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Chapter 3 *Can a Band-Aid Fix A Reactor Leak?*

What in the name of all the gods was going on? The face of James Madford swam in and out of my vision, the drugs he'd just pumped me full of left him in washed out hues of yellow and brown.

He was saying something... I think, but it was the most I could do to watch his lips move. The only sound that reached past the tanned hide of my ears was the wail of alarms. Gods... hadn't I just switched them off a moment ago... and why was I laying on the floor?

A quick flex of my muscles sent the human scampering back. A spasm running up my leg answered why I was lying in an undignified heap. I'd been bleeding out through a wound that had sprung up in my thigh. I still didn't know how it had gotten there. All I knew was that *something* had jabbed through me like a hunter's claw at the same time people up in the bridge had begun screaming.

James' lips were moving again, but I just ignored him as I got to my feet and slowly limped towards the main engineering console.

The mass of switches and readouts here were little more than so many distractions to one such as I, but I was capable enough to be able to find the mute switch for the alarms. It was of limited utility though. It only seemed to silence them until yet another buzzer kicked in, then they would all come back with the vengeance of a thousand wronged ancestors.

The sudden silence opened up around us like the belly of a long dead beast. The only sound was of our breathing. The dogsbody James still stood where I'd left him. His eyes tracked my every motion, almost as if he couldn't believe I was here.

To be honest, even to myself, I was having a little trouble coming to terms with whatever was happening.

It wasn't exactly the type of thing I would ever admit, even amongst my brothers back home, but I had to keep myself from scooping that little pink thing up in an embrace that would just as likely break his thin bones.

Memories of the last few hours swam back towards me so quickly that they threatened to drown me under a cold tidal wave. I remembered the screaming, the pain, the blind panic as the reactor breached, the bone chilling cold as I slowly bled out on the unyielding metal floor a billion miles from home...

The reactor.

"James, get over here!" I roared it over my shoulder as, unsteadily, I twisted back to the controls before me.

I was no engineer, but even an uneducated trader like I could tell when the reactor core was breached.

"What's going on?" His voice came from just behind me as I leaned heavily on the counter. The sudden rush of the painkillers was already starting to run ragged, the edges of my vision was going dim.

"Runted if I know." I had to take a deep breath and pause to keep my eyes clear. "You got anything else good in that drug kit of yours?"

He emptied the small plastic container on to a clear space on the console beside me, pills and hypodermis clinking together.

"What can you take? I don't even know what you are, likely so much as what won't kill you."

"Azlin." The word gritted through my teeth like sand paper as I let my body slowly sink to the ground. I could feel every beat of my heart, every hair on my pelt itched.

"Never heard of them." He pulled out an oversized roll of gauze and knelt down beside my leg. The wound had mostly clotted over already, but the pressure of the support bandages tightening into place felt good. I had to hold back the instinct to swat him away and growl. It wasn't appropriate for me to be taking charity from one such as him, but *appropriate* could hang for the moment.

"I'm not surprised." I let my head rest back as I spoke, faint pinwheels swimming under my closed lids. "Not many of us leave our planet. We're not exactly a spacefaring species by nature."

"Then why did you have the misfortune of signing up with Bulla?"

I felt a growl worm its way up from my throat. It took everything I had to force it back down. The human's hands had stopped the moment its sound filled the air.

"That's a story for another time, Madford." I took a deep breath to level my voice again before I spoke, "Please, don't stop wrapping my leg."

"Okay." He paused for a moment as he returned to my wound, "Can I at least ask what you're doing down here?"

I did better this time, the growl never made it up to hearing range. "I like it down here. It's quieter." I had to think quickly. It wasn't a lie, but it wasn't really the truth either. "I'm on the bridge when my position requires me to be. Otherwise I prefer to keep my own company."

"Fair enough." He pulled the bandage tight, a splint in place now. "Looks like it saved your life. Everyone else is dead."

"What!?" My eyes sprang open. That was a bad call, I almost blacked out.

He cocked his head at an odd angle, eyeing me. "Didn't you already know?" I pushed away from him slightly as he spoke. "Fred bought it in a hull breach on the way up here, and everyone else is dead with a hole through their chest. You lucked out with just a jab in the leg... maybe it's that same shot that caused all these problems."

I had to take a long breath, slowly letting it out through my nose as I fought to get the frantic three-stage beat of my heart back under control. "We're under attack? By who, who's shooting at us?"

He just shrugged and futzed with the bandages again, sending a spike of pain up my leg as I pulled away. "You're asking the wrong person, Crit. I showed up long after all the exciting stuff had happened. The most I was able to suck from the computer was that we hit something, a satellite perhaps, and I'm guessing it's in even more pieces than we are." He paused for a moment before showing his teeth in one of those deranged human grins. "I guess that means this is your ship now."

All I could do was roll my eyes. "That's not how it works..." I was cut off as all the klaxons came back full force, a new one adding its wail to the clamour that almost deafened me.

Back on my feet, I was at the console a few moments later, flipping the switch to force them off again as yet more lights began to blink on the status board.

Oh bugger.

When last I'd been standing here, just moments ago, there had only been one light frantically blinking for attention, 'Reactor Containment' or something like that. Now there were half a dozen. They ranged from 'Under Pressure' to 'Over Max' and a whole host of things I couldn't even read. The alarm that got most of my attention was a little warning that stated 'Approaching Prompt Critical'.

My knowledge of anything regarding reactors was about on par with my ability to swing through the trees, but not even I could spend so much time hiding down here without picking up at least the most basic of emergency procedures.

'Critical' meant that the reactor was producing enough energy to sustain itself, 'Super Critical' meant that the amount of energy it was creating was going up. 'Prompt Critical' meant bad things. Very bad things. Prompt Critical meant that the system was somehow creating more energy than it could dissipate, and that extra energy was being shunted back into *creating even more energy*.

This was not a good thing.

"How much do you know about anti-matter reactors, Madford?"

The human stood behind me, looking small, even in the cramped space of engineering.

"Only that they don't have an easy 'off' button," he said.

First Officer Crit was an impressive sight at the best of times, and seeing him in a panic like this woke up instincts deep in the back of my human brain that were more at home making clay pottery and hiding from toothy things.

Crit had the body of a beast, and I'd never known him well enough to tell you what might be behind those eyes.

"Madford? James!" He reached out a hand to poke me, knocking me from my daze and almost sending me leaping through the roof.

"Oi!" I had to lean against the wall for a moment, heart almost beating out of my chest. "Don't... don't do that."

He pulled back for a moment, almost as if I'd slapped him on the face. His voice was still smooth velvet when he spoke, but a hint of cringen slipped through now. Or at least I thought that was what it sounded of. I was never that good at dealing with alien accents, and it's not as though I had any other references to what his kind sounded like.

"I'm... I'm sorry." His hand came back, resting on my shoulder and slowly pulling me towards

the console. Honestly, it brought me closer to his furred body than I was really comfortable with.

"This isn't good, is it?" Was the only thing I could think to say. I hoped all the blinking lights meant more to him than they did to me.

He cycled through a couple of security cameras around the reactor that I hadn't been able to poll from the bridge. They didn't exactly bring any good news.

The first camera looked all right, I suppose. Though I wouldn't know what 'all right' was supposed to look like. It was the second camera that painted a more alarming picture.

I could already see the familiar yellow hull sealant. A shot had stabbed the ship, possibly the same one that had tagged Crit, and it had brushed the containment of the AM reactor.

All reactors were supposed to have multiple layers of defences, of course, but that would be too much to ask for here. There was a radiation overlay to the video image. It showed the deadly rays spilling out into the secondary chamber beneath our feet. So much raw power was escaping from the reactor that the very edges of the breach were melting, letting more out every second.

"That's not good, is it?" My voice was weak. The only thing I wanted to do right now was to turn and run as fast as I could. "I'm going to assume that we can't just shut the damn thing down?"

Crit shook his head, dark brown mane rustling back and forth, "That was the first thing I tried. To shut the reactor down would require enough pressure to force the elements apart, and the breach prevents the proper build up."

"And running away would...?"

He didn't even bother to shrug as his voice came out simple and deadpan. "Give us about an extra quarter-second as the anti-matter propagation catches up to us." Now he did smile, showing *way* too many teeth. "Don't think I didn't consider that."

Wonderful. I'd survived how much, only to get eaten by an over excited AM reactor. And the bloody thing had been damaged *by accident*.

"Any way we can get this, oh I don't know, fixed, Crit? I really don't feel like dying today. I've already done my best to avoid it."

He turned from the blinking lights, raising a furred eye ridge at me. Being the focus of those slitted golden eyes instantly made me feel itchy and nervous. Like he was contemplating me for a last supper.

"There's not much I can do," He pointed a thumb over his shoulder. "But you might."

Off in the corner of the room was a single radiation suit. I assume it was for the CE to use, as it was approximately human sized, much too small for Crit.

The thing was even older than the suit I was in already, and was obviously not air tight. It was a faded dull yellow, looking like a bad serial prop that one might expect to see someone skulk around in with an axe in one hand.

"And you think *that* can keep me safe down there?" I couldn't believe that rat eaten suit would even keep me alive inside a microwave.

The azlin shifted nervously on his toes, as if uncomfortable with the idea of sending me out of sight. "We haven't many other options, James."

It was only then that I realized he still had his arm draped over my shoulder.

"Uhh, Crit? You can let go of me now."

A quiet, strangled sound escaped his throat as he quickly pulled away, but he never moved more than a step back.

Struggling into the radiation gear, I refused to remove the suit that was already loose around me. We were just fortunate that the radiation gear had been fitted for CE McAlaster, and he was more than a few sizes heavier than I. Even my near balloon like space suit was able to compress enough to squeeze in.

"Any clue what I'm supposed to do once I get down there?"

Crit just closed his eyes for a moment and let out a huff of breath large enough to rustle my hair. "I haven't the slightest, my friend. We either find a way to contain the leak, or we will soon meet our ancestors. I can't speak for you, but I'm not yet ready for that step in my life."

"You and me both." I reached stiffly for my helmet. The double padded arms of the suit didn't want to bend. It was Crit who reached over and set it atop my head with a click, twisting it into place. Over it then sat the radiation cover.

Stepping away from me, he poked a button on the wall. I could see his lips move, then a moment later his voice came from the speakers of my suit.

"Can you hear me, James?" Even at this short distance his voice was cut with static, a warbling high pitched scream running up and down the signal. I had a bad feeling that last bit was from the reactor.

It took me a moment as I fumbled for the transmit control, it was a tongue switch that took one heck of a stretch to reach. I didn't want to think about how many other people had used this suit since it was last cleaned.

"I'm here. There's a lot of interference on the line. Is that normal?"

In front of me, the Azlin let a long and liquid shrug roll over his shoulders. The human motion was an odd sight to see on him.

"McAlaster might have been able to provide an answer to that, but I, sadly, cannot." He took two strides to the corner of the room, hardly limping now, and pulled open a trap door in the floor. He watched me as I stiffly made my way to the ladder. "Promise me one thing, James."

I turned my head towards him. His alien eyes were inscrutable.

"What?"

"Come back." He shivered under his fur coat, arms coming up to wrap around his chest. "We're a long way from home, a long way from my family. I don't want to die out here alone. Alone and cold."

Who knew such an imposing creature as him could be nothing more than a pussycat at heart? Well, considering his appearance...

"I don't exactly want to die, Crit. I plan on getting out of here." A dark grin edged onto my face, "Although, if we don't fix this, I doubt we'll have much time to wax philosophic about it."

He reached out a hand to brush my suit as I descended the ladder into the tiny antechamber of

the reactor room.

There was hardly enough space to squeeze into once Crit closed the door above me. This small room was an airlock of sorts, designed to keep radiation from flooding engineering when someone had to enter the reactor chamber.

The door above me sealed shut with a hiss as a small lamp clicked on over my shoulder, providing just enough light to see by.

There was a status board on the wall with a small red indicator. A few seconds later it snapped green.

I had to fight when I reached down between my legs to turn the catch on the lower door, the gauntlets that doubled over my hands would barely fit.

I wasn't exactly sure what to expect as the door fell out beneath me with a bang. Teetering, I nearly lost my balance, clinging as I was to the small platform beneath me. Wouldn't that look great? Fall into the reactor room and break my neck on the closed circuit in front of Crit? I'll avoid that, thank you very much.

Back on the ladder, I descended the rest of the way down to stand nose to nose with the reactor core. To be honest, I was a little underwhelmed.

The camera feed we'd been watching before had made it a little more dramatic with the radiation overlay, but my suit didn't have that feature.

The space down here was dark and unimpressive. A small, square room with the tube shaped reactor running from floor to ceiling. It took me a few moments to even find the leak. The small nick in the core containment was no more than a few centimetres across. It looked bigger on camera. Crit must have zoomed it in.

If he hadn't told me how critical it was, I would have simply passed off the blemish without a second thought. There was no ominous green light, no viscous ooze leaking out. Just a simple, small hole on the unmarked tube in the center of the room.

For a moment I considered getting down on my knees and having a peek at what a real, operating AM reactor looked like on the inside. Yeah... Perhaps not. This suit should protect me from the radiation leaking out, but I didn't exactly want to press it and see if I could vaporize my brain.

I clicked on my comm again, "Okay, Crit. I'm down here. Now what?"

The static was the same as it had been before, but the warble in the signal had grown exponentially. Now it felt like someone was taking a tuning fork to my brain.

"I... I don't know. There should be a breach repair kit in there somewhere."

I rolled my eyes.

A circuit around the small space found a bright red box with the word 'Emergency' written on it in a couple dozen different languages. I was just about ready to start smiling when I popped it open to find the worthless thing empty.

"Uhh, Crit? We have a problem."

The voice that came back to me had almost completely lost its velvet purr. "What is it, James? What's wrong?"

I threw the empty container across the room, watching it bounce harmlessly off the far wall.

"If Bulla wasn't dead already, I'd kill him myself. That cheapskate lizard wannabe never refilled the kit!"

There was silence on the other end of the line for a long moment. I almost thought I'd forgot to press the transmit button when he came back on. "Return to engineering, James. We'll... we will find another solution."

I rolled my eyes at that one.

"Crit," I took a deep breath, "The only options are that we either patch the breach, or we start praying. I'm open for any other solutions, but I'm doubting that we have any."

"James." His voice was level, but I could hear a note of panic cutting at the edges. "Come back up here right now. That's an order."

It was all I could do not to laugh. "An order? Really, Crit? You're the first officer of a ship of ghosts. What are you going to do, fire me?" A giggle forced its way from me, sounding more hysterical than I wanted. "You can threaten to kill me, I'm sure you could, but we'll all be dead soon if we don't fix this."

I laid an arm on the unyielding wall of the chamber, throwing my head back to laugh. It wasn't funny, but I didn't know what else to do.

James had descended down into the reactor room. The small human was the only one who could fit in the protective suit. And it was all I could do to watch him on the camera.

He was laughing now, a hollow sound that came across the comm dull and haunted. And I stood here uselessly at the console, watching, drawing my claws bluntly across its metal surface.

"James," I had to fight to keep my voice level, fight to keep it from falling back into the snarling and grunting tongue of my home, "James, I told you that was an order."

He looked up at me, staring straight into the camera, "Sorry, Crit. I'm down here already, might as well see what else I can do." I heard the click of him silencing his transmitter. All I could do was hope he hadn't turned his comm completely off.

Slowly, he made another circuit of the small room, double checking the empty repair box.

His comm clicked again, coming back online. I had to hold myself back from screaming at him, demanding, pleading that he come back to engineering, not leave me alone...

"Hey, Crit? Buddy?" The distortion in his voice had grown even worse as he moved to stand next to the leak.

I took a deep breath before speaking. "James. I am here."

"Buddy," There was something to his voice that sent my blood cold, made my fur want to fall out. "I've got an idea." He paused for a moment, "Just promise me that if this doesn't work, you won't come in here after me."

"James!" I clutched the microphone before me, nearly wrenching it from the wall as the joints of my hands screamed, the metal bending.

The click of his microphone going off again echoed around me. I watched him pull a small

welding torch from his toolkit, carefully lighting it and setting the arc just enough to seal.

He turned to me once more, looking directly into the camera so I could just make out his eyes through the double visors. Then he turned and put his gloved hand across the leak.

And brought the welding torch down to seal it over the hole.

"James!" I screamed it at the top of my lungs, my voice growing to a pitch that no human could match. The only thought that ran circling through my mind again and again was that of dying out here alone, cold and alone in deep space. The faces of my family flashed past me.

I would have ripped Bulla's head from his very body, that traitorous lizard, had he still been alive.

I wasn't sure if he could hear me. I wasn't even sure what I was saying anymore, my speech had devolved into nothing more than primal snarls as I clawed at the screen, as if I could somehow, by sheer willpower alone, prevent that stupid human, that silly, foolish human from welding himself to the reactor.

It took a long moment for me to realize that something was wrong... he had finished welding his glove over the breach, and he was still alive and moving. The resolution on the screen was low, having never been designed for such observation as this, but I could just make out that the radiation suit's arm hanging loose and limp, the human's arm no longer in it.

"James? Are you still there?" My voice was leveller now, the terror that clawed at my heart submerged just below the surface. "James... please, answer me."

He paused for a moment from his labours, now welding part of the metallic radiation suit's arm to double over where the glove was held in place.

"I'm here, cat-boy." His voice was high pitched, sounding almost hysterical, but calmer than it had been moments ago. "I'm still here. Care to give me a reading? How am I doing?"

I'd almost forgot. It took me a few moments to find the right indicators on the dials and screens before me, there were fewer in the red now. The pressure gauge, the one that had been predicting the contact between the mater and anti-mater, was down to yellow.

"We've... you've done it." I almost fell flat back on my tail.

"Ha!" He sucked in a deep breath, "What's the level like in the room around me? I'm going to have to cut off the arm of this suit, and I'd like to be able to make it back out of here without any of my own limbs falling off."

"It's... uh, better." Truth be told, I really couldn't read any of the gauges before me. All I knew was that the radiation overlay on the screen had fallen from a fiery red to at least a somewhat more manageable bloody orange. "Don't hang around. It may be better than before, but I don't think it's a good place to catch a nap."

"Ten-four. That's an order I can deal with." He lifted a thumbs up towards the camera, "Let me just seal a couple more folds for good measure, and I'll be up for champagne."

"Champagne?"

"Never mind," he said, turning back to work, "Just get ready to cycle the lock when I make a break for it."

It took a good ten minutes to finish my makeshift repair to the reactor breach. The most frightening part was that I could very well be getting a lethal dose of any and everything that junk box was pumping out and I had no way of knowing.

I'd used up the entire arm of my radiation suit, layering it over the breach again and again. I guess I should consider myself fortunate that I could weld the stuff at all. I'd lucked out in at least one small way – the smart welding torches these days were able to attach almost anything to anything. The only question was how well, and for how long.

The last step was to sever the arm of my radiation suit. The arm of my real space suit was pulled from the limb and stuffed in next to my chest. It was a tight fit, but it's amazing the things you can pull off when it's life or death. I'd almost had to dislocate my shoulder to make that happen.

"Crit, you ready?"

"Yes." His voice was flat and tightly controlled. I wasn't sure if he was going to shake my hand when I got up there, or try to tear my guts out.

Here we go.

I was almost pressed flush to the reactor core now. Holding the remainder of the sleeve tight before me, I sliced it with my welder, hoping that it would make enough of a seal to keep the residual radiation at bay. It would just be my luck to save the ship, then die of radiation poisoning as I try to scamper out of here.

There was a snap and hiss as the sleeve came free. I'd never had to run one-armed before, and it completely threw off my balance as I dashed for the ladder. I must have almost looked drunk as I lurched forward, crashing into every wall I could on the way.

Climbing the ladder one armed was a whole new challenge, but I just gritted my teeth and made it happen, almost falling flat every time I had to adjust my one handed grip.

Eventually, I made it to the cycle chamber, breathing a sigh of relief as I pulled the door into place below me. I found myself almost holding my breath as I counted down with the timer until the upper lock released.

I'd been concerned how Crit would react with me directly disobeying him. I could only hope he wouldn't take my comment about killing me seriously. I nearly screamed as he hauled me up by the collar of my suit. I never did get the sound out; his arms enveloped me in a massive bear hug so tight I could hardly breathe.

"Gah!" The air was forced from my lungs, I could feel the suits around me creaking as he pulled me tighter. "Need air!"

He relaxed his grip a half measure, releasing one arm to twist the helmets from me.

At first I thought the radiation must have gotten to my brain. The sounds that came from him were more like what I would have expected from a feral animal, not another sentient being. The snarls and yowls nearly deafened me. I got the explicit feeling that I was being lectured, but if so I couldn't understand a word of it. I was more concerned, however, with the inch long fangs that were snapping back and forth not more than a few centimetres from my exposed ear. We were so close together that I could smell the alien reek of his breath.

He paused for a moment in the middle of his tirade, mouth hanging open. A second later he dropped me heavily on the floor, bruising my backside in the process.

"We..." He paused for a moment, coughing and gagging as he forced his voice back into some vague form of civility, "We'd best get you some anti-radiation drugs. I, uh, don't want you dying on me after all that."

It was all I could do to sit there stunned and watch him as he rooted around in the first aid kit, reading the labels and throwing aside container after container until he found something for humans.

This creature seemed to switch from aloft and unemotional to cuddly-feely-can't-get-away-from-him with the flick of a switch, then back again. He leapt from perfect Standard to some guttural language that seemed more at home amongst brick huts and thatched roofs.

Crit was back at my side again, more slowly this time, more hesitantly. Almost as if he were afraid of touching me, when just moments ago he had held me aloft by my collar.

By the gods, what was happening to me?

I'd almost thought I'd lost James, the little pink human I hadn't said more than three words to since boarding the ship. And now I'd fallen back and begun screaming at him like my father had done to me. I had to grip the tubes and boxes in my hands to keep them from shaking.

We were alone, lost in deep space, but that was still no reason to glomp to him like a month old kit. I took a deep breath as I pulled the cap from an anti-rad hypo, refusing to look over and meet the human's eyes.

I was my father's son. I had to keep remembering that. I was here for a purpose. That monster Bulla might be dead, but my honour would not be saved until I returned home to feel the red soil of our village beneath my toes again.

And the only way I was going to do that was by keeping this pesky little human alive to get me there. Yes. That was it. I needed him to get me home, nothing more.

One more deep breath, then I composed myself to carefully form the alien words in Standard, "This will sting, James. We don't know how many curies you took down there, so I'm giving you the maximum safe dose. Ready?"

He didn't respond, and I still refused to look up at him. I plunged the needle into the fleshy part of his hairless upper arm, like the instructions said. He hissed, almost like a fellow azlin.

With the act of courage he'd just done, there might even be one in there somewhere.

It took a few moments before he was ready to get on his feet, for the aftereffects of the drugs to pass. I helped him toss aside the remains of the butchered radiation gear and spacesuit.

"So, uh, Crit, buddy?" He raised one eyebrow at me, "We're not in danger of immediate death anymore, so what do we do now?"

I just sighed and rolled my eyes.