

Forgotten Fleet - Act 0

Chapter 1

Ava tightened her grip on the wrench, feeling the Beetle's thruster vibrate gently beneath her hands. "Come on... just a little more." When the bolt clicked into place, her face lit up.

"Boom! Done!"

She pulled her head away from the engine compartment, wiping a bit of grease off her cheek with her sleeve. '49 was already there with the calibration tool, passing it to her without a word.

Evv didn't look up, her hand gliding over the thruster, fingers feeling for imperfections. "Check the alignment."

Behind the hangar bar, Ellis leaned against the counter with his mug, watching them work amid the familiar sounds of mechanics tinkering between rounds.

"You're raisin' a real ace, Evv. Kid's hands are already flying smoother than half the folks I know. You know, when we started, I couldn't get Evv here to ask for help on anything. Stubborn as a rusted bolt on a cold morning." He quipped, raising an eyebrow at his old protege.

"I learned eventually." Evv set down her wrench, looking Ellis squarely in the eyes. "Unlike someone who spent three days trying to diagnose a faulty thrust vectoring system before finally asking for a second pair of eyes."

Ellis laughed, putting his hands up. "Hey now, that was a tricky one. Could've happened to anyone. Regardless, looks like Ava's getting a better start than either of us did."

Evv smiled lightly. "She's getting there."

Ava shook her head, shooting her mom a glance. “I thought we were supposed to focus,” she said, the playful edge in her voice clear. But her hands were already moving, fingers deftly checking the next connection.

Ava stepped back for a moment to inspect their work. Its patchwork frame was a testament to their work—pieced together from salvaged parts and discarded tech Evv had saved over the years. The thrusters came from an old shuttle, the stabilizers from a wrecked transport, and the wiring... well, it was a miracle they’d gotten the wiring to work at all. But despite its mismatched components, it had character. It was **theirs**.

Two Greysuits approached from the far end of the hangar, one carrying a crate, the other slipping behind the bar where Ellis stood. Ava’s eyes immediately lit up. “Is that the AI module?”

Without waiting for an answer, she darted forward and yanked the crate from the Greysuit’s hands, already tearing at the packaging.

“That’s the one,” Evv confirmed, giving the Greysuits a nod of thanks before dismissing them.

“Mom, we can install it tonight, right?” Ava said, her fingers already prying the lid open.

Evv stepped closer, calm but firm. “Not tonight. We finish this, then head home. Early start tomorrow, remember?”

Ava sighed, slowing her hands, though her excitement hadn’t faded. “But we can at least look at it?”

Evv’s expression softened. “Alright, open it. But we’ll install it tomorrow, this thruster won’t install itself”

Ava quickly pulled the module free from the crate, holding it like a prized treasure. But before she could dig deeper, Evv gently took the crate.

“Come on,” Evv said, with a small smile. “Weren’t you just reminding me to focus?”

“Fine, fine...” Ava crouched back down next to Beetle. “Think we’ll have it ready for the race?”

Evv ran her fingers along the thruster. “We’ll have to do a fresh calibration before you ride, but I don’t see why not.”

“I can do that,” Ava said, her voice quick.

Evv paused, then nodded. “We’ll do it together.”

Ellis stood, stretching with a quiet groan. “Alright, I’ll leave you two geniuses to it. Just don’t keep her up too late, Evv, **someone** has a test tomorrow.”

“Not a chance,” Evv said softly, already refocused on Beetle.

“I studied,” Ava said, scrunching her nose.

“Uh-huh.” Ellis smirked as he grabbed his jacket.

“Come on, Ellis, tests are just tests. Beetle’s my **final project**, **it’s** what we’ve been working toward for months. Years!”

Ava gestured between herself and her mom.

Evv's eyes met hers. “Class grades are just as important as your final project, young lady.”

“I know, Mom,” Ava groaned. “But we're so close.”

Ellis patted Ava gently on the back and shook his head. “Just don’t burn the place down while I’m asleep.” He winked slyly at Ava then headed for the door, waving goodbye to the others in the bar. “Y’all take care now!”

“We wouldn’t dream of it,” Evv murmured.

Ava watched him leave before turning her attention back to the work in front of her.

“Ready to fire her up?” Evv asked.

Ava nodded, her fingers moving over the control panel. “Ready.”

Evv activated Beetle. The engine purred to life, a soft hum filling the space. Ava focused on the vibration in her fingertips, the thruster’s power clicking into place, the rhythmic hum of the power cells feeding the thruster modules. *Perfect.*

“We nailed it!” Ava said, her excitement spilling over.

Evv looked over with a wide smile. “You did great, Ava,” she said. “That was flawless work.”

Ava vibrated visibly. “Really?”

“Really.” Evv placed her arm around Ava, pulling her into a gentle squeeze against her side.

Then, the faint ping of Evv’s communicator cut through the calm. Her hand paused mid-adjustment, just for a second, before she pulled the comm from her pocket.

Something felt off – a weight pressed on her chest.

Evv’s smile faded as she read the message. She quickly slipped the comm back into her pocket.

“I’ll deal with it,” Evv said, standing. “Keep testing the thruster.”

'49 was moving before Evv finished speaking, falling into step beside her. Ava's hands slowed, her eyes following them as they moved toward the far end of the hangar.

“Everything okay?”

Evv nodded blankly. “Just something for tomorrow. Let’s head home”

Ava hesitated, glancing at Beetle. "You'll have time to help tomorrow, right? For the module?"

Evv paused, looking out the hangar window toward the rest of the fleet.

"I'll make time."

The door slid open with a soft hiss as Ava stepped into her mother's workroom. Evv stood at her bench, back turned—one hand braced against the edge while the other curled into a fist. The screen's glow carved harsh lines across her face. '49's fingers moved across the auxiliary display, pulling up core diagnostics and maintenance logs faster than Evv could reference them. Ava stood frozen at the threshold.

"—it's not enough." Evv's voice trembled with controlled fury. '49 brought up the collector degradation charts without prompting. "The collectors are shot. If we can't get a feed crew out there—"

Ava's fingers moved across her tablet, silent and practiced. She'd been taking notes on her mom's work for years. *UDRV-17, a Slumship.*

She pulled up the core schematics from her classes, adding another entry to her growing library of her mother's cases.

"Limited resources?" Evv's grip tightened on the edge of the bench, her knuckles white. "That core's going critical, and you're talking about limited resources? If the collectors fail—"

*Barely hanging on without a refeed. Those collectors are practically dissolving in the radiation. *Ava's eyes traced the schematic's layout. Every core needed feeding—that was basic physics. Working ships used recyclers, converting waste heat and matter back into fuel. But slumships... *three weeks late for their last feed.*

"Manual feeds are all they have left," Evv's words cut glass. "And you've halved their schedule."

The simulation data played through Ava's mind: containment fields weakening, radiation spiking. Her fingers hovered over her project files. *Maybe if...*

Evv paused for a moment, her deep breathing stretching through the doorway. Ava stayed quiet.

"They're past the danger zone," Evv spoke slowly, but you could feel the tension escaping from between her teeth. "One more day, and we'll be talking about a RUE."

*RUE. Rapid Unscheduled Evaporation. *The vids from her advanced containment class still haunted her. Once the cage cracked, the refeed couldn't catch up. Just a bright flash, then... *Everyone's gone.* She tried to swallow, but her mouth had gone dry.

Silence stretched across the comm. Evv's shoulders bunched.

"I need two hours, tops. A small crew. Just enough to replace the collectors, get a fresh feed going."

The comm crackled. "Impossible. Your team's scheduled for Iron Cross's recycler repairs. We're stretched thin, Engineer Cole. UDRV-17 is... not a priority."

"They'll die," Evv said quietly, her hands flexing against the bench, fingers twitching toward the tools on the table.

More silence. Then, flat and final: "We can't help every ship, Cole."

The comm clicked dead. Ava flinched as Evv's fist slammed against the table.

"Mom?"

Evv spun, a hand pushing back loose strands of hair. "Hey, sweetie. Didn't hear you come in."

"The AI module's prepped." Ava crept into the room, her hand lingering on the edge of the doorway.

She hadn't seen her mom this angry before — though it's not like she hadn't been documenting every repair denial for months.

"Ellis helped with its housing last week, but... you said we'd finish it together."

Evv's eyes darted to her tablet. "I know. I just—" Her fingers pressed against her temples.

Ava's hands moved to her own tablet, pulling up the file she'd been refining between guild classes. "I could help."

The diagrams glowed as she held them out. "Been working on this process for repolymerizing degraded collectors. Was going to be my backup project for finals, in case..."

In case I... Beetle... kept sliding down your priority list.

"Could repair the existing collectors. No replacements needed."

Something sparked in Evv's eyes as she studied the screen. Then it turned to fear.

Evv heaved a deep sigh. "Not this time."

She knelt, hands gentle on Ava's shoulders. "I'll make it right. I always do."

The words were the same, but the certainty had bled out of them.

Ava crouched beside Beetle, aligning the AI module's neural interface ports with the housing connectors. The cool metal under her hands was familiar, grounding—but this time, the routine precision of it was hollow. Each connection should have been a small victory, but right now? Purely mechanical.

“You’ve done this a hundred times,” Ellis said, voice easy. “No need to rush it.”

"I know."

Ava's hands moved with practiced precision, her voice harsher than normal. She guided the module into place, feeling for the click as it met the connectors. Her hand lifted automatically for the torque driver - but the air stayed empty. *Oh right. Where mom goes, '49 goes too.* She grabbed it from the kit herself.

“I just want it to work the first time.”

Ellis chuckled, “sometimes these things just like to fight you.”

She flipped the activation switch. Beetle’s HUD blinked to life, lights flickering on one by one. For a moment, everything looked perfect—data streaming across the screen, engines powering up with their usual purr. Then the system stuttered. The lights dimmed.

Beetle's voice crackled through the speakers, disjointed and erratic.

"INIT—I—SYSTEM FAILURE
DETECTED—HELLO—HELLO—POWER FLUCTUATION—ERROR
42—DON'T PANIC—EMERGENCY SHUTDOWN—ENGAGING
CORE—HOW ABOUT A CUP OF TEA—"

Ava's fingers jabbed at the diagnostic panel. *Neural mesh errors. Core timing misalignment.* Her mom's voice echoed in her head...

Hot metal and grease. Mom’s hands dancing across a different diagnostic panel, every movement precise. Confident.

"The trick with neural interfaces," she had said, that familiar problem-solving spark in her eyes, "is timing. Like a conversation." Her fingers traced connections to the fiber-optic hub. "If one side talks before—"

"—the other's ready to listen—" I finished her sentence as her words clicked in my mind. "The whole system breaks down!"

"Quick study." Mom's smile was fierce, proud. The interface hummed to life under her touch, systems falling into perfect alignment. Our language, spoken in voltages and timing sequences.

"Core's running, but the AI's having a fit." Ellis leaned in, squinting at the flickering data.

Ava forced herself back to the present, eyes tracing the timing logs. "The boot sequence is loop-locked."

"DANGER—LANDING GEAR DEPLOYED—ERROR 42—DON'T PANIC—SHUTDOWN IMMINENT—LOVELY DAY FOR A CRISIS, ISN'T IT?"

Ava forced herself to focus, her fingers moving on autopilot. She re-ran the initialization, but the cold, mechanical voice returned. "Awaiting further input."

Ellis glanced at her, his voice soft but teasing. "Well, it's got a sense of humor at least."

But Ava wasn't laughing.

Her eyes caught on the timing logs. The pattern jumped out—just like the diagnostic exercises from her core systems class, the ones her mom used to help her study.

“Wait... internal clock's desynced. Core's running slower than the personality matrix.”

Ellis snapped his fingers. “That'll do it. Small lag, big problems.”

Ava adjusted the clock's timing, pushing the core forward to match the matrix. The HUD flickered, but this time the lights stabilized. Beetle's systems hummed, steady and even.

“Initialization complete. Core and matrix reader to synchronize.”

Ellis grinned. “There we go. Told you there's always a fix.”

Ava didn't respond immediately. She reached for her tablet, but her fingers met empty fabric. “Oh, come on...”

Ellis raised an eyebrow. “Problem?”

Ava groaned, “I left my tablet at home. I can't load the personality data without it.”

Ellis handed over his own tablet. “Here. Can't leave Beetle half-baked.”

Ava connected the tablet to Beetle's core and started uploading the matrix files. But something in the code made her pause, a pattern she recognized. “Wait... the personality matrix isn't just glitching. It's gone. Completely wiped.”

Ellis frowned. “That'd explain the random outputs. System's trying to function without its brain. See if there's a default package somewhere.”

It isn't just Beetle. Everything seems like it's missing a piece.

Ava rummaged through the repair kit, pushing aside neural spanners and calibration tools. Her hand brushed something small at the bottom - a dusty data chip in faded green. The label was barely legible: “Chip's Chipper Character Constructs™ (Standard Issue).”

"You're kidding me," she muttered, turning the chip over. "They still make these?"

"Oh no," Ellis groaned, recognizing the logo. "Those were recalled for being too..."

"Cheerful?" Ava plugged the chip in. Better than leaving Beetle with no personality at all.

"Personality data loaded. Core and matrix synced— Stand By"

"Calculating optimal course to nearest refueling station," Beetle suddenly announced. "Alert: No refueling stations detected within current galaxy. Suggested alternative: Interpretive dance. Correction: No galaxy detected in current location. Void status confirmed. This is fine! Everything is fine."

Ava snorted despite herself. "At least the navigation systems are online."

"Attention crew: Current survival probability calculating... Error: Number too small to display! Don't worry, this just means every day we survive is a statistical miracle. How exciting! Would you like to hear today's void activities? Options include: Staring into infinite darkness, measuring the growing distance from known space, and competitive oxygen conservation. Remember: Every crisis is an opportunity for team building!"

Ellis pinched the bridge of his nose. "Maybe the error messages weren't so bad."

"Alert: Detecting traces of pessimism! Would anyone like to hear a song about the bright side of cosmic isolation? I've composed forty-seven verses!"

Ava shook her head and laughed, turning to look at— never mind. *Mom would have loved this.*

The clock on Ellis's tablet caught Ava's eye. "Crap. Training in ten."

Ellis glanced at the time. “You can’t miss another session. The matrix can wait. Beetle’ll survive a few hours sounding like – whatever that is.”

Ava hesitated, her fingers hovering over the console. Walking away from unfinished work felt wrong.

Ellis’s voice softened, placing a hand on Ava’s shoulder. “Your mom’s fighting her battles, Ava. But Beetle? You? Those matter to her. Don’t doubt that.”

Ava’s fingers traced along Beetle’s frame, finding the rear tether lock by memory –

Single thruster humming beneath them, makeshift stabilizer fins fighting to keep them steady. Mom’s voice steady over the comms: “Just a systems check, nothing fancy.” But Ava had felt her excitement in the way she’d triple-checked the tether connections. They’d drifted through the repair bay together, Ava pressed against her mother’s back in the secondary pilot position, both of them laughing as Ellis shouted increasingly creative expletives about safety violations over their helmet comms. A stripped-down frame and salvaged parts, but in that moment, it felt like they could outrun the whole fleet.

Pure freedom...

The memory shattered as Beetle’s AI crackled cheerfully in the present: “Would anyone like to hear a song about the bright side of cosmic isolation?”

“Then where is she, Ellis?”

She threw the spanner at her toolkit, but missed.

“Every time I think we’re going to work on this together, she’s already gone.”

Ellis was quiet for a moment, then met her gaze. “She’ll come around when it counts.”

Ava shouldered her bag, the weight of it all settling deeper. The empty space beside the workbench, where her mom should have been, was just a void.

Ellis stepped away from the workbench. "She's always been stubborn, but she comes around."

Ava's hand rested on the doorframe. Her mind flickered to the collector schematics still waiting on her tablet—the ones her mom had barely looked at. And the fear in her mom's eyes when she had.

"Yeah," Ava said softly, "that's what scares me."

Chapter 2

Evv slipped into UDRV-17's engineering bay—behind her: the greysuit she'd come to call '49 over the years. The core's oscillations were deeper, heavier than expected. She hesitated at the sight of another greysuit already at the monitors, his back turned to her. Her eyes caught his serial number: LGS-8041.

"Fleet actually sent support?"

'41 turned his head slightly, acknowledging her presence before returning to the data feed. He didn't speak. His stillness had that manufactured quality she'd seen in Warden cadets: humanity filed down to military precision; however, working with greysuits meant remembering they were people first, numbers second—like teaching Ava to look past her classmate's academy rankings.

"Mind if I call you '41? This one's been '49 so long, I forget the rest."

'41 shrugged and continued his work, fingers moving deftly across the control.

Evv moved toward the core's observation window. This close, the decay was unmistakable. The core had degraded further than the readings she'd received suggested. They didn't have much time.

Evv pulled Ava's tablet from her jacket, the glow from the polymer decay equations spilling across the dark bay. Her daughter's quick, excited handwriting filled the margins, calculations running alongside the more official schematics.

Brilliant girl. Ava had been talking about recyclers and core decay for weeks now, seeing patterns Evv hadn't. She'd solved things engineers twice her age had missed. Evv stared at the tablet for a moment, both proud and regretful. I had no idea she'd gotten this far. I should have listened closer.

"The refeed system." Evv's voice was firm now, commanding. "Power it down. We need the emitters."

'49 moved toward the controls without a word, their silent rhythm of cooperation setting into place. She knew Evv's methods, her orders needing no further explanation.

"Shutdown complete," '49 confirmed, her tone as steady as always. "Hawking radiation's climbing. One hour until critical."

"Plenty of time, get the emitters aligned with the collector geometries. I'll work on scripting the repolymerization procedure."

Her fingers moved across the controls, reconfiguring the gamma emitters exactly as Ava had outlined. Ava's technique was simple but brilliant: the hydrogen bonds in the polymer had decayed after exposure to neutron bombardment. Normally, the electromagnetic sieve – which pulls out useful bits from the Hawking Radiation – would have filtered out the neutrons before they reached the collectors. When a core is near evap, the Hawking radiation emissions get too high for the sieve to compensate. The hydrogen atoms in the polymer chains absorb neutrons, transforming into deuterium, and the polymer stops conducting. Ava's solution? Reverse the neutron bombardment: break down the deuterium with beams of high-energy gamma radiation, and the hydrogen will rebind.

"Emitters are aligned," '49 confirmed.

If Ava's right, Evv thought, the deuterium should begin breaking down immediately.

Evv brought the emitters up to frequency. A flicker in the readouts. The deuterium fractured, its hydrogen bonds reforming in its wake. Clean. Perfect. Just like Ava had predicted.

"Electron flow increasing in array one," '49 murmured, eyes on the screen.

The procedure was working. It was flawless. Pride welled up in Evv's chest, but something colder settled alongside it. All this brilliance, just to patch another decaying ship. She swallowed, pushing the thought down.

"Time to restart the refeed," she muttered, her hands moving automatically to the controls. The portable recycler waited by the input valve, ready to begin pushing matter into the singularity. Simple process. Should take minutes.

The system engaged with a harsh grinding sound that made her skin crawl. What the hell is it now?

She shimmied over to the access panel and yanked it open. The smell hit first—burnt metal and ozone, sharp and acrid. Her hands moved along the conduit, tracing the length of the wiring until—there. A clean, precise slice through the coupling. The cut was too neat, too deliberate.

Sabotage.

The dissonant hum. The power fluctuations. The way '41 had barely acknowledged her. Everything clicked into place with sickening clarity.

She looked up at him, still standing by the monitors.

"You knew."

When '41 turned, the movement was wrong - too precise, too controlled. His voice, when it came, wasn't his own.

"Oh sweetie," The voice that came from his throat was unexpectedly soft, "I do wish you hadn't noticed. Now I'll have to add this to your list of disappointments."

When he struck, it was calculated. A machine's precision in human form. Evv twisted, but her shoulder caught metal. Pain flared. Her fingers found the spanner.

She swung hard. He slipped past, fluid, practiced. His counter-strike cracked ribs, drove her back against hot metal. The core housing burned through her jacket. Klaxons screamed as the core overheated.

'49 vaulted the monitors, bringing steel down in a killing arc. Metal rang. She matched him blow for blow, but each exchange pushed her back. His fist found her ribs - precise, brutal. She dropped. Blood hit deck plating. Through the pain, she shoved Evv toward the gap between converters.

"Run!" Blood stained '49's teeth. "The Fleetmother—she has him!"

Evv stood shocked. *That saccharine fluidity, the mechanical softness...*

"Nuh uh uh," The Fleetmother sang through '41's lips, "that was our little secret, dear." His hand closed on '49's throat.

"The emergency seal!" '49 gasped as '41's grip tightened before he threw her across the room into a workbench. She slumped to the floor breathless.

Evv scrambled through the gap. Shoulders scraped raw. Mind racing - the manual override could seal the core section. But '41 arrived first, blocking her path.

She fainted, diving for the crawlway. His grip caught her arm, grinding bone. The tablet slipped, cracked against metal. Through the splintered screen, Ava's equations flickered - brilliance reduced to fragments.

Copper filled her mouth as he slammed her into a junction box. Core readouts bled red. Ten minutes, maybe less. She'd come here thinking she could fix it all, wielding Ava's solution like a magic wand. But this wasn't fixable. This wasn't another "I'll make it right."

'49 rose behind him, raw with fury, and drove jagged metal deep into his back. '41's torso twisted, spine audibly breaking in the process. A precision strike caught '49's chest. Her body lifted, then crumpled beside him.

'41's eyes drifted downward, his perfect emotionless face slowly faltering. "Oh, look what you made me do." The Fleetmother sighed through his broken body.

'41's face softened as The Fleetmother left him. His eyes were suddenly his own again, terrified. . "I couldn't... I couldn't stop her." His voice broke. "I'm sorry—"

"Shh." '49 reached for his hand. "You're free now. We both are."

A tear cut through the blood on his cheek. His fingers tightened around hers, then went slack.

Evv dropped beside '49, hands shaking. Blood seeped through the torn grey suit, warm against her palms. '49 coughed once, lips curling into that familiar half-smile."

"Always... too kind..." '49's words came out wet and slow, a mixture of blood and breath. "You... you hesitated."

Evv's throat tightened. "I never even—" her voice caught on the words, "I never even learned your name."

"Never had one," she breathed, her chest rattling with every word. "Neither did he." She glanced weakly at '41's still form, blood staining her teeth as she smiled faintly. "But... at least..."

Her eyes went blank, fixed on nothing.

Evv forced herself up, ribs screaming where '41 had struck her. Their bodies lay crumpled on the deck - '49 and the young greysuit who killed her. She couldn't look at their faces.

No, The Fleetmother killed her.

She found the emergency comm panel, punching in Harmony's hangar ID. Static crackled as the connection fought through the core's interference. She glanced at her dosimeter. *Not good.*

The screen flickered to life. Ellis dropped the glass he was cleaning.

"Gods, Evv—"

"Core's going critical." Her voice stayed steady despite the copper taste in her mouth. "Fleetmother sabotaged the refeed system. Clean cut through the coupling."

"What? Why should she..."

"They sent a greysuit — or whatever he was. He was waiting for us." She tried to steady her voice, to push down the image of '49's final moments. "Listen to me. I'm broadcasting a distress signal, but the radiation's already climbing. Once the containment field fails—"

"Get out of there. Whatever's going on, you can't—"

Behind him, unnoticed, the hangar bar's door slid open.

"I'm not leaving these people to die." Then her voice softened, just for a moment. "Ellis. If I don't make it back... take care of Ava for me."

"Don't you dare—"

The comms cut off with a harsh click, leaving Ellis staring at static.

The hangar bar was quiet when Ava walked through the doors, just the low hum of machines and soft clatter of tools from the back. She'd rushed over after training, hoping to find her mom, maybe get back to working on Beetle's AI. Ellis was alone behind the counter, back turned, speaking into a comm unit.

"I'm not leaving these people to die." Her mom's voice crackled through the static. A pause. "Ellis. If I don't make it back... take care of Ava for me."

"Don't you dare—"

The comm went dead. Ellis slammed his hand against the counter, cursing under his breath. When he turned, he froze at the sight of her.

Ava was already moving toward Beetle, pressure helmet tucked between her arm and hip. *Checklist. *Mom's voice in her head: *Stay focused. Work the problem. Power coupling. Navigation matrix. Core alignment...*

The console lit up under her fingers, that stupid cheerful personality matrix spinning to life.

"Good evening! Would you like to hear a song about—"

Her hands shook as she tried to steady them on the controls. *Methodical. I have to be methodical.* But the image of her mother's blood-streaked face on that comm screen—

"Shut up." The power coupling screeched as she yanked it free. No time for proper disconnection protocols. No time for any of it.

Ellis moved around the counter as fast as his bad knee would allow. "Ava, stop. You're not thinking straight."

"She needs help." *Focus. Check the gauges.* The launch prep sequence burned in her mind - pressure regulators, fuel lines, core temp. All her mom's careful lessons dissolving with every heartbeat.

"You don't understand what's happening out there—"

"I understand she's not coming back!" The words cracked through the air like a blown fuse. Her hands didn't stop moving. Fuel lines connected, pressure rising. Too slow.

Ellis reached for the main power switch. "Ava, listen to me—"

She knocked his hand away, punching in the launch codes she'd swiped from her flight instructor's console during guild training. The launch lane lit up, indicators cycling through their startup sequence.

"I can't just wait here while she—" The words caught in her throat. The pressure gauge wasn't climbing fast enough. She needed more power if she was going to make it in time.

"Alert! Detecting elevated stress levels and questionable decision making! Would you like to hear a relaxing meditation on the futility of—"

"Override voice functions!

Ellis gripped the edge of Beetle's frame, his knuckles white against the matte gray plating.

"You're going to get yourself killed."

"Better than staying here doing nothing!"

She shoved past him, swinging her leg over Beetle's frame and dropping into the pilot's seat. Her fingers fumbled with the tether lock at her hip. *Click it in. Check the seal. Don't rush the connection or you'll die in vacuum.* A red light started flashing on the hangar control panel - someone in flight control had noticed the unscheduled launch already. The alarm klaxons kicked in seconds later.

Her fingers flew across the startup sequence. Port thrusters, starboard thrusters, stabilizers... The deck plates vibrated as Beetle's systems spun up.

"Ava." Ellis's voice had gone soft in a way that made her chest hurt. "Your mother wouldn't want—"

"Don't." She kept her eyes on the controls. "Just don't."

The launch lane's warning lights started flashing - red, yellow, red. She scrambled to get the thrusters online in time.

"Fascinating!" The AI's voice cut through her override. "I've never seen anyone run a launch sequence quite this illegally before. Shall I compose a ballad about our imminent arrest?"

"I said shut UP!" She ripped the AI matrix's power line free. *The auxiliary power routing. Focus.* Her mother's warnings echoed in her head - never bypass the safety interlocks, never rush the power cycle. *Still too FUCKING slow.*

Ellis stepped closer, hands raised. "They're going to lock down the hangar. Think about what you're doing."

"She'll come around when it counts." Ava's voice came out raw. Her fingers flew through the overrides she'd sworn she'd never use. "That's what you said this morning. But she won't come around, Ellis. Not if—" The words stuck in her throat as she forced the thrusters online. "Not if I can't get to her first."

The first guard reached the door. Ava's hand closed around the throttle control.

"Ava, please—" Ellis's voice cracked. He'd been so focused on Evv's voice, on her bloodied face that he overlooked something crucial. The image of her dosimeter flashed before his eyes. *Black.*

"Don't make me lose both of you in the same day!"

But Ava didn't hear him, her helmet was on and Ellis wasn't on comms.

Beetle shivered as the launch lane's electromagnets gripped its frame, and shot it like a railgun into deep space.

The dead comm panel stared back at her. Core warnings tore through the ship's speakers, drowning everything else. *Focus. Work the problem.* The words echoed in her mind - how many times had she said them to Ava?

She punched in the emergency frequency.

"Senior Engineer Evelyn Cole aboard UDRV-17. Core reaching critical failure. Immediate evacuation support needed."

Coordinates followed.

"Any vessels in range, respond."

She set the message to auto-repeat and moved to the auxiliary console. The ship's manifest filled her screen as she dug through inventories - spare parts, outdated tech, deactivated systems. Her fingers froze mid-scroll.

KWON DRIVE UNITS (DEMILITARIZED) - Engineering freight hangar. Forgotten after the Flotilla Fits.

The core groaned, confinement beams struggling to hold the shrinking singularity. *But those drives... if I could get them working...*

She walked over to a massive, rusted door which she'd mistaken for wall. She fit a crowbar into the seam and threw her weight against it. It bent, but the door stayed silent.

Her hands slipped on the next try, cracking knuckles against steel. "Come on, you piece of—" She kicked the release mechanism. Once. Twice. The third hit bent something else, something inside the mechanism itself.

Sweat dripped down her face as she stood there, panting. Core alarms screamed behind her. *Time's running out. Need to think.*

Her eyes drifted back toward the singularity core where the sabotaged refeed cycle still pulsed weakly.

What's the worst that could happen? The thought came in Ava's voice.

She wedged the pry bar under the core's shielding panel. Metal groaned, then gave. Heat slammed into her, radiation threatening to cook her from the inside out. Six heavy bolts held the nearest emitter housing. Her hands shook as she worked them free with a spanner, skin blistering from the heat. The last bolt dropped. She grabbed the emitter with both hands, the heat fusing the work gloves to her hands. A scream caught in her throat as she yanked it free.

The beam sprayed wild, cutting a molten gash across the ceiling. "Fuck fuck fuck—" She wrestled the emitter around, trying to focus the plasma stream with burning fingers.

Like threading a needle with a blowtorch.

The beam carved through bulkheads and support struts before aligning. The door melted away in bright streams of liquid metal.

She twisted the emitter's feed line, killing the plasma. The housing clattered to the deck. Her trembling hands found her toolkit, and she made her way toward the melted doorway

Then static crackled from the comm panel.

"—repeat, this is Fleet Rescue Four-Seven, responding to distress call, do you copy? Emergency teams inbound—"

She sprinted back through the smoke-filled bay, lungs burning. "This is Engineer Cole. I need immediate evacuation support, core reaching critical—"

"Copy that, Cole. We've got three ships diverting—" The voice cut off as another channel broke in.

A derisive scoff cut through. "You can't be serious," Kye snapped. "Those are just slumrats and drifters."

"Our teams don't recover...undesirables," another captain cut in. "Why risk our people for those parasites?"

White-hot anger flashed through her. "Listen, you soulless synths. There are thirty thousand people on this ship - families, children. They're stranded and dying."

Her fists slammed against the panel. "We don't get to turn our backs anymore. Not after everything we've lost. Not if we want to look ourselves in the eye as a fleet."

Silence held. Then Farah's steady voice: "She's right...we'll make it work, no matter who they are. What do you need, Evv?"

"Just get here. I can't coordinate, I'm focusing on staving off the RUE as long as I can."

"A RUE? But you'll --"

"You have 23 minutes to get who you can, and get out."

Evv turned off the comm panel and ran back through what had been the hangar door, dodging the hot metal still dripping from the hole. Her headlamp cut wild arcs through decades of dust. Ancient shuttles loomed ahead. Which one? The manifest listed three units, but where are they?

The light caught it - that curved housing, the distinctive resonance chambers. The drive stood massive casing pristine under grime. Not built for efficiency or elegance. Built to tear holes in space itself.

She yanked supply crates away from the housing, ignoring protests from her aching flesh. Wiping away the grime and dust revealed the coupling ports—one for raw power, the other for the photaxion feed. Where military-grade buffers should have been, only stripped mounting points and exposed internals remained. *Demilitarization protocols. At least it'll make the damn thing lighter.*

Waves of heat could be seen coming through the door back to the engineering bay.

Sieve's drowning in exotic particles right now - including the photaxions I need. The old matter synthesis feeds had to be there somewhere...

The synthesis unit had probably died centuries ago, like everything else here. But the feeds would still be there, buried in the rats' nest of conduits around the core. Two centuries of jury-rigged repairs and bypasses to dig through.

Her hands shook over the toolkit. Without buffers, I'll need something to handle the power spikes. And a way to trap the photaxions long enough to initiate the fold. *But first...*

The spanner trembled in her burned hands as she worked the first bolt free.

Not the outer casing - takes too long. *The maintenance breakpoint behind the primary resonance chamber, just like the schematics showed. Four bolts, then the whole drive assembly slides free.*

Three bolts left. The core flared again, radiation surging through the hangar. Her dosimeter screamed, but she couldn't spare the seconds to check it.

Two bolts. Her fingers slipped, slick with hot serum and blood soaking her gloves. Ancient metal groaned as she forced it.

One bolt. Almost—

The ship lurched. *That better have been the evac shuttles docking.* The spanner clattered into darkness under the shuttle. "No no no—" She dove after it, fingers scrabbling through centuries of dust. Where is it? Can't lose time like this, can't—

Metal touched her palm. She yanked the spanner free and scrambled back to the drive. The last bolt fought her the whole way but finally surrendered.

Now comes the tricky part.

She braced against the shuttle's frame and pulled. The drive assembly resisted for one heart-stopping moment, then slid free with a hiss of ancient seals breaking. Without housing and buffers, it was barely larger than a cargo drone - but still heavy enough to make her grunt with effort as she wrestled it clear.

The exposed resonance chamber caught the core's light, crystalline lattices refracting it in impossible ways. Demilitarization crews had done their job well. Every system designed to contain and regulate power stripped away, leaving only the bare minimum needed for fold geometry.

Another violent shudder ran through the ship. The gravity fluctuations pulsed through her bones now, just like Ava had predicted in those polymer equations. Always seeing the patterns before anyone else.

Secondary control junction's behind two centuries of patches and bypasses. She adjusted her grip on the drive. Just need to get there. And pray the EM sieve's still functional enough to be reprogrammed.

"Come on, you beautiful bastard." She started her awkward shuffle toward engineering.

Fifteen meters. The crystalline lattices caught the emergency lights, throwing fractals across walls that moved wrong, folding through spaces that shouldn't exist. *Don't look directly at them. Not unless you want your brain leaking out your ears.*

Ten meters. Another violent shudder nearly took her off her feet. The drive clattered against the deck but held together. *The radiation is degrading the entire control system. I have to hurry*

Five meters. Almost to the secondary control junction. Just need to find those synthesis feeds before—

The ship's gravity hiccupped. One sickening moment of weightlessness, then crushing weight, then normal again.

"Shit." *Almost out of time.*

She shouldered through the gaping hole into engineering's emptiness. The secondary control junction hid behind a maze of conduit patches. She wedged the drive into a maintenance cradle and started tracing lines. The synthesis feeds would be some of the the oldest ones, buried deepest.

"Come on, come on..." Her fingers found a thick bundle of cables disappearing into the wall. The outer insulation cracked with age,

revealing pearlescent sheen of particle-shielded conduit beneath. "Got you."

The EM sieve's control panel was worse - half the displays dead, and someone had bypassed half the system with... *Manual toggle switches? Really? At least they were slightly more radiation resistant -- I guess?*

She swore under her breath. *Right. Time to remember everything I'm not supposed to know about photaxion particle extraction.*

Muscle memory from countless simulations took over as much as it could when facing analog replacements for vastly superior digital interfaces.

Target mass: 10^{-4} eV. She had to physically hold one switch while toggling another - *whoever jury-rigged this setup had really committed to the "manual" part.*

A status display flickered to life, showing particle flow rates in faded orange. The sieve pulled more exotics than she'd seen in any simulation. If I can just...

There. The photaxion numbers climbed. Now to route them without a proper buffer. She yanked her toolkit open, pulling out length of shielded cable. This is going to be ugly, but if I split the feed between synthesis conduits...

The drive's exposed internals hummed faintly as the first particles reached it. The crystalline lattices aligned, geometric patterns shifting in ways that made her neck hair stand up.

One connection left. Her hands were steady now - the calm of absolute focus, or maybe just acceptance. The exposed coupling gleamed in the strobing emergency lights as she reached for it.

"This is either brilliant," she muttered to the empty bay, "or the second dumbest thing anyone's ever tried with a Kwon drive."

The final coupling clicked into place. The drive's crystalline lattices pulsed with contained energy, each surge matched by the radiation from the dying core behind her. *Beautiful, in a terrifying sort of way.*

Her hands moved across the drive's control panel, programming the automated sequence. Simple enough - wait for full charge, calculate optimal fold geometry, initiate. *Ah, no switches. That feels nice.* The drive would handle the rest. Assuming it didn't tear the ship apart first.

"Charging sequence initiated. Time to critical mass: three minutes."

She could set up the jump now. Her fingers hesitated over the coordinates. *Where?* It didn't matter. *Anywhere but here.*

click

Something crunched under her boot as she turned. Ava's tablet, screen spiderwebbed but still faintly glowing. The polymer decay equations were

still there, half-visible through the cracks. *All that brilliant work, that beautiful mind...*

Her hands shook as she picked it up, fingers tracing her daughter's handwriting in the margins. So many late nights watching Ava work, seeing that fierce concentration as she solved another impossible problem. The last pieces of Beetle's AI, waiting at home. Waiting for a tomorrow that wasn't coming.

"One minute to critical mass."

The lattices' light filled the bay now. She clutched the tablet to her chest

"Thirty seconds."

She reached for the comm panel one last time.

"Ten seconds."

"I'm sorry," she whispered into the void.

Ava leaned into the throttle, feeling Beetle shudder beneath her. The thrusters weren't properly warmed - she'd skipped half the startup sequence in her rush to launch. Now they pulled unevenly, making Beetle drift slightly left with each acceleration. She kept having to compensate, her hands constantly adjusting.

That damn stabilizer. She should have finished the calibration. Should have waited for—

The thought stuck like a rusted bolt.

The evacuation shuttles were already visible, tiny points of light breaking away from UDRV-17's coordinates. Her hands tightened on the controls until her knuckles went white.

The comm crackled, more static than signal. Fleet frequency was a mess of overlapping voices, but her mother's cut through the noise:

"You can't be serious—" Another voice, cut off by her mother's response:

"Listen, you soulless synths. There are thirty thousand people on this ship - families, children. They're stranded and dying."

Ava's chest tightened. She'd never heard that edge in her mother's voice before.

A warning light flashed on her console - the control electronics were starting to glitch. She'd ripped out the AI matrix's power line in her rush to launch, and now the auxiliary systems were struggling to compensate. The nav computer stuttered, then crashed entirely.

"Great." She slammed the side of the panel. "Really great timing."

The AI could have rerouted things, kept the nav systems stable, or even taken over in a pinch. But no, she'd had to shut it up.

Her mother's voice again, weaker now: "You have one minute to critical mass."

Ava instinctively reached for her tablet to reconfigure Beetle's systems. *Right. That's missing too. *She cranked the throttle to max and piloted on visuals alone, the thrusters whining in protest as their unsynchronized burn made the whole vehicle oscillate.

UDRV-17 emerged from the void ahead.

"Ten seconds," her mother's voice whispered through the static.

Then: "I'm sorry."

The void seemed to pulse. Ava caught a glimpse of impossible geometries, space folding in ways that made her eyes hurt. A Kwon drive. Her mother had actually found a way to—

"She did it," Ava whispered. "She actually—"

Then she saw it.

Where engineering should have been, there was... nothing. A perfect sphere of void, edges smooth as glass, like something had taken a bite out of reality itself. The surrounding hull was peeled back like flower petals, frozen in the moment of... whatever had happened.

The electromagnetic pulse hit like a hammer. Beetle's systems crashed in cascading failure – screens dead, thrusters offline. The control electronics, already unstable without the AI's processing support, went completely dark.

The unbalanced thrusters threw Beetle into a violent spin. The force ripped her from the seat, tether line going taut with a metallic shriek. Her body whipped through the void, then slammed back into Beetle with devastating force. Something cracked.

Her fingers traced the worn edges of the unopened paint tubes. She stared at nothing, eyes unfocused on the wall in front of her.

The ship's core began to whine. She slowly turned her head toward the thin plating between her quarters and the engineering bay.

Her brother's voice tugged from within as her fingers tightened on the paints.

The deck plates shuddered as the door opened

"Liora. We're evacuating. Now."

K's hand closed around her arm. Her skin crawled as she stood frozen, dead eyes looking back at him.

The second shudder hit. K stumbled, his grip loosening for just a moment.

The deck lurched.

Wind suddenly howled through the corridor, ripping at clothes, hair, flesh. K's eyes met hers and for the first time she saw real fear there. He grasped at nothing as the vacuum took him, throwing him into the void.

The emergency bulkhead slammed down. A wet crunch of reinforced metal meeting flesh. Then silence, broken only by blood drops hitting deck plates. She stood motionless for a moment before glancing out the the viewport.

A perfect sphere of nothing where the engineering section had been. Clean edges, like something had taken a bite out of reality itself. Then movement caught her eye - rescue shuttles, their running lights cutting bright lines through the void as they approached the emergency airlocks.

Liam's voice finally echoed in her mind. *Follow the signs*.

She stepped into the corridor, nearly stepping on K's leaking remains. She gasped, gripping the silver necklace around her neck. Her fingers found the delicate clasp.

The chain slithered from her neck, landing in the spreading pool of blood below.