A Bond is Formed

The time leading up to the field operation seemed to stretch and shorten in waves, I would find myself busy, and time would slow, but in those moments, I had to myself; I found that time seemed to run faster than I could think. I wasn't even sure of my responsibilities; in most cases, the pilots could be handled by one or two engineers. But it was clear that a T1 wasn't just any SoulCore; it required the utmost attention. And even more so, it was clear that this wouldn't be just any field operation.

The Command Center felt unnaturally quiet, considering the bare whispers could be trumpets compared to the beat of my heart. The turning of knobs and pushing of buttons were deafening, and among all this, I was short of knowledge watching the vitals of Kiara and the T1, trying to read the abundance of sensory data sent back; it was blazing fast, which I wasn't used to. The operation was only half an hour in, and trouble had already struck.

"We have two Nundu class H1s five knots out from the T1, sir. They are closing fast at vectors- " The sound of blood rushing to my ears muted the engineer officer as I watched particularly close. '*Come on, Kiara, see them, you have to see them*,' Was the thought that raced through my head as I tried to find in the transponder stream any indication of the woman's intent, but It didn't take long before the radar sensed the movement of the T1 in the direction of the Nundu, but still no sign in the data of their acknowledgment of them; I found myself stumped and confused.

"The T1 has engaged the Nundu; there are signatures-" there was a break in the commentary as gasps filled the command center. "two more Nundu Class H1s have emerged from the ocean and are converging on the T1's position!"

There was an uproar in my heartbeats, and the tides in my mind turned; Kiara was in danger, and by the looks on the other engineers' faces, they thought the same. I looked towards the colonel and felt winded by his almost concentrative focus on Kiara's indicator among the radar information.

"The radar shows the T1 has come into contact with a strike," all eyes turned to me, but there was nothing. No data showing they had been hit or that Kiara was even remotely worked. Something was wrong, and as I watched the IO stream, I saw it in a blink of an eye; the same pattern repeated. Considering no other engineer could touch the T1, it was apparent that Kiara made sure of that and that she tampered with the transponder, but the question was why.

“Nundu H1A has been neutralized, T1 is converging onto H1B moving to intercept, T minus 60 seconds for H1C and D to reach its position.” The words have become noise to me, and it was in the moments as another gasp and the sound of more movements as the officer called out another hit that I saw the IO as it lagged before a slew of information was plastered into the IO stream; a conversation.

‘*Dani! Quick to the left! We knew about the other two we got little time-*‘, ‘*Ki, I’ve been hit again! Ki?*’ and ‘I*-my arms been smashed in that hit, Dani-‘* transmissions were followed by Kiara’s vitals dropping.

“Kiara is unconscious!” I called it out more out of shock, but it was enough to let the room know the severity of the situation as I scrambled to understand the problem.

“But the T1 is still in flight?” came a far-off voice, and I could barely make out the colonel’s voice as he spoke up, “We need to take control of it quickly, get it back to base, Lieutenant.”

“The T1 has silenced H1C and B-“ I pondered the implications of what was happening, walking the list of concerns and obvious facts with a fine-toothed comb. Kiara sabotages the transponder, and Dani and Kiara are talking to each other. Dani can speak, and Dani is the T1 by Kiara’s words; SoulCores shouldn’t be able to talk to their pilots.

Kiara’s words from our first meeting burned their way to the front of my mind, ‘*I told you I don’t need anyone babysitting me. I can take care of myself and Dani, and it’s not like any of the others did. They were too busy pining over being able to be this close to a T1 to do their job.*’ She didn’t trust anyone and seemed to care deeply for Dani. If people knew what the T1 was capable of, I left that thought alone.

“H1D has been neutralized; the T1 is the only marked actor on the radar, sir!” came the call from the officer as Marim piped in, “We best get the Mark Threes out to get the T1. It will sit in the water with an unconscious pilot.” The way he said that irked me as I sat down, staring at the empty transponder, the last transmission blinking back at me; ‘*Ki?*’

I reached for the terminal, wondering, and like someone who hasn’t ever used a keyboard, I typed each letter slowly out to send down the stream, ‘*Dani*?’

The was no response for what felt like forever as I could feel movement around me as a rescue response began its preparations. Finally, I could only look at Kiara’s vitals in fear as I sent one more output, ‘*Dani, please, it’s Lt. Ava. I need you to get Kiara back to me; if you don’t, she could die

from blood loss*.’

And I waited, before the stream filled with another input, ‘*Ava, I don’t know where to go. You’re not supposed to know about me.*’ I could almost hear the fear in those words but pushed it aside as anger filled me at Kiara’s recklessness and the danger she was putting herself and Dani in.

‘*I’m sending you vectors to get her back; follow them to the T, don’t worry about it yet. I won’t tell anyone.*’ As the T1 began returning to base, I swore that I felt the colonel’s eyes watching me before he nodded in my direction.

I stood up, ripped my tablet from the terminal, took all the logs, and rushed out of the command center and down the main hall, nearly knocking over a few cadets as they scrambled to get out of the way. The two large doors that lead to the hangers were wide open as the base was on high alert. The sounds of chaos filled the air as I pushed back and through people coming up the stairs. Then, moments before the Mark Threes were ready to push out, the sound of the hanger doors that brought Shells in from the ocean opened, and the T1 landed haphazardly in its spot on the floor.

Looking at the T1’s shell, the left hemisphere of its core-shell was caved inwards towards the engineer’s core. The light behind the T1’s visor passed in my direction as I rushed up the stairs with the sound of metal creaking and tearing itself apart as the core’s door was forced open by the T1. I could hear two pilots not far behind me rushing to help as I dug myself through the Nerve Stems to find Kiara covered in blood, her arm mangled in the caved-in portion of the core as it pinched her between them.

“Dani, force her out; I got her,” almost as an afterthought, I added, “I promise!” Then, as the Nerve Stems gave from Kiara’s body, she slumped, and I rushed forward and caught her. Kiara’s eyes opened as the Stems released her, dazed, painfilled, and bleary.

“Dani, help Dani-“ was Kiara’s muttered phrase as she looked lost and disoriented towards me; I shifted her weight to look at her arm as I whispered to just her as the two pilots had finally pulled enough of the Stems apart, “I promise, I will take care of Dani, and you.”

Kiara’s green eyes stared into mine, almost emotionless, before her eyes closed, unconsciousness retaking her. “Come on! Quickly we need to get her out and stabilize her!” I let my training take over and pushed all my questions and anger behind walls; I was now focused on keeping Kiara alive, at least long enough to express my anger toward her when it was done.

My mind wandered as Kiara was brought to my office and laid on the bed, and I began stemming the bleeding while stabilizing her vitals. A week passed in this manner as Kiara's wounds reopened and closed, and she remained unconscious. And I spent the time projecting, I felt frustrated, but also my anger shifted to the others around me. I could hear them talk about Kiara as if it wasn't wrong, as if she wasn't someone that could be dying and in pain. She was just an object to them, to be ordered around and forced to do their bidding. The way they talked, it was no wonder Kiara did everything she could to keep control.

I spent some of that week attending to Dani, moving and reaffixing the Nerve Stems within the Engineer's core long enough to fix the transponder and to replace it as Kiara meant for it to function. Part of me had considered chucking it when I found the device nearly crushed, and my anger spiked. The emotional toll as I felt tears slide down my cheeks in those moments was too much. I had joined the academy so I didn't have to watch others die; thinking about it now was foolish.

And once the insides were cleaned up, I worked hours on the carapace of Dani's shell, reorienting the parts and filling in what I could find; all the while, I could feel Dani's sensors on me. Finally, on the second day of this, I looked about to see us alone.

"Kiara is going to be okay; she is stable and just needs rest and to give her arm time to heal." I felt weird talking to what I had assumed to be another AI shell constructed by some ancient civilization. But it turns out they weren't just a shell.

"If I admit to you how angry I am at Kiara, you won't use it against me, would you?" as spoke as Dani's head tilted as if to listen. "The danger she put you two in, for a moment, I thought you were both done for. Everything I have ever experienced told me you should have been done for. Though I guess I understand why she would keep this quiet. She's not wrong. If people knew about you, they'd want to know more."

As the hanger grew quiet and I moved to leave Dani alone, they stopped me, raising their hand in a fist to my level; they waited for me. I could only blink back before bumping my fist against theirs, and with a spin of theatrics, Dani splayed its fingers back in mimicry of an explosion; It brought a smile to my face, the first in a long while. I left while calling out, "Thank you, Dani, " returning to the boring parts of my job; paperwork.

I found myself changing out Kiara's IV when she woke up, shifting in the bed with a groan, a soft muttering of 'Dani' under her breath as she turned to get up. I didn't hesitate to reach forward and hold back.

“Dani is okay, and I cared for them like you asked. In fact, Dani wants me to make sure you stay in bed and get better. Are you going to do that, or must I sedate you?” The question was given with such vitriol towards Kiara that I hoped my anger was evident. But instead, I added much softer as the girl looked up at me, “Please.”

I could see the consideration in her eyes before she slumped, and I was able to help her back and finish up the IV. I could feel her eyes on me as I rolled the gloves into the disposal bin before the sound of her clearing her throat was followed by a question, “What happened?”

“What happened, you ask-“ I took a deep breath, trying to clear my head before I moved closer to her, whispering as quietly as I could, “What happened was you recklessly put yourself in a position where no one can help you. What the hell were you thinking, messing with the transponder like that? Any number of things could have been happening to you, and I wouldn’t have known-“

“I told you I can take care of-“ She flinched back as I slammed my hand onto the bedside table, taking a deep breath in; I was visibly shaking.

“I don’t know what I have to do, Kiara. I don’t think I’m asking for much, and I get it; you don’t trust me or label me based on everyone else before me, but if we don’t bridge this gap, what’s the point? You could have died! Dani could have died! Does that not register to you?” I inhaled deeply, more glad than ever that there were two doors and walls made of lead between us and the outside.

Kiara stared, not in shock, but almost emotionless, and blinked back. “You know,” I said while pacing, busying myself with cleaning up the already spotless room, “I get it, your right. If anyone knew what you were hiding, the danger to you and Dani would be worse. But all I can do right now is this.”

Moving forward, I reached my fist up with my pinky stretched out and waited. Kiara seemed hesitant before wrapping her pinky around mine. “I promise you, Kiara, that I don’t want to hurt you or Dani; I want to help. I’m not going to tell anyone, I put the transponder back as you had it, but I only have one thing to ask” The suddenly quiet girl nodded as our hands dropped. “Please, don’t hide this from me; I can’t take care of either of you if you hide.”

I didn’t even wait for an answer before going to the door. “If you need anything, I’ll be in here. Just give me a holler; otherwise, you will be here until I deem you fit, which means it’s in your best interest to rest and heal.” And with a smoldering glare at the now shy girl, I shut the door harder than I meant to and slumped in my office chair, trying to wipe tears away with shaking hands.

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