

FAMILY MATTERS

By Tara Tallan

Her morning had been so wretched that she really shouldn't have been surprised to see Weedy and all of his junk occupying her favorite spot. If she'd stopped to consider the direction her day was going, she probably would've headed straight for the waste reprocessing level and locked the door.

Weedy looked up to greet her with one of irritating grins. "Nat! I wondered if all that racket was you. You've got to be more quiet in the tubes, you know? Your mum'll toss you headfirst into the core if you're caught in here again."

Nat's lip twisted up. Her parents had both been so involved in their work the last couple of days, they probably wouldn't care where she was, just as long as she kept out of their hair. They'd made *that* perfectly clear at breakfast, when she'd asked if she could hang out with them in the labs. Well, spilling her orange juice all over her dad's notepad the last time she was allowed there may have had something to do with their swift and categorical refusal. But what else was she supposed to do with a full Free shift? Beth was still mad about the doll incident and she wasn't allowed to show her face in the reading lounge for another two days, so if the chart room was the only worthwhile place on the ship left to go and sulk in private, that was hardly her fault, was it? But here was Weedy,

who'd virtually disappeared since the last layover when the new girl had come aboard, sitting in her spot and obstructing her view.

“You're not supposed to be here either,” she muttered. “Unless you got a pass key.”

“Are you kidding? They don't even let my parents in here without special permission.” Like the library, the chart room housed emergency backup hard copy records. Except for training purposes, the room and its contents were almost never used. “Nah, I had to crawl in through the tubes, just like you. 'Cept I know how to get around without waking the dead.”

She couldn't think of anything scathing enough to say to him in response. She tapped her fingers irritably on the floor, wondering if she should turn around and leave. Then she looked up, past Weedy, out the large half-dome window which made this otherwise boring room so attractive. Just coming into view was the gentle curve of a reddish-brown planet.

“We're in orbit!” Nat exclaimed. She scampered over to the viewing circle and leaned in, putting her palms on the thick transparent barrier, which gave her the deliciously dizzying feeling of floating in open space. She craned her neck to see more of the tantalizing object.

“Well, yeah,” Weedy said sarcastically. “Why else d'you think I hauled all my scopes down here? Now if you'll move over, I can set up my tripod. I'll bet I can capture some great images.”

“Oooh, I hope I get to go down there. But how did you know?”

He placed the tripod on the circle and bent down to adjust its legs. “I read about it. The notice was sent out three days ago.”

She certainly hadn’t seen any announcements in *her* mailbox. Then it hit her. “You saw that in your mom’s personal files!” she accused. “You’re not supposed to look at those, they’re *private!*” In Nat’s home it was a familiar refrain: *some things are not meant for public viewing*. She presumed it was a polite way of saying, *no kids allowed*.

“It wasn’t red-flagged,” he said. “Hey, if my mom picks such obvious passcodes, I’m gonna take advantage. I need access.”

“You still shouldn’t do it.” It wasn’t anything new. Weedy’d been surreptitiously reading his mom’s mail since before they ever left Earth’s docking station. He prided himself on being able to outthink his folks, both of whom were well-respected scientists, and keep one step ahead of the passcode guessing-game.

“Oh? What am I supposed to do, ask? Nobody tells us anything.”

“There’s got to be a better way to get information than *stealing* it.”

“Good luck trying to find it,” he scoffed. “I mean, look at you. Your parents probably know more about what’s up with this planet than anyone else on the ship except the Captain, and yet you’re standing there as clueless as a deck plate.”

“Yeah, but lately they’ve been so busy that I—” She trailed off stupidly. She could almost feel the lights finally going on, *bling*, in her brain. *I am such an idiot*. She dashed back out to the corridor, leaving Weedy to his amateur astronomy.

* * * *

“Mommm!”

Nat plowed through the three-room suite her family had called home for the past ten months. She rounded the corner into her parents’ bedroom and smacked into the leg of her mother, causing Nat to lose her balance and fall over. Her mother didn’t even appear to wobble. Typical. It was all part and parcel of that amazing—and to Nat’s mind, inexplicable—ability both her parents possessed to completely ignore their daughter at will.

“Mom!” she repeated, undeterred, from the floor.

For her trouble she received one of those *just-a-minute-dear* waves. “No, I’m sure that won’t be a problem.” Her mom was speaking to somebody on the commline. The image was turned off and she was using the headset so Nat couldn’t see who was on the other end, but more than likely it was Milo. Mom and Dad always needed to talk to Milo, even after spending an entire shift doing excavations with him. “We’ve done these kind of drops before, we know the procedure.”

Nat became aware of the heavy, EV-certified jumpsuit her mother was wearing. Were her parents scheduled to do a surface survey already? That meant her chances of getting to actually set foot on the planet were microscopically small. Nat had missed out on seeing the last two planets, and for the dumbest reasons. Did they really think she was klutzy enough to fall into a pool of molten lava?

“Yes, we’ll take the tracer box. And the net. What? No. No, of course not. Look, we really *have* done this before-- lots of planets exhibit borderline indications, and they almost always prove false. Well, we have procedures for that, too. Fine, all right, I’ll speak to him before we go.”

“What’s going on?” Nat demanded. “Is that Uncle Milo? Can you ask him to bring me back some rocks for my collection?”

“Hush, dear,” said Mom automatically. “Yes, she’s here. No, she’ll be fine. Yes. Yes. We will.” She took off the headset and replaced it on its hook with a long exhalation. Her brown hair was pulled back into a tight bun, a look that Nat thought was awfully dowdy, but Mom favored for her work. She managed a small smile for Nat. “Your father and I will be gone a few hours. Can you be a big girl and do your schoolwork quietly in your room until we get back?”

“I’m *ten*, mom,” she replied, offended. At least they hadn’t tried to subject her to babysitters since they moved aboard. “Why didn’t you tell me before that you were doing a survey? What’s the planet like? When will I get to go see it? Are there—”

“Honey,” she interrupted wearily, “I’m sorry, but I’ve got a lot to do before we leave. I... don’t know if I’ll be able to bring you something, but I’ll see what I can do.” She darted about the room collecting datapads and chips.

“But the planet! Don’t you have—”

“That’s enough now.” Mom stopped and looked over her shoulder at Nat with a scrutinizing eye. “Your morning classes ended hours ago. Where have you been hiding all afternoon?”

An instant case of guilt emptied Nat’s brain of all coherent thought. “I, um—”

Her mom put her hands on her hips. “Oh, not *again*. I’m tired of this, Natalya! The access tubes are dangerous, highly sensitive areas, and we’ve told you time after time not to go wandering in them.”

She didn't bother attempting to deny the charge. "But I know what not to touch," she whined. "I've been careful!"

"No, you've been deliberately *disobedient*." Her lips were pressed tightly together and she was taking deep, measured breaths. "I'm very angry with you right now. For God's sake, what if one of the crew found you playing in there?"

Nat cringed. She was never getting off the ship now. If her mom knew she'd gone to the chart room, she'd really be in for it. How did she end up in this fix? Wasn't *she* supposed to be mad at *them* for keeping her in the dark?

A low chime signaled the cabin door opening. "Rhianne? You there?" called her dad's voice. He stepped into the bedroom doorway, already dressed in a gray-green jumpsuit twin to the one her mom wore. Departure was obviously imminent. "Oh, hello, sweetie." He bent down to give Nat a peck on the cheek. "You be a good girl while we're gone. Rhi, we need you downstairs for the pre-launch checks." Then he saw Mom's stormy face. "Rhi?"

"Natalya was in the access tubes again," her mom announced.

"Oh, for God's sake, why now?" He turned back to Nat with an irate look that she'd rarely seen on her normally easygoing dad. "Nat, this ship is not your personal playground! You could damage equipment, and you could get hurt! What do I need to do to convince you how *serious* this is?"

"I'll keep out of the tubes from now on, I promise," she said in a small voice.

"We ought to just turn her in to Captain Mayhari and let him decide what to do with her." There was half a smile on her mom's face as she said it, but the very notion was enough to send chills running up and down Nat's spine. She'd only seen the Captain

in person twice in the whole time she'd been on board, and that was more than enough for her.

Dad smiled a little. "Right now, that almost sounds like a good idea."

"I was kidding," Mom said, stiffening.

"Rhianne, we've tried everything. The supervised school program only runs for a half-shift. What do you want to do for the rest of it, lock her in our quarters? Maybe this is just the sort of shake-up she needs."

From past experience, Nat knew she was in for trouble when they started talking like she was a piece of furniture, to be repositioned, reupholstered or removed to suit their own desires. She tried her best to look penitent and waited quietly for her sentence.

Mom went over to the bed and sat on it, folding and unfolding her hands anxiously. "We can't ask the Captain about this, we just *can't*. I swear, one of these days one of these kids is going to go too far, and he'll throw us all off the ship!"

"It's not that bad," consoled her dad. It was common knowledge among her friends that Captain Mayhari hated kids, but she had no idea the situation was this dire. She knew how hard her parents had worked to get transferred on board one of the new Family Ships. She could barely begin to imagine what they'd do to her if she managed to get them kicked out....

Her mom stood up again, looking determined. "We have to go. Nat, we don't have time to punish you right now—it'll have to wait until we get back. In the meantime, I want you to go down to the rec centre and stay there. I'll ask one of your teachers to come get you at suppertime."

Nat shuffled out. She was still, she realized, as clueless as a deck plate.

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The rec centre wasn't really designed for the entertainment of ten year olds, but it was a popular place to park wayward kids when parents ran out of other ideas. She headed for a quiet corner on the opposite side of the room. She passed adults running laps, more doing Tai Chi together, and a couple peddling madly on stationary bikes. Several of them shot her disapproving glances as she walked by, as though she was encroaching on their space. *Well, tough*, she thought defiantly at them. *I live here too*.

She pulled a lesson book out of her backpack, flipped through it for a while, and put it back. Schoolwork took more concentration than she could muster might now. She thought idly about what passcodes her parents might be using, until she spotted a personal exercise kit, still carefully packed in its box, next to a low pile of mats.

After a half-hour's worth of disassembling and reassembling the parts of the exercise kit into arrangements not entirely intended by the manufacturer, Nat noticed Weedy and Ky, the new girl, enter the rec centre. She groaned. Maybe her parents had arranged a punishment for her after all. Weedy waved and crossed the room towards her with Ky in tow. What else could she do? Nat reluctantly invited them to join her. Weedy immediately plopped down on the floor and began to create his own sculpture from loose pieces; Ky placed herself on the pile of mats, arms and legs crossed tightly.

“So, did your mom and dad tell you anything about their mission?” Weedy asked.

Nat glared at him. “How did you know they've gone on a mission? If you've been reading more of your mom's coded messages, I don't—”

Weedy grinned smugly. “It’s just common sense, Nat. When the engineers wouldn’t let me go below the fifth deck this afternoon, I knew it had to be because they were launching a shuttle, which means a reconnaissance mission. And your parents are the scouts.”

“Yeah,” said Nat doubtfully. She was stuck on why Weedy wanted to go below the fifth deck in the first place. As far as she knew it was kept thoroughly secured most of the time, and what wasn’t locked down was utterly boring.

“But the only time the Captain ever calls for a manned preliminary reconnaissance is when he thinks something’s wrong,” Weedy continued. “I’m dying of curiosity, and I couldn’t tell anything with my stupid ‘scopes.’”

“There *is* something weird about this survey,” Nat said. “I mean, they don’t usually tell me much about their missions anyway, especially not in advance, but this was different. There’s something that’s just not right, but I can’t put my finger on it, you know?”

Weedy looked over at Ky. She spared him what seemed to Nat like a rather contemptuous glance. What the heck did he see in her? “I think we can find out,” he said to Nat with a grin.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, my parents’ terminal isn’t the only place worth hacking into.”

Nat dropped the small free weights she was trying to balance to the floor with a deep *thunk*. “Are you nuts? What if you get caught? You’ll be grounded for the rest of your life!”

“Oh, relax,” said Weedy. “It’s not like I’m gonna steal any secret fleet codes or anything. Besides, what makes you think I’m dumb enough to get caught?”

“Well, why’re you in this stupid rec room, then?”

Weedy stood there speechless for a few glorious seconds, his lips moving but no words coming out, and Nat knew she’d pegged him good. It was true that he almost never got into trouble, so he his plans must have failed spectacularly for him to have been banished down here. He glanced at Ky again, who this time shrugged with a sour expression. “I . . . we got lost,” he managed eventually.

“What, below fifth deck? What were you *thinking*? I suppose you dragged Ky along and got her in trouble, too. You know, one day we’re all going to get thrown off the ship and it’s going to be your fault!”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about! And what do you mean, get thrown off the ship?” he added in confusion.

“Oh, of course, I’m just a dumb kid, right? Well guess what, Weedy! You’re not as smart as you think you are!” Nat took the sting out of this by sticking her tongue out at him.

“I’m smarter than you,” he challenged, grinning.

“Oh, yeah?”

“FOR GOD’S SAKE, WILL YOU TWO JUST *SHUT UP?*”

They stared at Ky in astonishment. Her fists were clenched tight and her dark brown eyes were wild. Most disturbingly, she looked on the verge of tears. After a few tense seconds she glanced away and began to collect herself again.

Weedy was horrified at the notion of having offended his would-be girlfriend.

“I’m sorry,” he bumbled helplessly. “I didn’t mean—”

Ky huffed at this inanity. When she turned back to face them the tear traces in her eyes were gone, but fire still smoldered behind them. “Don’t you see? This always happens! We’ve been shut out—put away like we’re nothing more than little amusing trinkets that get taken out and smiled at, and then tossed aside again when we’re not wanted. But all you two can do is to sit there and argue like a couple of *children!*”

Weedy stumbled backward a step like he’d been slapped. “Uh...”

“Sorry,” Ky apologized, though she didn’t particularly look like she meant it. She wrapped her thin arms tightly around her middle. “God, I hate it here.”

“Oh, it’s not so bad,” Nat piped up brightly. “The rec room can actually be a lot of fun if the adults aren’t...” Belatedly, she clamped her mouth closed before any more hideously moronic words could escape. *She doesn’t mean just the rec room.*

Weedy nodded slowly in understanding. “You get used to it, you know.” He inched cautiously towards her, reaching a hand out to hers.

“I don’t want to get used to it, I want out!” She didn’t respond, but didn’t object to her hand being clasped in his. Her fury had mostly burned away by now, and for the first time since Nat had met her, she looked like an average, vulnerable, thirteen-year-old girl.

“My dad won’t put in for a transfer,” complained Ky. “He says he was lucky to get a berth on a Family Ship. But I *liked* it on the space station. This place is so... *cramped.*” She hunched up even further.

“There were lots more kids there too,” Weedy said. He was gazing at her like a puppy dog hungry for scraps of approval. Bleah. Reluctantly, Nat recalled how much she used to admire Weedy and follow him about everywhere, back when she’d thought he was the cleverest kid she’d ever met. Did she ever look at Weedy in that same, pathetic way? Hideous thought. After a few months getting to know him, she’d certainly learned better. Maybe Weedy would, too.

“I went to see your school while we were in dock,” he was saying. “That must have been real nice.”

“Yeah. I want to see my friends!” Her voice was almost a wail.

“You’ve only been here a few weeks. It’ll get better.”

“It wasn’t like this on the space station. Around here everything is all *regulations* and *no civilians past this point*. They won’t let you do anything!”

Weedy burst out laughing. “Can you blame them? Two teenagers and your dad’s spare tool kit wandering down in the lower bays— that engineer who came in wasn’t stupid. Heck, if I’d known what you had in mind *I* wouldn’t have let you go. You just can’t *do* stuff like that, Ky. Not here.”

Ah, now I understand, thought Nat. While Weedy enjoyed finding his way into places he wasn’t supposed to be, his antics were generally harmless. Ky, on the other hand, clearly had other plans. It wasn’t Weedy who was going to get them all tossed off the ship, it was Ky.

“I didn’t think any of the adults cared what we do,” Ky said scornfully. “They barely seem to acknowledge our existence, except to shoo us out of the way. How else

are we supposed to look out for ourselves? They're all too busy to give us the time of day!"

His chin lifted slightly. "Well, they *are* busy." Weedy's dreams, Nat recalled, included becoming a deep space scientist just like the ones serving aboard the ship, so Ky's criticism ruffled his feathers a little. "The older crew remember the days before families were allowed on working ships, and some think it should never have changed. But not everyone's a permanent grump. Nat's folks are nice. And Lieutenant Caspari—he's Third Officer, we all call him Uncle Milo—he's great, he'll even let you on the bridge during his watch if you ask him nicely. That's him down there, leading the Tai Chi group. You'd best stay away from the Captain, though. He thinks kids should be locked away in a dungeon, or something. Now, my folks, they aren't always real forgiving, but...."

Nat let out a startled gasp.

She stood up and stared, her hands held up to her open mouth, at the opposite corner of the room where half a dozen adults were practicing their slow, fluid motions. Weedy, his back to her, blathered on with his assessment of the ship's complement.

Eventually even the sullen Ky had to say something. "Nat, what's with you? You look pale."

"I—" She took a deep breath. It seemed like such a small thing, but she knew, *she knew*, this was more. This was *serious*. She needed them to understand. "Um. You know what I said about something being wrong with this survey mission? Well, I think I figured it out." She pointed across the room to the Tai Chi instructor who was correcting

another woman's posture. "Him. Milo *always* goes with my parents. *Why is he still here?*"

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Nat kicked loudly at the door when it wouldn't open fast enough.

"Stop that!" Weedy hissed. "Somebody'll hear!"

"So what," Nat growled. She kicked at the door again, just to show him. In the last fifteen minutes she had gone from shocked to suspicious to downright angry, and growing angrier by the minute. "These are my quarters, I'm supposed to be here."

"Not today, you're not," he shot back. "Sooner or later someone's bound to notice we ducked out of the rec centre."

Ky followed behind the other two into the room, peering at her surroundings. "I doubt it. Those people were probably just glad to see us go."

"The terminal's this way," Nat said, marching into her parents bedroom and flinging herself on the bed with a thump. She was mad at the Captain for ordering this vile mission. She was mad at her mom and dad for capering off (yet again) without giving their one-and-only daughter the slightest hint about what perils awaited them. And she was *disgusted* at Milo for abandoning her parents to their fate. "It's a waste of time, I don't know their passcodes." Oh yes, and what with plenty of ill will to go round, she was also mad at Weedy and Ky for dragging her along for their *stupid* plan.

Weedy sat down at the terminal, and then made room as Ky elbowed him over. "We had to go data scrounging like this all the time, even on the station," she said,

powering up the computer. “Adults never tell you *anything* important.” Ky was looking much brighter now, and as she began to peck at the keys her lips even started to curl upwards into a proto-smile. *Delinquency must agree with her*, Nat thought uncharitably.

She was now pretty certain that her Mom and Dad had gone down to the surface alone, no assistants, no nothing. Whose crazy idea was that? Her parents hadn’t even been in this job for a year, they couldn’t manage on their own. Or... were they considered expendable?

“Music files... games... ‘Snoofulpuss Goes to the Park’?” Weedy raised his eyebrows. “I won’t even ask. Good grief, Nat, don’t your parents ever use their terminal for anything interesting?”

“They do most of their work in the labs,” Nat said. “Why are we doing this? This is dumb. I want to go.” She wanted to go find Milo and throttle him.

Ky suddenly sat up straighter. “Here. File named ‘T4M16C: Prtcl Init’. You got any idea what that means?”

“No,” Nat admitted. “But it’s probably a fleet admin file. They’re obscure on purpose.”

“Hmm. It would probably tell us what we need to know, but we can’t get into that kind of file from here without a passcode. I knew this would be a waste of time.” Ky snapped off the screen. “Now, if you’d gone along with my first suggestion—”

“We are *not*,” declared Nat, “going to break into the Captain’s quarters! We’d be killed!” She was quite certain the stories she’d heard about lethally armed booby traps scattered all around his private rooms were true.

“I think I agree with Nat for a change.” Weedy was finally beginning to look spooked by his girlfriend’s brazen attitudes, which as far as Nat was concerned was time and past time. “Hacking into the Captain’s personal files is a *really* bad move. Trust me. You haven’t been here long enough to know.”

“I met him once,” she defended. “He didn’t seem so bad. But if you’d rather not just cut to the chase, that’s fine with me. I suppose we can always crack the mainframe.”

Ky tossed off this pronouncement like it would be no more trouble than having to make your own sandwiches for lunch. Nat fully expected Weedy to veto this suggestion as quickly as he did the last one, since it seemed to her to be equally doomed to a monumental, if not quite as fatal, disaster. Instead, he just shrugged his shoulders and said, “I guess. But there’s no way we’d be able to walk through the main door *this* time.”

“What about those access tubes you’re always crawling around in? Don’t they go below fifth deck?”

“Oh sure, they go everywhere eventually. I made a map. We can work out a route.”

Nat’s jaw dropped. “I can’t believe this! That’s not just somebody’s terminal you want to mess with, that’s the ship’s comp system! You could seriously damage—”

“When did you become such an old lady?” said Weedy, disgusted. “Do you want to know what’s happened to your folks or not? Besides, I know what not to touch.”

Nat rolled her eyes.

The two of them made their way back out to the main corridor, neither noticing nor caring that Nat did not follow. “By the way, why does she keep calling you Weedy?” Ky’s voice drifted in. “She got a lisp or something?”

“I do *not!*” Nat yelled after them.

“She’s since grown out of it,” Weedy explained, just before the door closed. “But the nickname stuck....”

Nat kicked at the bed frame. Then she counted to ten like her mom did, to control her temper. She counted again. Then she stormed out.

* * * * *

Pound, pound, pound.

“All right, all right, *I’m coming.*” Nat could hear the muffled grumbles slowly moving closer. “Ever hear of a door chime?”

The door slid open, revealing an untidy room, a tabby cat looking for an escape route, and a man who had obviously just come out of the shower a short time ago, as evidenced by his wet brown hair. His expression changed from one of irritation to one of surprise as he looked down and saw Nat glaring at him.

“Nat,” Milo welcomed her, with a puzzled but genuine smile. He bent and scooped up the cat with a practiced hand. “I thought you were in the rec centre.”

She gulped, but stood her ground. “I want you to get on another shuttle and go *after* them.”

He blinked. “What? Nat, honey, what’s this about? You look upset.”

“You let them go. By *themselves*. Into, well, I don’t know what’s down there but it’s something bad. They’re in danger and you ditched! So now you’re... you’re damn well going to go down there and rescue them!” She could feel the water pooling in her

eyes—oh, but when she looked at him, how could he be anything but Uncle Milo?—she made a heroic effort to hold back the flood.

“Ah,” he began, but the cat seized the moment to squirm and make a break for it, so the next minute or so was occupied wrestling with a streak of white and brown. When he’d gotten things somewhat under control he said, “Look, standing here with the door open is a terrible temptation for Yoyo, so why don’t you come in and we can talk about it, okay?” He looked so ridiculous with the cat gripped tight around his head like a fur hat gone wrong, Nat had to smile. She allowed herself to be led inside.

He didn’t have a wife or kids, but his position as Third Officer allowed him a suite almost as large as those designated for families. Yoyo jumped free and dashed off to another room, and Milo picked writing tablets and datadisks off his chairs to make a place for them to sit. “Would you like some water?” Not waiting for her answer, he crossed over to the little bar sink, filled a clean glass and handed it to her. She drank deeply. How did he know how thirsty she was? Well, that was Uncle Milo.

“Now,” he said, seating himself across from her. He looked at her with calm, encouraging attention. “I’d like you to explain to me why you believe your parents need rescuing.”

Suddenly she felt quite foolish sitting here with Milo, who was not only her buddy in his off-hours but also her parents’ good friend, but she concentrated on what brought her to this juncture and soldiered on. “We entered orbit today,” she began slowly. “I only found out by, um,” she better not mention the chart room, “by coincidence. Mom and Dad never mentioned it, they were being real secretive these last couple of days.”

“They were under orders, but go on.”

“Huh. Well, I know it’s gotta be a *bad* place, because the Captain ordered a survey team in straightaway, and he never does that. So Mom and Dad went down, like they always do, but you’re still here.” As she put the pieces together in her head, properly for the first time, she grew more sure of herself and her voice more steady, and more accusing. “If it’s so dangerous, why did the Captain send them in all by themselves? Why didn’t you go after them? What’s down there, anyway? And why won’t anybody *tell me anything?*” The last, which spilled out in a rather whiny tone, was more of a complaint directed at the universe at large rather than at Milo, but once she got going it was hard to stop.

Milo listened carefully to all her questions, and took a moment before answering. “Those are very astute observations,” he said approvingly. “I’m afraid I’m under orders too, so I’m also not at liberty to reveal all I know about the planet in question. But perhaps I can ease your mind. First of all, up on the bridge they’re closely monitoring your parents’ progress, just like they do for every manned survey. If there’s any trouble, they’ll know right away. Second, your parents were doing surface surveys for *years* before you were born. Before they left active duty to have a family, they were the team that got routinely assigned the trickiest drops. They’re old pros. They don’t need anyone else to look out for them, especially not me. Honest.”

“They have? Really?” She had trouble imagining her parents doing anything before she was born. “But... but you *outrank* them.”

“True, but once we get to the surface, they’re in charge. I tag along on missions to learn from them, not the other way round. I feel quite privileged.”

Nat digested this. “But I still don’t know anything! My parents could be trapped under a rock slide right now and you wouldn’t tell me ‘cause I’m just a kid! It’s like Ky said, adults never tell you anything important.” And despite all the yammering about unfair treatment, Ky and Weedy had their own set of secrets. Maybe they were closer than they realized to becoming the very thing they rejected.

“I know it’s difficult to understand,” he said, opening his hands in a gesture of apology. “Life isn’t the same on a ship as it is on the ground, or even on a space station. The rules are different. Heck, the rules are *multiplied*. Most of us grownups on board have lived within these boundaries for so long, we forget what it was like to be... outside.”

Nat’s foot tapped an impatient staccato beat on the floor. “What am I supposed to do now? Time could be running out for them down there and Ky and Weedy are being idiots and you’re under orders... isn’t there anyone who can tell me what I want to know?” She’d really hoped Milo would have the authority, or at least the nerve, to get her down to the planet, but it wasn’t right to try and talk him into breaking his word. She didn’t know the First Officer, Lieutenant DeBruyn, very well, but maybe he’d be willing to listen. “Where can I find—”

“I think,” interrupted Milo, leaning forward in his chair, “I should take you to see Captain Mayhari.”

She choked on her water.

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Milo led Nat up to Captain Mayhari's office behind the main bridge on level one. She crept along just behind him, in hopes that he would be an effective shield against whatever Captainly wrath might be brought down upon her. Her knees shook, and she counted her blessings that she hadn't eaten dinner yet, because if she had it would be in a puddle on the floor.

The Captain wasn't in, however. He was busy on the bridge, Milo told her. Nat strained to hear any sort of noises that might give her a clue about what was going on in there, just a few metres away, but the walls were sufficiently soundproofed. Nat waited in one of the large ergonomically molded chairs—molded for someone at least twenty-five centimetres taller than her, that is—and looked around at the oversized desk, the weighty plaques and sculptures that decorated the room, all calculated to invoke feelings of a proud spacefaring history.

Close to an hour passed. Milo was called away briefly, and when he came back he helped himself to the room's food stores which were cleverly hidden behind some paneling, and offered her some tea. She was too distracted to remember she didn't like tea, so she drank it, and it helped calm her a little. The lights flickered and Milo was called away for a second time. It was an eerie reminder of her old home in the Mars biodome. Minor brownouts were a common occurrence there, but she hadn't known they happened on ships, too. Nat tried not to think about her future.

When Milo returned he brought with him Ky and Weedy, who both looked shakily defiant, and a little worse for wear. They were followed in by an unhappy looking man in an engineer's work uniform. Nat stared at them open mouthed. Milo's features were tightly controlled. "Stand over there," Milo directed the two kids, when they began

to head to the chairs. They looked over at Nat, sitting with her tea, with wild speculation in their eyes.

A few seconds later the far door swooshed open—teasing Nat with a frustratingly brief glimpse of the bustling bridge—and Captain Mayhari swept through.

“Dammit, I don’t have time for this!” he bellowed, rounding his fearsome gaze first at Nat and then at Ky and Weedy. Nat shrank back as far as she could. She’d only ever seen him at formal functions, and although he’d been intense, he’d never been angry. He advanced upon them like a descending hurricane in a gray uniform. Weedy looked like he might faint on the spot.

“Chief Takashi,” the Captain said, addressing the engineer. “Explain this to me.”

“Sir, these two children,” he used the word distastefully, “were discovered in an access tube below the secondary accelerator banks. We think they were trying to tap into the main computer grid. Fortunately, we got to them before they electrocuted themselves.”

The Captain didn’t seem overly concerned about that. “Damage?”

Takashi looked embarrassed. “They fried two of the node points and erased some of the routing codes before we caught them. We experienced a small blip in the non-critical ship functions while we remapped that part of the system, but nothing more serious than that. My team will be a week cleaning up the files, though.” He scowled at the two young perpetrators.

Captain Mayhari peered down through narrowed eyes at each of his victims in turn. “The timing of your little stunt is impeccable,” he said icily. “If we weren’t right in the middle of an extremely delicate business, I’d personally watch while you scrubbed

down every metre of access tube with your toothbrushes.” He paused to savor the moment as Ky and Weedy stood and quivered. “As it is, you get to help Chief Takashi fix the mess you made. Report to him immediately after classes, every day until the job is done. In addition, your Free Time privileges are revoked and except for assigned duties you are banned from using any and all networked computers for one month, starting today.”

Then he turned his back to them and said, “I suggest you keep yourselves scrupulously above-board for the next while. Believe me when I say, you do *not* want to find yourselves in my office again anytime soon. Dismissed.”

As they hurried towards the exit, escorted by the Chief Engineer, Weedy passed close to Nat. “*You rat,*” he hissed in her ear.

“What? I *didn't,*” she said, aghast. “I would never—”

“Young Mr. Kressmann,” Milo said crisply to Weedy, “I should think you would have learned something today about jumping to conclusions.”

Weedy looked properly chastised, and crept out.

The door shut, leaving Nat alone with Milo and the Captain.

The Captain looked a little deflated now, and a little pained. “Thank God Ensign Kolnik was on her toes this evening,” he said to Milo quietly. “This could have been a lot worse.”

“Reed’s a good kid, sir, he just got a little over-enthusiastic. Kyla, well, I think she’ll need some special attention.”

Nat hoped she'd managed to successfully blend into the furniture, but the Captain finally spied her, and took aim with his eyes. "Ms Barrett, you've picked an awkward time for a visit," he said blandly.

This wasn't my idea! Nat protested silently.

"She's concerned about her parents," supplied Milo from the background.

"Well, they're busy right now, and so am I. You'll just have to be patient, Ms. Barrett. Come back in an hour. Make it two. I'll need to find time to speak with the engineering staff about controlling our... pest problem in the access tubes." He turned back towards the door to the bridge.

Nat's temper suddenly flared. "You know, this mess with the computers wouldn't've happened if you'd quit being so secretive! All we needed was a little information!" Too late, she clamped her mouth shut. *What kind of moron yells at the Captain?* She wondered if that "we" was going to see her sentenced to menial duties along with Weedy and Ky. On the other hand, if she came out of this with only menial duties to contend with, she'd consider herself extremely fortunate.

Captain Mayhari turned to face her. "Young lady, a little information is a dangerous thing, as your friends so aptly demonstrated today. My orders are not for public deliberation, nor am I accountable to you." His tone held no anger, but no room for argument, either. Nat sank into her chair, defeated.

"Sir," Milo put in delicately, "I think what's she's trying to say is, the children lack any sort of connection to the ship's community. The parents do their best, but when faced with potentially sensitive items, they often feel they have no choice but to keep quiet. We can't expect the children to be happy with this much isolation, sir."

“It’s not my job to make them happy,” glowered the Captain. But he sighed and conceded, “However, Lieutenant Caspari, I can’t say you’re the first of my officers who’s come into my office playing children’s advocate. Very well. Ms Barrett, what is it you think you need to know?”

It wasn’t a very inviting opening. The effort required to properly collect her thoughts was well beyond her by now, so she just let them all dribble out any which way. “Why did you send my parents down to a dangerous planet all alone? Why did Milo have to stay behind? What’s down there? Why—”

“*Stop,*” commanded Captain Mayhari, holding up a hand. He glanced up at the ceiling, and then back down at Nat. “Let me first ask you a question. What do you know about manned surveys?”

Nat thought for a moment. “I know you have to follow lots of rules,” she offered. “Dad’s always complaining about that.”

“Yes. The rules are necessarily complicated. Can I assume you’ve been taught about N-V 329-A? You probably know the planet as Nester-Ventra.”

Nat nodded. Her mom and dad were full of stories about that famous survey mission, some thirty years ago, which had been her bedtime fodder when she was small. “The survey team found intelligent life. They almost got killed, but they figured out at the last minute that the humming noise from their rovers was freaking out the aliens, so they shut them down and were able to leave peacefully.”

“Well, yes, that’s the abbreviated version. But the important point is, it was our first and only encounter with extra-terrestrials, and it has changed the course of

reconnaissance missions since. Intrepid would-be explorers like your parents spend years learning to avoid making the same mistakes.”

“Uncle Mi—I mean, Lieutenant Caspari said my mom and dad used to be pretty good at it.”

“They *are* good at it,” he corrected. “It’s because so many fine officers and specialists like your parents were retiring from the service to have children that the Fleet Council pushed through their hopelessly awkward Family Ship proposal. They didn’t want to lose that pool of talent.” He waited until he’d caught her eye, and he held it with a pointed stare. “I was fortunate to have the Drs. Barrett assigned to me. In fact, occasionally they are the only two people on this ship who have enough experience and training to handle the survey mission. Now do you understand?”

Whatever it was he was driving at, she was feeling too brain-dead to puzzle through just now. Was a straight answer really too much to ask? “So what’s on the planet, then?”

The Captain looked so irritated that for a moment Nat believed she’d be tossed off the ship after all. But the *breep* of the intercom cut across anything further he might have wanted to say. He reached his desk in one long stride and tapped a button on the console. “Mayhari.”

“Sir,” came an urgent female voice from the speaker, “They’ve reached the crash site. They say their readings show energy weapons!”

“Oh, hell,” said the Captain. “I’m on my way.” He tapped off the intercom and headed back towards the door to the bridge.

Nat jumped from her chair, dumping her not-quite-empty teacup on the carpet. “My parents *crashed?*” she shouted in horror. And then the second part of the message penetrated. “*Energy weapons?*” Among that long list of survey rules, right up at the top was, ‘No weapons allowed.’

Captain Mayhari stopped long enough to turn and say in a calm and definitive voice, “No, they did not.” And he disappeared back to the one place she and Weedy had never once tried to sneak into.

* * * * *

Milo set up Nat with a dinner tray, pulled out of the same invisible pantry from which he’d found the tea, before he too escaped onto the bridge. Nat put a few forkfuls of noodle casserole into her mouth out of a sense of duty, but she was barely aware of the food that passed over her tongue. This was like being sent to the rec centre all over again, except here she was too afraid to touch anything, and she was dead certain if she tried to duck out she’d be missed. She was closer to the place where all the real action went on, though—was this moving up or down in the world of juvenile confinement? She tried to console herself that at least the Captain was on top of the situation. She, however, felt buried beneath it. Over an hour passed, and what with even less to do up here than down in the rec centre, she eventually fell into a blissfully mind-numbing sleep.

The next thing Nat knew, Milo was waking Nat up from where she had dozed off in the chair. As Nat’s brain slowly came back up to speed she registered the fact that he had a smile on his face. This seemed a good sign.

“It’s over,” he said, giving her hand a squeeze as he collected her tray and disposed of it.

“What do you mean?”

The door chimed, and at Milo’s call, Nat’s parents entered the room. They had, evidently, come directly upstairs without even stopping to change out of their sweaty jumpsuits. Dad’s dark hair, prone to cowlicks even at the best of times, was suffering from a laughably severe case of helmet head. Without a word Mom made a beeline for her daughter and wrapped her arms tightly around her. The jumpsuit with its various pokey bits of instrumentation made this uncomfortable for Nat, but she was far too relieved to complain.

“Welcome back,” said Milo. “Did you have a good time without me?”

Dad smiled. “What do you think? You should get suited up, we’ll need your help for the next stage.”

“You’re alive!” cried Nat.

Mom released her grip just enough to look at her face. “And you just can’t seem to keep out of trouble. What happened? You never used to worry about us before. Back around the time of your birthday we had to go collect mineral samples from that planet that had a terrain like swiss cheese—do you remember?—that was a much riskier survey, and you never even batted an eyelash, except to complain that your presents were late.”

“But you’ve never gone alone, before.” *And I never knew how hazardous your job was, before.* Had her parents been in danger every time they left the ship? And would they have been any more forthcoming about their missions if she had been as desperate to know the details as she had this time around? “And you wouldn’t talk to me about it.”

“Honey,” said Dad uncomfortably, “I’m sorry, but sometimes things are just that way.”

“But that’s not fair!”

The door opened again and Captain Mayhari emerged, looking grim but satisfied. “Welcome home,” he said to his mission specialists. He circled around the crowd to his desk and sat down in the big chair. “All right. I suppose a proper debriefing will have to wait, but let’s have the précis.”

“Sir?” questioned Dad, glancing over at Nat.

“We can overlook a few minor technicalities this time. Go ahead.”

He nodded. “Sir, our preliminaries suggest that the crash must have occurred over twenty years ago. The distress call we picked up three days ago was an automated unit encased in a kind of ‘black box.’ It’s growing weaker, I don’t think the signal would have lasted another month. Whoever was meant to hear the call was obviously too far away to receive it, not that it would have mattered. Once we saw the site, it was clear any life forms on board wouldn’t have survived the impact.”

“And the energy weapons?”

“I don’t think they were weapons after all, sir. But I’d sure like to know what Chief Takashi would make of it. Perhaps it was part of their drive system, but if that’s the case it’s the strangest fuel cell I’ve ever seen.”

“Radiation?”

“Nothing the suits can’t handle. You can send down a full team right away.”

Milo had a wide-eyed look of wonder on his face. “This is as close to First Contact as we’ve come since Nester-Ventra. I wonder what they were doing all the way out here?”

“I’m hoping a forensic investigation will provide some answers,” her dad said. “Maybe they got lost. Who knows?”

“You found aliens?” Nat gasped.

“No, darling,” Mom said soothingly, “just the artifacts. Sorry we weren’t able to bring you back anything for your collection this time.”

“Real aliens? Wow!”

Milo sighed. “I wish I’d been there with you. I’ve *got* to get my FC rating.”

“Who’s conducting this interview?” barked Captain Mayhari. “It seems as though the number of juveniles aboard my ship is growing by leaps and bounds.”

Milo smiled self-consciously, but her parents both braced. “We heard about what happened while we were away,” her dad started. “Sir, we’re so sorry we haven’t been able to—”

Captain Mayhari waved this away. “Natalya wasn’t involved,” he assured them, but went on to add, “this time. The situation is under control. Justice has been handed down. I don’t expect there will be any repeat performances *this* week.”

Mom, who still hadn’t let go of Nat, fidgeted. Nat had thought the danger of her family being expelled had passed, but the anxiety in both her parents’ faces made her start to sweat again. “We’ll talk to the other parents, sir,” her mom said, “and make sure nothing like this ever happens again. I promise.”

The Captain's eyebrows climbed up his forehead. "I'd advise against making such far-fetched promises, Dr. Barrett," he said severely. "My experience so far in commanding these new 'Family Friendly' ships tells me that these incidents are a foregone conclusion. We simply do not have the resources to contain these children sufficiently."

Her mom shrank back a little and gripped her daughter tighter. Nat winced, from both the gadget-laden squeeze and the Captain's words. Images of shipboard dungeons full of kids popped into Nat's head. "We're doing our best," said her mom faintly.

Captain Mayhari studied his two tired mission specialists. "Sit, all of you. You too, Caspari." He directed them into the chairs by his desk, and her parents complied without objection.

"It has been brought rather unmistakably to my attention today, that as much as I may try to run this ship with the same standards and protocols of any ship of the line, I can no longer do so because this ship is no longer *like* any other of the line. The Fleet Council has decreed that I now command a Family Ship, which is entirely a different sort of beast, and what sort that may be, we are all still endeavoring to learn. This project is still in its infancy, if you will pardon the pun, and we have barely learned to crawl. Clearly, a few, ah, adjustments are in order." He looked at Nat and added sternly, "On both sides."

"A full shift's worth of supervisors for the children would set my mind at ease," her mom immediately pitched in. "I'm sure most of the parents would be willing to volunteer a little of their time after the school session ends, in exchange for a more flexible workload."

“Hmm,” grunted the Captain.

“But when more families start signing on, especially the ones with younger children, that grass-roots approach may no longer work,” Dad pointed out. “You’d have to find full-time teachers and caregivers.”

“A devoted, closed-off area would suit your needs,” said Milo. “Maybe we could reconfigure the upper lounge.”

“Hmm,” grunted the Captain again, this time with a definite warning tone.

Nat exhaled loudly. “You can’t just shut us away in a room somewhere!” she protested. “Why do you think I ended up here today? We need to know what’s going on.” She remembered something Weedy had said to her earlier. “We want *access!*”

Captain Mayhari and both of her parents looked like they were going to have to draw lots to see who would get to yell at her first, but Milo was quickest off the mark. “Nat, honey, what you and your friends have to understand is, adults don’t make things off-limits and keep secrets from kids just to be perverse. We do it to keep you safe. Think about what happened today to Ky and Weedy. Sure, all they did was make the lights blink, but what if they’d hurt themselves? Or caused a real power failure? The boundaries exist for a reason.”

She thought about how often she heedlessly crossed those boundaries to get to the chart room, or any of her other unauthorized haunts. If she played by their rules, where would she have left to go?

“I’m not saying you aren’t entitled to more information than you have right now,” he continued, keeping a wary eye on the Captain’s frown, “but be aware that due to the

nature of our missions, there will be times when we won't be able to tell you what you want to know."

Nat suspected these news blackouts would conveniently happen just when things got most interesting. "Mom and Dad get to read ship's logs and see real-time vids from the main scanners and stuff like that. We should get to do that too." Without having to use Weedy's stolen passcodes, anyway.

"*That is not—*" Captain Mayhari stopped himself, grimaced, then began again. "You'd be getting it in the same form as your parents, mind. Raw data, unedited video stream. If you want an easy-to-digest format, you'll have to write it yourself."

"Sounds fair to me," she said. It was a minor victory. She tried not to look too pleased with herself.

"Don't get the idea this is *carte blanche*," he cautioned gruffly. "I can and will shut down your access without a moment's notice if the situation calls for it, and there will be no appeal."

The Captain sat back, crossed his arms, and tried to look menacing again. Maybe she was just too tired to care, but Nat no longer felt as frightened by his eyes. "That is all the concession you will get out of me. Dr. Barrett, and Dr. Barrett, take your troublesome daughter away and put her to bed, or something. But don't get comfortable, because I want you to report back here in an hour."

"So you're not going to throw anybody off the ship?" Nat pursued doggedly.

Captain Mayhari blinked. "Well, I'm a bit busy today, but if you come back tomorrow we might be able to squeeze you in," he said dryly.

“Natalya!” Mom exclaimed. She reached over to squeeze her again. “Darling, what I said before we left... I didn’t, er, mean that literally.”

“Hmm,” added the Captain.

Mom blushed.

As they all got to their feet, Dad said, “We really want to make this work, sir. We were happy with the choice we’d made ten years ago, even though it meant leaving the deep space expeditions, but now that we’ve been given a fresh taste of it... Frankly, we’d do almost anything to avoid having to go back.”

“It’s a shame when anyone has to choose between a career and a family,” said the Captain softly. He then rose from his chair and pinned Nat with his gaze again. “Ms. Barrett, the chart room may have a pretty view, but its value as an emergency navigational aid diminishes when you leave your grimy fingerprints all over the glass. Your free-time privileges are revoked for one month.” Nat’s parents gave her a look that promised yet another lecture on acceptable behavior when they got back to their quarters.

The Captain continued more amicably, “After that, if you wish to learn manual starcharting in the proper method—and I warn you, it’s the most tedious task imaginable—you may petition Lieutenant Caspari.”

Nat was speechless. She’d never gone into the chart room by the door.

“And you will report for inventory detail along with your friends until we get the mess cleaned up downstairs. Now, get out of my office, the lot of you.”

* * * * *

The next afternoon Nat caught up with Weedy and Ky in the main corridor on fifth deck, dragging their feet wretchedly on their way to the Chief Engineer's station. She grinned cheerfully, and walked alongside them.

“What're you doing here?” Weedy asked suspiciously.

She held up the thin tan worksuit she carried in one hand. “I'm being punished. Captain's orders.”

The both studied her with new respect. Amazing, what a little bit of shared culpability could do for your self-esteem.

“Sorry we weren't able to help you yesterday,” said Ky. She seemed much more mellow today. Maybe the Captain scared some of the attitude out of her. “Are your parents okay?”

“Yeah, they're fine.” She skipped a little as she walked, she couldn't help it. “Aren't you going to ask me what's on the planet?”

They stopped in their tracks to gape at her, rampant curiosity wiping away their dreary expressions. “You found out?” Weedy finally managed to say. “You *have* to tell me!”

She chuckled. Today, life was good.

- END -