief. I didn't want to wake you. Or force you to deal with the smell. I set my coat and satchel down and while I was occupied, I heard someone rifling them. I couldn't get myself together quick enough to stop her, and she, a woman, took off with the satchel. She appeared to be alone."

"Dammit Marsh," Garvin said. "You really are a piece of work."

"I *am* sorry sir."

Garvin swiped his hand as if erasing the apology. "What kind of woman?"

"What kind of woman?" Marsh repeated. "The female kind sir."

"Now is not the time to be a smart-ass, Marsh. I mean, was she a company woman?"

Marsh stared at the ground.

"Oh, shit," Hatch said and Garvin shot him a nasty stare.

"You're telling me a *scaff* female made off with our package?" Garvin balled his fists, his face crimson. "The satchel that you insisted you carry. It's safer with me, you said. If we encountered the enemy, they're more likely to search the leader, you said? The satchel that we have to deliver to Delta camp?"

Marsh started to speak but Garvin threw up a hand. "Just shut it and let me think," he said.

Garvin paced. He stopped twenty feet away with his back to the camp. His shoulders slumped and he turned around.

"I could get you kicked right out of the company for this?" Garvin said and Marsh nodded solemnly. "And I probably should, but we need to fix this. We may have a small window of opportunity to correct your blunder. The contents of the satchel are encoded. We can assume that whoever this woman is, she can't figure out what it says. She'll need to take it somewhere. To her camp probably." He sighed. "So. Tell me everything you saw and maybe, just maybe, I can save you."

Garvin was a cover-his-own-ass kind of executive. So Marsh gave him the story he'd rehearsed in his head, the one that hid his illicit relationship, but revealed that he believed he saw a Bakra Camp medallion around the thief's neck. Garvin settled on the conclusion that Marsh had known he would; they were headed after the satchel themselves. No backup. No retreat to Alpha Camp. Just the three of them.

#

Unlike Garvin or Hatch, Marsh knew Bakra Camp's location without a map. He had actually been there several times, in the early days of the split between the company and the secessionists. He helped Garvin calculate a route as they marched. They had eighteen miles to cover. It took most of the day.

Two miles from the scaff encampment, Marsh guided them off

trail and they walked the rest of the way cross-country. Just after nightfall, they made it to an overlook on a low ridge.

The camp had grown since he'd last seen it. What once was a concentrated collection of temporary shelters was now a permanent encampment of log buildings and thatched huts that filled a valley meadow.

Smoke rose from chimneys on several roofs. A stone fire pit crackled gently in a perfectly-groomed square in the center of town. A group of men played a game of dice at a table. It was almost bucolic.

"Weird," Garvin said.

"What is?" Marsh said.

"It's quieter down there than I thought it would be. There's only a handful of people. I expected a hundred or more."

Hatch sidled up to Marsh and leaned close. "What is so damned important about that satchel?"

"Don't worry so much," Marsh replied. "The boss knows what he's doing."

"Damn right," Garvin said and slid away from the ridge. "The company is not a democracy, Hatch. Sometimes, the executive team has to make decisions that are in the best interest of all of us."

"Riling the scaff is in the family's best interest?" Hatch mumbled.

Garvin sighed. "Without that satchel, we don't get home."

"Back to Alpha Camp?"

"No Hatch," Garvin said wearily.

"Then what do you mean, *home*?"

"You know what I mean." Garvin sighed heavily.

"*That* home? Come on boss. It's a known fact that we're never getting back home. That's long settled."

"The odds are against it, but that doesn't mean we have to stop trying." Garvin motioned to the scaff camp. "That's *their* problem. That's the divide between us. They've forgotten their place in the natural order of things. They don't want to leave this place. They prefer a world where scaff and company are on even footing. But we still have a mission to fulfill."

"You're saying there *is* a chance?"

"We don't want to get everyone's hope up, but yes. We've been able to refurbish a power source. It's not perfectly clean, but it might work. And Delta camp has a transmitter that just needs the right kind of power. If our little delivery mission works, we can make contact with a ship to get us home."

"Did you know about this?" Hatch asked Marsh. Marsh kept his focus on the camp below. Hatch turned back to Garvin. "So we reach someone. And then what? They just come?"

"We'll need to pay our way, of course."

"Pay with what?" Hatch laughed. "Our ship is a field of debris orbiting this planet. We salvaged only enough tech to keep ourselves from dying. We have no transport systems, no

advanced communications. We certainly don't have any form of money. So how? How do we pay?"

A peal of laughter carried up the hillside, children playing in the scaff camp's central park. Garvin and Hatch slid up to the ridge.

"Well?" Hatch pressed from below. "There are only a handful of races operating in open space. Who could we possibly deal with? The Markon? The Hartites?"

Marsh focused his attention on the village, contributing nothing.

"The Cray?" Hatch said and lowered his forehead to the ground. "You have *got* to be kidding me."

"This planet is not our home," Garvin said. "We were only meant to establish its value for resources then go back to our lives. Many of the members of the board have loved ones waiting for them back there. We are not ready to give up."

Garvin's words triggered a memory for Marsh; the day his father consigned him to the company and delivered him to the transport shuttle. Everything seemed so much larger from his young perspective. He'd held his father's hand and his father told him everything would be alright as he collected his money and said goodbye at the terminal. Marsh didn't stop crying until after their home-world, and his first concept of family, shrunk to nothingness in the space behind them. Then a vision of Janelle came into his mind. She sat cross-legged on his coat in

a meditation circle in the forest. She had a child cradled in her arms. She giggled and he felt flooded with warmth. He shook the image from his head before it could reflect on his face; he couldn't have her clouding what he needed to accomplish at this moment.

"The Cray have only one thing they value," Hatch said. "I can't stand the scaff, but they didn't do anything to deserve the Cray." He snorted. "And knowing the Cray, they'll take their payment and abandon us here anyway. Maybe scorch the planet just for the fuck of it."

"It doesn't matter," Garvin said abruptly. "The board has made its decision. You don't have a say."

The forest rustled behind them. Marsh, ready for it, reacted quickly, rolling for cover. Hatch jumped for his rifle just as a force of a dozen scaff burst through the tree line. Hatch fired his weapon at the charging men. They returned fire and Hatch hit the ground with a thud. Marsh felt a presence behind him and whirled. He struggled briefly with two scaff, but was quickly immobilized, the pistol forced from his hand. He looked over to Garvin. The old man rushed one of the scaff, the long knife he kept in a scabbard at his waist out and aimed at the attacker's chest. The man smirked and swept Garvin's legs out from under him. Then he was quickly on Garvin's back. The two men struggled against each other. The long knife bounced across the ground, then the scaff had his own blade at the old

man's throat. Marsh screamed for the scaff to stop, but was punched in the back of the head and lost sight of the fight.

When he regained a sense of himself, his vision still wavered. His arms had been yanked behind his back. Rough cord was knotted around his wrists. But for his own labored breathing, silence fell over the forest.

Janelle floated into his vision and lifted his chin. "Take him away," she said. Marsh felt a thump then his world went dark.

#

Marsh had been watching the world and waiting for the fugue in his thinking to clear in the Bakra Camp infirmary for days now. The beating he'd received at the hands of Janelle's compatriots had done a number on him. Rest was critical to his recovery, the scaff doctor told him. So they fed him soup and mixed a powder into water that made him sleep almost continuously for the first three days.

Those days flickered by like time-lapse video. Morning led to day led to sundown led to night. The constant sedation broke his circadian rhythm to the point where, on his fourth day, when the fog in his thinking finally receding, he found himself wide awake at the quietest time of night.

He had good reason to be awake.

There were three beds in the infirmary, one on each side of

Marsh. The bed to his left was empty, its occupant had succumbed to his injuries on the first day. The occupant of the bed to his right lay facing away from him, covered to the crown of their head. He watched a moment as their chest rose and fell in a calming rhythm, then a sound outside pulled his attention. He whispered a warning as the door creaked slowly open.

A shape filled the infirmary doorway, backlit by moonlight. "Garvin?" Marsh said, tentatively.

Garvin looked older than when Marsh had last seen him, in the scuffle on the ridge above the camp. Garvin hung in the doorway. He had something in his hand. "I suppose you heard that everything has been settled between the company and the scaff," he said in a growl. Settled is a relative term, but Marsh knew Garvin was right. The conflict between scaff and company was over. The scaff had already been mobilized against Alpha Camp while Marsh, Garvin and Hatch searched for the missing communique. The company fell quickly; the scaff outnumbered them four to one. And they had surprise on their side. Thanks to him. That confrontation led to a settlement; the transmitter was destroyed, the company's mission officially ended, and the two peoples agreed to live in peace, but separately.

"We lost good men, Marsh," Garvin said bitterly. The occupant of the bed to Marsh's right shifted a fraction. Marsh held his breath until Garvin spoke again for fear he'd draw the old man's attention to the other bed. "And we've been driven out

of the territory as punishment for our crimes. Which means most of us, the executive class, are moving south to establish a new place for ourselves. Besides you, I'm the last company man left behind. And I'm headed south today."

"You're here to say goodbye then?" Marsh said.

Garvin took one step into the room. The pistol in his head hung heavily by his side. "In a way." Garvin shifted his weight from leg to leg. "I'm here because I have a lingering question. Something that's been nagging at me since we last saw each other."

"And what question is that?"

Garvin stepped closer, keeping his voice low. The barrel of the pistol lifted toward Marsh, not exactly aimed at him, but a menacing presence nevertheless. "You know I was a nine-share right? It would have been something to go home and cash that in. Do you know what a nine share can buy? How well he can live?" Garvin stopped at the end of the bed, bumping it with his thighs. "All of that has been undone now, hasn't it." He pushed his hair off his face. "This is our home now. We're never going back. You lost the satchel. The scaff got all uptight about what was in it. Our lives are effectively over now. All because you let some scaff girl lift that satchel from you." He sneered. "Tell me again how that happened?"

Marsh shifted back so he could sit. "Why do you have a gun, Garvin?" he said, as calmly as he could manage.

Garvin turned the pistol sideways, as if he were considering it for the first time? "This?" He swung it back so it pointed at Marsh's chest. "This is just incentive for you to answer my question. A motivation technique. You know how big the company is on motivation. Now, about my question. Here's what I think. And please, tell me if I'm wrong. I think that you knew this little scaff before she just *happened* to run off with your satchel. Isn't that right?"

"That's your question?"

Garvin's face hardened. Spittle flew from his mouth as he he responded. "Enough stalling. The girl. Did you know her?"

Marsh calculated. "Okay. Yes. I knew her. I snuck off a few times to be with her. I know it was against the rules. But this is a lonely planet."

"Fine," Garvin said smugly. "You needed a bit of company. Whatever. But you admit you knew her. So then the real question becomes, did she know what was in the satchel? Did you tell her what was in it?"

Marsh fixed his expression. He said "No" firmly.

Garvin shook his head. "That answer doesn't work for me. It's all much too pretty. You had insisted on holding onto the satchel yourself. A scaff girl, *your* special friend, just happens to run into you, away from camp, while we are on a sensitive mission. She leaks it to her people. And now, here I am, here all company men are, stranded light-years from home,

with no hope of returning, the courses of our lives irrevocably altered." He lifted the pistol so it aimed between Marsh's wide eyes. "It was no random coincidence. She didn't just *happen* upon you, *happen* to make off with the communique, *happen* to get it to someone who could decipher it. It was a setup. You gave her those documents. You are the architect of our downfall. It's the only thing that makes sense."

"Wait," Marsh said quickly.

"You deny it?"

"Yes, Garvin. I deny it. What you're saying is crazy. Why would I help the scuff overrun the company? What do I gain? I'm also stranded on this planet."

"You have *everything* to gain," Garvin said loudly. He flicked his eyes to the sleeping form on the second bed then lowered his voice and leaned over the end of the bed to be closer to Marsh. "I know you. You have no family to back to. You're a three-share, so middle-class existence at best. Tell me being stuck on this rock isn't what you want? It has to be. It's the only explanation."

"Garvin, I promise. It happened like I said. The satchel was taken from me. I had no idea what would happen. I..."

Garvin cut him off. "It doesn't matter what you say. The truth is what it is. You did this to us." He raised the pistol. "And you're going to pay." He pulled the hammer back with a loud click.

Marsh raised his hands and slipped sideways out of the bed. He moved away from Garvin, turning him from the occupied third bed.

"Stand still," Garvin barked, tracking Marsh with the trembling pistol. "Stop moving."

"You don't need to do this. You have it all wrong."

"Bullshit Marsh. Now stand the fuck still and this will be quick." Garvin planted his feet and switched his grip on the pistol so he had it in both hands.

"Now" Marsh said and rushed forward, sweeping his hands up to redirect the barrel of Garvin's pistol. He didn't make it all the way there before Garvin got a shot off. An explosion roared inside the small room. Marsh hit the ground, his hands over his ringing ears. He held his breath a moment then exhaled sharply as he realized he was still alive. He took a mental inventory of his body, searching for the hole, for the tremendous wave of pain he expected would overtake him. Instead, he heard a loud click.

"Move an inch and this will be your last moment alive," she said from behind Garvin. The occupant of the third bed. She had made her move, just as they planned, waiting until she was sure of the old man's intentions.

Marsh got up into a crouch. She stood behind Garvin, the tip of her pistol pressed to the back of his head. The old man kept his head still but his eyes roamed the air, searching to

understand the turn of events. Then realization took him over and his expression hardened. The pistol stopped shaking and leveled at Marsh one more time.

"Don't even think about it," Janelle said firmly, forcing the barrel of her pistol into the bony skull just behind Garvin's ear. "I *will* shoot you."

A flash of decision washed over Garvin's expression. "Goodbye," he said and winked at Marsh. He steeled himself and aimed true. Marsh rolled to one side just as another thundering explosion shook the room.

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Marsh sat on the bed while Janelle's colleagues carried Garvin's body away. They didn't speak until they were once again alone. And even then, they spoke in embrace and murmur, happy to together, happy to be at the end of the ordeal, happy to just be able to hold each other. Finally, Janelle broke off and said "Come. I have someone who wants to meet you."

It took them an hour to walk to Saba Camp. It was Marsh's first time out of his cell in days and they were in no hurry.

Janelle led Marsh down Saba's main street. Scaff of all ages and sizes greeted Janelle warmly. They regarded Marsh with a mixture of awe and curiosity, but no-one spoke to him.

On the far side of the enclave, she guided him through a wooden archway made of intertwined sapling branches. White

flowers bloomed in clusters over the top of the arch. The archway led to a two-hundred-meter long path that ended at a clearing. They stopped and Janelle yanked a cord that rung a bell mounted on a post. It sent up a clear note.

A wide, single-story log hut sat at the far end of the clearing. It was surrounded by a waist-high fence made from stacked stones and wrist-thick branches. Marsh recognized some of the plants, herbs, and vegetables growing in neat rows in the front yard.

As they approached, the front door opened. A woman, a more mature and equally stunning version of Janelle stepped onto the narrow porch. She waved and smiled. Janelle urged Marsh more urgently and they were soon running across the clearing. Janelle almost knocked the woman over with her embrace. "Mama," she sighed happily.

"My sweet daughter," the woman said and held Janelle by the shoulders. "Let me look at you."

"Oh Mama," Janelle said.

The woman cut her eyes to Marsh. He knew her name was Jiani but said nothing. "Bring him inside," she said in an unreadable monotone. "Your father is just cleaning up."

Janelle led Marsh to a front room. Padded benches made from timber and quilted fabrics he recognized as salvage from their downed ship bracketed a long table. They sat together on one side. There were voices somewhere in another part of the cabin.

The mother's, he could tell. And the deep timbre of a man's voice. He leaned close to Janelle. "Don't worry," he whispered. "It's going to be fine."

Janelle's father was a man Marsh knew from the ship. He ran the working-class crew on the engineering team. Marsh, too young to be given any real responsibility but an executive nevertheless, was used as a gopher between the boardroom and engineering. Barok was never unkind, but he carried himself with a command that intimidated anyone who had dealings with him. He was also the largest man Marsh had ever seen. Even now, when Marsh had grown into full maturity and stood over six-feet tall himself, Barok was an overwhelming presence.

The table vibrated when Barok entered the room. He sat on the opposite bench. He dropped his heavy hands onto the table. He regarded Marsh with a long look. Marsh returned the stare. The corners of Barok's mouth twitched for a brief moment then returned to neutral.

Jiani came in with a trio of clay mugs and set them on the table. She took a seat beside her husband. Barok lifted his mug to his mouth without breaking eye contact with Marsh.

"Father," Janelle warned.

"Jonathan Marsh," Barok said finally. His voice was deep and patiently metered. He set his mug carefully on the table. "I am conflicted about you." Marsh started to reply but Janelle gripped his hand under the table. "You put my daughter in great

danger. Leaking the company's plans to her and sending her to Bakra camp put a target on her back." Janelle made a sound in her throat. Barok shot her a quick look. "What?" He said. "You could have been killed." Marsh felt her legs lash out under the table. Barok flinched then returned his attention to Marsh.

"Putting her in harm's way was not my plan," Marsh said gently.

Barok folded his arms. They corded like mooring cables under strain. "We know about her impulsive decision to sedate you and take matters into her own hands." He attempted a scowl at his daughter but there was no heat behind it. "Nevertheless, this whole plan was your idea."

"It would have never worked his way, father," Janelle said. "The minute he left his teammates to go with me to Bakra Camp, they would have gone straight back to Alpha. The company would have been ready for us. Too many people would have lost their lives. All I risked was myself."

Barok's shoulders dropped. He grunted. He fell silent for a long moment. "The only truth that matters, I suppose, is that you adapted and we are all better off. You and my daughter played a vital role in our freedom from company dominion. We owe you a great debt." He nodded at his wife and she left the room. "Not only myself and Jiani, but all scaff." Jiani re-entered the room. She set a small cloth sack on the table in front of her husband and nodded at him with a smile.

Barok fussed with it. "My wife and I have had long discussions with our daughter about the plans you two have made. We were angry at her for getting to know you in the first place and it has been an adjustment to understand her feelings." Marsh felt the movement of another under-the-table kick directed at Barok by his daughter.

"What I'm trying to say is--" Barok pushed the sack across the table. A cord slipped out of the open edge and Marsh saw the ceramic medallion is was attached to. "--welcome to our family."