

# BACKUP

*A Story of Station Kepler-Seven*

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BY

Blurt Snodgrass

321LUMINA

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*In space, nothing works forever.*

*You fix it with what you have — or everybody dies.*

## CONTENTS

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Bay Seven  
Four Days  
0400  
The Observation Deck  
Fifteen Hours  
Commander Chen  
Three Weeks Standard  
Blight  
Petersen  
Stress Fracture  
The Repair  
The Locked Door  
Sunday Morning  
Week Twenty-Four  
The Observation Deck  
One Year Later

## Bay Seven

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The alarm shrieked through Bay Seven—three short bursts, pause, three more. Purple-white LED strips ran along the ceiling, casting harsh shadows between the rows of vertical growing towers.

Kira Sato's fingers flew across the control panel. Red warnings cascaded down the screen, reflected in her dark eyes. The main nutrient pump had seized. Twenty thousand liters of mineral solution backing up in the transparent polymer pipes that snaked across the ceiling. Pressure climbing. The pipes vibrated. In six minutes they would rupture.

She jabbed the emergency comm button. "Hydroponics to Engineering. Critical failure, Bay Seven. Nutrient pump offline, pressure at two-forty and rising."

Static crackled. Then: "All teams deployed. Reactor Three's got a coolant leak. Can you manage?"

"No. I need someone now or we lose the entire soybean crop."

"Sending Webb. ETA four minutes."

Kira ran between the rows—steel frames ten meters tall, green soybean plants sprouting from white foam growing medium. The air tasted metallic. Sweat beaded on her forehead.

The pipes groaned. A joint near the ceiling dripped yellow-brown liquid onto the catwalk. The smell hit her: sharp ammonia mixed with iron sulfate. Her eyes watered.

She pulled the diagnostic tablet from her belt and climbed the ladder to the catwalk. She reached the manual pressure valve—a wheel the size of a dinner plate—and started cranking with her right hand. The metal resisted, then gave.

The bay door hissed open. Cold air rushed in.

Boots hit the deck below. Not soft-soled ag crew boots—heavy work boots, each step deliberate. Then the thud of a toolbox hitting deck plating. Then climbing, fast.

“Where’s the pump?” Rough voice.

“North wall, third level.” Kira kept cranking. “Pressure’s at two-seventy.”

He reached the pump housing—a gray metal box mounted against the curved wall. Yanked off the access panel. Inside, the motor whined like a turbine eating itself apart.

“Primary actuator.” His hands moved fast. He pulled components: ceramic bearings, steel pins, polymer gaskets. “Supposed to be self-lubricating. Isn’t.”

“Can you fix it?”

“Not with parts from the manual.” He dropped a broken bearing—cracked ceramic, poker-chip size—and it fell through the grating, three levels down. “I need something that’ll work instead of something that’s supposed to work.”

Kira checked her tablet. Orange numbers: 290. “Pressure’s at two-ninety. In twelve minutes this whole system blows and we lose six months of protein production.”

He was already moving—climbing down, running to his toolbox, snapping it open. Inside: chaos. Scavenged parts, modified tools, components stamped with serial numbers from different systems entirely. He grabbed pieces and ran back up.

His fingers worked—twisting, forcing incompatible parts to mate. He pulled a handheld torch from his belt and squeezed the trigger. White flame shot out. Sparks cascaded down, tiny orange stars falling through the purple light.

“Tell me when it hits three-ten.”

“We’ll rupture at three-twenty.”

“I know. Tell me at three-ten.”

Kira watched the numbers climb. Three hundred. Three-oh-five. The pipes shuddered—the whole structure vibrating like a plucked string. Another drip became a stream. She’d bitten her lip without noticing. Copper on her tongue.

“Three-ten.”

His torch went dark. He slammed the access panel shut and twisted something inside the housing. “Restart the system.”

“It’s not—”

“Restart it.”

She punched commands on the tablet. The pump coughed—seized—coughed again. Then it caught. The whine smoothed into a steady hum. Pressure dropped on her screen. 308. 290. 270.

Kira exhaled. Her hands shook. She gripped the catwalk railing.

The man climbed down. Gray eyes, direct. A scar through his right eyebrow, old and white. Lean build, pale skin—someone who worked in maintenance tunnels and engine rooms.

“Kira Sato.” She extended her hand.

“Marcus Webb.” His grip was firm, callused. “Your system’s running on a fuel injector from a maintenance drone and the locking pin from a bathroom stall. It’ll hold for a week, maybe two.”

“Then what?”

“Then I come back and replace it with something else that doesn’t belong there.” He picked up his toolbox. “That’s what I do.”

He started toward the door, then stopped. “You always work alone up here?”

“Usually. Half the ag team got reassigned to help with the reactor issues.”

“You know these systems could kill you if something goes wrong. Caustic burns, asphyxiation, electrical shock.”

“I know.”

He studied her. Then pulled a comm unit from his belt and tapped something. Her own comm buzzed in her chest pocket. “You need

help, call me direct. Bypass dispatch.”

“Why?”

“Because if the hydroponics fail, fifty thousand people starve. That seems important.”

“Marcus.”

He looked back.

“What you did with that pump—improvising like that—they teach you that in training?”

“No. They teach you to follow the manual and wait for proper parts.”  
A slight smile. One corner of his mouth. “I never liked waiting.”

The door hissed shut. The cold air from the corridor cut off.

Kira stood in the purple-white light, surrounded by the steady hum of working pumps. Her comm unit sat in her palm, screen glowing blue with his contact info.

She saved it.

## Four Days

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Four days later, Bay Seven's makeshift pump whined like a sick animal. Kira stood at the main panel watching pressure readings fluctuate—260, 275, 250, 280. Not critical yet, but trending wrong.

She stared at Marcus Webb's contact for ten seconds. Then pressed call.

"Webb." Machinery sounds behind his voice.

"It's Kira Sato. Bay Seven. Your improvised pump is dying."

"What's the pressure doing?"

"Fluctuating. Two-sixty to two-eighty."

"That's the fuel injector wearing out. I figured it had another three days." A shout in the background, muffled. "I'm in the lower ring, Sector Twelve. Forty-minute walk. Can you hold?"

"I think so."

"If it hits three hundred, shut down flow and wait for me. Don't try to fix it yourself."

"I know how to—"

"Promise me. That pump housing is under stress. It could fail in new ways."

Kira looked at the pressure reading: 285. “I promise.”

“Good. On my way.”

She walked the bay perimeter, checking each vertical tower. The soybean plants were at peak: twenty centimeters tall, leaves dark green, tiny white flowers just starting to bloom. The smell was fresh, almost sweet—living things growing in recycled air. Thirty-two thousand plants. Enough protein to feed six hundred people for six months. If the nutrient system held.

Thirty-eight minutes later, the bay door opened. Marcus strode in, tool belt already unfastened.

“Still holding?”

“Two-ninety. Spiked to two-ninety-five six minutes ago.”

“Show me the diagnostic history.”

She handed him the tablet. He scanned the data while walking.

“The injector’s cavitating. Classic failure mode for components operating outside design parameters.” He climbed the ladder one-handed. On the narrow catwalk, his shoulder touched hers.

He pulled off the access panel, reached in barehanded, then pulled back. “Hot. Give me thirty seconds.” He sprayed the pump housing with a small aerosol. White vapor rolled down through the grating. Kira’s breath came out in fog.

He reached back in. New parts from his toolbox—a different injector, this one from atmospheric systems. A gasket cut from pressure suit seal material.

“Where do you get these parts?” Kira asked.

“Wherever they’re not being used. Station’s full of redundant systems. Nobody notices if secondary backups disappear.”

“That’s against regulations.”

“So is letting hydroponics fail because we’re waiting six months for a supply shipment from Earth.” He twisted a final connection. “Restart it.”

The pump coughed once, then caught. The hum returned—steady, healthy.

“How long will this one last?”

“Two months. Maybe three.” Marcus wiped his hands. “Your whole system needs a rebuild. Proper parts, proper installation. But that requires shutting down the bay for three weeks.”

“We can’t spare the production.”

“So we improvise.” He latched his toolbox. “I’ll check it every ten days. Earlier if you call me.”

He didn’t pick up the toolbox immediately. “You hungry? I haven’t eaten in eight hours. Galley shift ends in twenty minutes.”

Kira glanced at the panel—all green—and followed him out.

The main galley occupied Deck Five, Section B, a circular space fifty meters across. At this hour it held twelve people. They went through the line. Marcus loaded his tray with protein paste, potatoes, green beans, bread, black coffee. Enough food for two people.

They sat by the viewport—a circular window showing the station’s exterior, stars beyond. A maintenance pod drifted past, thrusters pulsing.

Marcus ate steadily. After four bites he looked up. “You’ve been on station how long?”

“Eighteen months. You?”

“Born here. Thirty-one years.” He gestured at the viewport with his fork. “My father worked the docks. Mother ran waste recycling. Started as an engineering apprentice at sixteen.”

“No formal training?”

“Station Technical Institute. Three years. But everything useful I learned from watching the old-timers. The ones who kept this place running before we had proper manuals.”

“Xenobotany,” Kira said. “Earth University. Four years. Specialized in high-efficiency cultivation for closed environments.”

“So you know the theory.”

“But theory doesn’t help when a pump fails and you’ve got six minutes.”

“No.” Marcus leaned back. “Station’s not like Earth. Everything’s connected. You fix it with what you have or everybody dies.”

“That’s a lot of pressure.”

“That’s life in space.”

They walked back together. At Bay Seven's entrance, he stopped. "I'll see you in ten days. Sooner if something breaks."

"It will break. It always does."

"Then I'll see you sooner." He started down the corridor, then turned back. "Kira. You did good today. Calling for help. Monitoring the system. Waiting." He almost smiled. "Not everybody's smart enough to know when they're in over their head."

"Is that a compliment?"

"As close as I get."

He disappeared around the corner.

## 0400

---

Six days later, Kira's comm unit buzzed at 0400 hours. She woke in her quarters—a cube three meters on each side, no windows—and grabbed it. Marcus Webb's ID.

“Sato.”

“Need your help. Reactor Two cooling system. I've got a leak I can't reach. Can you be in Engineering Core, Level Minus Three, in ten minutes?”

“What do you need me to do?”

“Fit through a thirty-centimeter maintenance access and turn a valve.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“Only if you touch the wrong pipes. Ten minutes, Kira. Please.”

“I'm coming.”

She dressed fast and took the main shaft down. At Level Minus Three the air felt different: hotter, heavier, humid. Oil and coolant and ozone. Machinery sounds everywhere.

She found him twenty meters into the south passage, kneeling beside a massive pipe. One branch had spray misting from a joint. Marcus had his hand pressed against it, glove soaked, water running down his arm.

“There.” He jerked his chin toward a maintenance access—a square hole in the wall, thirty centimeters on each side. “Follow that tunnel three meters. There’s a shutoff valve. Manual wheel. Turn it clockwise until it stops.”

“What if I touch the wrong thing in there?”

“Don’t. I’ll talk you through it.” He shifted position. The leak sprayed harder. He pressed back. “We don’t have time for this. Please.”

Kira knelt, put her head through the port. Inside: darkness, dripping water, the smell of mold and metal. She pulled her work light and stuck it to the tunnel wall, then crawled in. Her shoulders brushed both sides. Water dripped on her back.

“Keep going straight. Three meters.”

One meter. Two. The tunnel narrowed. She army-crawled, pushing with her toes.

A valve wheel appeared in her light—red painted metal, forty centimeters across, covered in rust.

“Found it.”

“Turn it clockwise. All the way.”

She gripped it. Pulled. Nothing. She braced her feet against the tunnel sides and threw her weight into it. A crack as the rust broke free. Half a rotation. Then another. Then smoothly.

“It stopped.”

“Come back.”

She crawled out backward. Marcus was standing, shaking water off his glove. The joint was dry.

“Good. Pressure’s down. That section’s isolated.” He opened his toolbox, pulled out a rubber seal. “Takes thirty minutes. You can go.”

“Why did you call me? You’ve got a whole engineering team.”

“Because they’re all dealing with six other leaks. This one was minor.” He looked at her. “And because you answered at 0400 hours and didn’t ask questions. That’s worth remembering.”

In the galley she got coffee and sat at a viewport. Outside, stars. Inside, the station’s heartbeat: pumps and motors and reactors keeping fifty thousand people alive.

Her comm buzzed. Marcus: Good work in the tunnel. You’re officially on my backup list now. Don’t tell dispatch.

She saved the message.

## The Observation Deck

---

Three weeks in, Kira knew Marcus's schedule better than her own. He showed up in Bay Seven every eight days—sometimes for repairs, sometimes just to check the systems. They developed a routine: he'd work, she'd assist, they'd eat after. He always ordered the same food. She varied her choices.

"Consistency is underrated," he said one evening, cutting his protein paste into exact squares. "When everything else is chaos, at least the food is predictable."

"It's not even real chicken."

"I've never had real chicken. Born on station, remember? For me, this is chicken." He ate a square. "What's your favorite Earth food?"

"Oranges. I haven't had one in eighteen months. They don't grow well in controlled environments—too much water, too much sugar. Not efficient."

"Show me a picture."

She pulled up an image: a bowl of oranges, bright against white background.

Marcus studied it. "That's an impractical color."

"It's natural."

“Natural doesn’t mean practical.” He handed back the tablet. “You miss Earth?”

“Sometimes. The sky. Weather. Things that aren’t made of metal.”

“I’m doing maintenance on the observation deck tomorrow,” he said. “Viewport cleaning, structural inspection. You interested?”

“In watching you clean windows?”

“In seeing the station from outside perspective. The observation deck has the best view. Most crew never goes there.”

“1400 hours,” he said. “Deck One, North Portal. Bring a jacket.”

The observation deck occupied the highest point of the station’s central hub—a circular platform fifteen meters across, domed viewport above and transparent floor below. When Kira arrived, Marcus was already working.

“You’re late.”

“Two minutes.”

“Still late.”

But he was smiling slightly.

Through the transparent floor she could see the station’s lower rings spreading in concentric circles. Lights sparkled like a city at night. Above, through the dome: stars, brighter than anything she’d seen on Earth. The Milky Way stretched across the black—a river of light. Saturn visible to the left, rings sharp and clear.

“Gets better.” Marcus touched a control panel. The station’s exterior lights dimmed, section by section, until only emergency lights remained. The stars blazed. The darkness became absolute.

They stood in silence. The only sound was the station’s environmental hum.

“You come here often?” Kira asked.

“Once a month. Maintenance schedule.” He set down his cleaning cloth. “But yeah. When things get too loud. When I need to remember where we are.”

“Where are we?”

“Nowhere. A tiny bubble of life in infinite nothing. Seven hundred kilometers from Earth. Far enough that we’re on our own. Close enough that we can still see home.” He pointed. “There. That blue dot.”

A blue-white marble, half-illuminated, cloud patterns visible. So small.

“Fifty thousand people on this station,” Marcus continued. “All of us maintaining these systems. Everything has to work perfectly or we die. No margin for error.”

“You think about that a lot.”

“Every day. Keeps me focused.” He looked at her. “You ever regret coming here?”

“Sometimes. When pumps fail at 0300 hours and I’m thinking we might lose the crop.” Kira turned from the viewport. “But mostly no. Earth’s got seven billion people. Here, my work matters. Thirty-two thousand plants. Six hundred people fed for six months.”

“That’s responsibility.”

“Same thing.”

Marcus picked up his cleaning supplies. “Can I help?” Kira asked.

“You know how to clean viewports?”

“How hard can it be?”

He handed her a cloth and solvent. “Don’t press too hard. The polymer scratches. Use circular motions. Buff until there’s no residue.”

They worked side by side for an hour. The only sounds: cloth on polymer, their breathing, the hum. Outside, stars wheeled slowly as the station rotated.

“You’re good at this,” Marcus said.

“I clean growth chambers. Same principle.”

“Then why’d you let me help?” she asked.

He looked at her. “Because you asked. Most people don’t. They assume engineering work is beneath them. Or someone else’s job.” He returned to his panel. “You’re not like most people.”

They finished at 1700 hours. The viewport was spotless, perfect. The stars looked close enough to touch.

“You can come back. Anytime. Access code is seven-seven-four-alpha. Don’t tell anyone I gave you that.”

“Another regulation violation?”

“Station has too many stupid rules.” He picked up his toolbox. “If you need to think, come here. You’ll be alone.”

At Level Three they separated. "See you when something breaks," Marcus said.

"When, not if."

"Always when."

That night she went to the observation deck. Entered the access code. Sat in the center, looked up through the dome. The Milky Way overhead. Earth in the distance—a blue dot, small and far away.

She understood now why he came here. The station was tiny. The darkness was infinite. Human problems felt temporary.

She stayed for an hour, then went back to bed.

## Fifteen Hours

---

Six weeks in, Bay Seven's pump failed completely—not the improvised fix, but the main housing. A structural crack. Pressure dropped to zero in eight seconds. Thirty-two thousand soybean plants without nutrient flow.

Marcus arrived in twelve minutes. "This can't be patched. Needs full replacement."

"How long?"

"Twelve hours minimum. I have to source a new housing, modify it to fit, install it, calibrate the system." He was already calculating. "Your plants survive how long without nutrients?"

"Eighteen hours before damage. Twenty-four before total loss."

"So we have eighteen hours." He pulled out his comm unit. "I'm calling in favors."

By 1100 hours, six engineers were in Bay Seven—three Marcus had trained, two he'd worked with for years, one who owed him for fixing her quarters' air recycler off-book. They worked in coordinated chaos: removing the old housing, sourcing a replacement from a decommissioned system in the lower ring, modifying mounting points, running new feed lines.

Kira stayed out of the way, monitoring plant status. Eighteen hours. The countdown ran in her head.

At 1500 hours, Commander Sarah Chen appeared in the bay entrance. Tall woman, forty-five, dark hair pulled back, station commander's insignia on her collar.

"Webb. You pulled six engineers off assigned duties. Engineering Core is understaffed. We have seven critical systems awaiting maintenance. Explain."

"Bay Seven pump failed. Total loss. These plants die without nutrients. That's six hundred people's protein ration for six months."

"I understand the stakes. That doesn't authorize you to redirect resources without approval."

"I didn't have time for approval. The plants were dying."

"That's not your decision to make." Chen looked at the engineers. "All of you, return to assigned duties. Now."

Nobody moved. They looked at Marcus.

"Commander," he said carefully. "We're eight hours into a twelve-hour repair. If we stop now, we lose everything."

"Then next time, you follow protocol." Chen pulled out her comm unit. "I'm reassigning—"

"Wait." Kira stepped forward. "Commander, this is my fault."

Chen looked at her. "How?"

“I should have flagged the structural weakness sooner. The crack didn’t appear overnight—it developed over weeks. I missed it during inspections. Marcus responded to an emergency I should have prevented. If anyone violated protocol, it’s me.”

“That’s not—” Marcus started.

“It’s true,” Kira said. “I’m responsible for Bay Seven.”

Chen studied them both. Five seconds. Ten. “Is this repair going to work?”

“Yes,” Marcus said.

“Then finish it. But Webb—this doesn’t happen again. You need resources, you go through proper channels.”

Chen left. The engineers returned to work. Marcus caught Kira’s eye, held it for a moment, then returned to the pump housing.

They finished at 2200 hours. Fifteen hours total. Three before the plants would have died. Marcus started the system, watching pressure readings climb, flow rates stabilize. When everything held steady for five minutes, he nodded.

“Good for five years.”

The engineers left. Marcus stayed, checking every connection, every seal. Kira stood at the control panel.

At 2300 hours, everything still showed green.

“You shouldn’t have taken the blame,” Marcus said.

“Yes, I should have. It was true.”

“Chen could have written you up.”

“She could have done the same to you. For pulling engineers without authorization—that’s the bigger violation.” Kira walked to where he stood. “We’re backup for each other. That’s what you said. We warn each other. Help each other.”

“Nobody’s done that before. Taken the blame for me.”

“Maybe nobody needed to.”

“No. People needed to. They just didn’t.” He picked up his toolbox. “Thank you.”

They walked to the galley. Even at 2300 hours it was open—station operated twenty-four hours. They ate at their usual table by the viewport.

“Why did you become an engineer?” Kira asked.

“Because someone has to. And because I’m good at it.”

“That’s not a reason.”

“It’s the only reason that matters.” He ate a square of protein paste. “My father worked the docks. Hard labor. He died at forty-eight—heart attack. His body gave out from the strain. My mother told me: don’t do work that kills you. Do work that matters. So I became an engineer.”

“Does it matter?”

“Every day. Every repair. Every improvised fix. Fifty thousand people depend on these systems.” He looked at her. “Your work matters too. Without you, we starve.”

“Without you, everything fails.”

“So we both matter.” He finished his coffee. “That’s enough.”

They parted at Level Three. At her door, Kira turned back. “Marcus.”

He stopped.

“I’m glad you’re my backup.”

“I’m glad you’re mine.”

He disappeared around the corner.

## Commander Chen

---

Eight weeks in, Commander Chen called Kira to her office.

Chen sat behind her desk, reviewing data. “Bay Seven’s running at one hundred eight percent efficiency. Above baseline for the first time in three months.”

“The new pump housing allows better flow control.”

“Webb’s work.” Chen set down the tablet. “He’s been in Bay Seven fourteen times in eight weeks. That’s above standard maintenance frequency.”

“The systems are old.”

“All station systems are old. Yet Webb prioritizes your bay above others.” Chen leaned forward. “Is there something going on between you two?”

Kira kept her voice level. “We work well together. He’s reliable.”

“Except you have his direct comm code. You bypass dispatch. That’s not standard protocol.” Chen’s expression was measured, not accusatory. “This station is small. People talk. Relationships between crew members create complications.”

“We have a professional working arrangement.”

“Good. Keep it that way. Bay Seven’s production is critical. Don’t compromise it by getting too close to an engineer with a reputation for bending regulations.”

Kira left the command center, mind churning. Fourteen visits in eight weeks. Direct comm codes. Shared meals.

Her comm unit buzzed. Marcus: Engineering Core, Level Minus Two. Coolant leak. Need your help again.

She stared at it. Chen’s words echoed.

She replied: I’m in the middle of a growth assessment. Can’t leave.

Three dots appeared. Disappeared. Then: Understood. I’ll find someone else.

Twenty minutes later: Leak contained. Sorry to bother you.

You weren’t bothering me, she started to type—then deleted it. Sent: Good work.

No reply.

That evening she went to the galley alone, sat at a different table. Marcus wasn’t there. She ate quickly and left.

Late in her quarters, she pulled up Bay Seven’s maintenance logs. Fourteen visits. Every one justified—system failures, preventive maintenance, calibration checks. Nothing irregular.

Except the direct comm code. The bypassing of dispatch. The connection.

Her comm buzzed. Marcus: You okay?

I'm fine.

You didn't call for help. You always call.

I didn't need help today.

Okay. Just checking.

She typed: Chen talked to me. About us.

Long pause. Then: What did she say?

That people are talking. That I should be careful.

She's right. People do talk. Another pause. But we should be more careful. Use dispatch for non-emergencies. Keep it professional.

Okay.

I don't want you getting in trouble because of me.

I won't.

Good. See you next scheduled maintenance. Ten days.

The connection went quiet. Kira set down her comm unit. Something had tightened in her chest—a sense of loss even though nothing had actually changed.

They were still backup for each other. Still professional. Just more careful now.

She hated it.

## Three Weeks Standard

---

Ten days felt like thirty.

Kira went to work. Monitored systems. Maintained plants. No failures, no emergencies, no reason to call Marcus. She saw him twice: once in the corridor, where he nodded and kept walking; once in the galley with other engineers, where he didn't approach.

On day eleven, Bay Seven's secondary pump developed a rhythmic knock. Not critical. Just wrong.

Right on time at 1400 hours, the bay door opened. Marcus entered—professional, distant.

"Secondary pump."

"Yes. Knocking. Started yesterday."

He climbed to the second level, ran diagnostics. "Bearing's loose. Twenty minutes."

She watched him work. The same methodical movements, the same careful attention. But the ease was gone. The casual conversation.

"All set," he said when he finished. "Good for another six months."

He picked up his toolbox and started toward the door.

"Marcus."

He stopped. Didn't turn.

"Are we okay?"

"Define okay."

"Are you avoiding me?"

"I'm being professional." Now he turned. "That's what you wanted, right? To be careful?"

"I wanted to not get in trouble. That's different from—" She stopped. "From whatever this is."

"This is following protocol. Not giving station gossips something to talk about." He adjusted his tool belt. "This is protecting both our careers."

"It feels wrong."

"It's smart."

"Since when do you care about being smart? You violate regulations constantly. You pull engineers off duty. You steal parts from backup systems."

"That's work. That's different."

"How?"

Marcus set down his toolbox and walked back. "Because if I screw up work, I face disciplinary action. That's acceptable risk for keeping systems running. But if I compromise you—your career, your reputation—that's not acceptable. I won't do that."

"You're not compromising me."

“Chen thinks I am. That’s enough.” He picked up the toolbox again. “We work together. We’re good at it. But we keep it professional. No direct comms. Go through dispatch. No meals. Just work.”

“That’s not simple. That’s lonely.”

“Lonely’s survivable.”

“When’s the next maintenance cycle?”

“Three weeks.”

“Three weeks? You’ve been coming every ten days.”

“Three weeks is standard schedule. That’s what professional looks like.”

He left.

Kira stood in the purple-white light, surrounded by plants that were alive because Marcus Webb had spent fifteen hours straight keeping them that way. Because he’d called in favors. Because he’d cared enough to break regulations.

And now he was following protocol.

That night she went to the observation deck. Seven-seven-four-alpha. The door opened.

She sat in the center, looked up through the dome. The stars overhead. Earth in the distance.

She stayed for two hours. Marcus never came.

The next day, she went again. Empty.

The third day, she stopped going.



## Blight

---

Week twelve, Bay Three's potato crop developed blight. Fungal infection, spreading fast. Emergency protocols: infected plants destroyed, bay quarantined, all ag personnel on alert.

Kira worked eighteen-hour days monitoring Bay Seven for cross-contamination. One spore in the wrong place and six months of work died.

She saw Marcus once—in Engineering Core, working on air filtration upgrades to prevent spore spread. They made eye contact across the machinery. He nodded and kept working.

By week's end the blight was contained. Bay Three lost forty percent of its crop. Station food supplies took a hit—potato rations reduced for six months. Other crops would have to compensate.

Commander Chen called a department head meeting. “Bay Three's loss affects station-wide nutrition. We need to increase production in remaining bays.”

“Bay Seven could handle increased density,” Kira said. “Current soybean crop is at one-oh-eight percent efficiency. We could push to one-fifteen with modified nutrient delivery.”

“System stress?” Chen asked.

“Higher failure probability. More maintenance required.”

“Can Engineering support it?”

All eyes turned to the engineering representative—Lieutenant Marcus Webb. He’d been promoted three weeks ago. New insignia, two silver stripes.

“We can support it. But Bay Seven’s systems are aging. Increased stress means increased failure frequency. We’d need dedicated resources—weekly inspections minimum, daily monitoring of critical systems.”

“Approved. Webb, assign your best engineer to Bay Seven as primary support. Sato, coordinate with Engineering for the modifications.”

After the meeting, Kira waited in the corridor. Marcus exited last.

“Lieutenant Webb. Congratulations on the promotion.”

“Thank you.” He didn’t slow down.

“Which engineer are you assigning?”

“Petersen. She’s good. Detail-oriented.”

“Petersen doesn’t know Bay Seven’s systems.”

“She’ll learn. I’ll brief her personally.” He adjusted his tablet. “She’ll do fine.”

“Marcus—”

“It’s Lieutenant Webb now.” He said it without anger. Just correction.

“And this is better. Petersen’s qualified. Everyone benefits.”

He walked away. Two silver stripes. New rank. New distance.

She understood now. This wasn't about protocol. This wasn't about Chen's warning. This was Marcus choosing career over connection—advancement over the thing they'd been building.

Maybe that was necessary. It still hurt.

## Petersen

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Engineer Petersen arrived the next morning—young, maybe twenty-five, blonde hair tied back, crisp uniform, tablet with detailed system specifications.

“Petersen, Engineering. Lieutenant Webb assigned me as primary support.”

Kira shook her hand. “Sato, Hydroponics.”

They walked the bay. Petersen took notes, asked good questions, recorded readings. She was competent. Thorough. Professional. Everything Kira should want in an engineering liaison.

She wasn't Marcus.

“This is good work,” Petersen said, examining the main pump housing—the one Marcus had installed during the fifteen-hour repair. “Non-standard parts, but solid integration.”

“Webb's specialty. Making things work that shouldn't.”

“He spent six hours yesterday briefing me on Bay Seven. System history, failure points, quirks he's documented over three months. Most engineers don't bother with that level of detail.” She ran her hand along a weld line. “He also said if I screw up your bay, he'll personally reassign me to waste recycling.”

Despite everything, Kira smiled. “That sounds like him.”

After Petersen left, Kira stood at the control panel, staring at readings Marcus had monitored for three months. The systems he’d kept running through improvisation and sheer stubbornness.

Her comm unit buzzed. Not Marcus. Petersen: Forgot to ask—what’s your preferred comm schedule?

Daily. Morning reports.

Understood. First report tomorrow, 0700 hours.

Professional. Efficient. Exactly what protocol required.

She missed the irregular messages. The 0400 emergencies. The “need your help” that meant crawling through maintenance tunnels or watching Marcus work miracles with scavenged parts.

That night she didn’t go to the observation deck. Didn’t think about it.

Whatever they’d been building was over. He’d made that clear.

Time to move forward.

## Stress Fracture

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Week fifteen, Bay Seven's primary pump developed a stress fracture. Not catastrophic yet. But coming. Petersen ran diagnostics: seventy-two hours until complete failure.

"We need to replace it before it cracks," Petersen said. "Controlled failure—we can plan it."

"How long for replacement?"

"Eight hours. I can schedule it for next maintenance window. Four days from now."

"That's cutting it close."

"It's the earliest I can get parts and assemble a team. Unless you want me to pull engineers off current assignments—but that requires Lieutenant Webb's approval."

Kira looked at the pump housing. The hairline crack forming. "Schedule it for four days. I'll monitor continuously."

That night she stayed in Bay Seven, watching the crack propagate. Millimeter by millimeter.

At 0200 hours, her comm buzzed. Marcus: I heard about the pump. You doing okay?

First direct contact in three weeks.

I'm fine. Petersen has it under control.

I know. I approved her scheduling. A pause. But I'm asking about you. Not the systems.

I'm monitoring the situation.

Long pause. Then: You're in Bay Seven right now, aren't you? Watching the crack.

How did you know?

Because I would be. Want company?

I'm fine alone. Thank you.

Okay. Comm me if anything changes.

The connection went quiet. Kira sat at the panel, alone. Like she'd said she was fine being.

She wasn't fine.

At 0600 hours the crack grew two millimeters. Pressure fluctuated. By 1000 hours, Marcus himself arrived—Lieutenant insignia, tablet, professional distance.

"Petersen says the timeline's accelerating."

Kira showed him the readings.

He studied the data. "This fails in forty-eight hours. Maybe less." He pulled out his comm. "I'm moving the repair to tomorrow. 0600. Six engineers. Twelve-hour window."

"That fast?"

“This crack goes critical, you lose the bay.” He looked at her directly for the first time in weeks. “I won’t let that happen.”

He left. Petersen stayed, running diagnostics.

“He talks about you sometimes,” Petersen said. “To the engineering team. Says you’re the best hydroponics specialist he’s worked with. Says you understand systems the way engineers do.”

Kira didn’t answer.

“Whatever happened between you two—he still respects your work. Thought you should know.”

## The Repair

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The repair started at 0600. Six engineers—including Marcus and Petersen—working in coordinated precision: removing the cracked housing, installing a new unit sourced from long-term storage, modifying connections, calibrating flow rates.

Kira stayed at the panel, monitoring. Marcus worked the primary installation, every movement economical, efficient.

At 1100 hours, the new housing was in place. Pressure climbed. Flow rates stabilized. Everything green.

“Good work,” Marcus told the team. “Petersen, run final diagnostics. Everyone else, dismissed.”

The engineers left. Petersen worked her tablet. Marcus cleaned his tools.

Kira descended. “Thank you. All of you.”

“Just doing our job.” He latched his toolbox without looking at her.

“Marcus—”

“Lieutenant Webb.”

“Lieutenant Webb.” She forced the correction. “Can we talk? Just for a minute?”

They moved to the far corner. Petersen was pointedly focused on her tablet.

“I miss you,” Kira said. “I miss working with you. I miss us being backup for each other.”

“We’re still backup. Through proper channels.”

“That’s not the same.”

“No. It’s what keeps both of us employed.” He looked at her finally. Gray eyes, tired. “Kira, I can’t do this. The direct comms, the observation deck, the connection. It’s not worth the risk.”

“Risk to what?”

“To everything. Your career. Mine. The work.” He shifted the toolbox. “I’m a lieutenant now. I can’t be the guy who bends regulations for personal reasons.”

“So you chose rank over friendship.”

“I chose career over complications. That’s what adults do.”

The words stung.

“You’re right,” Kira said. “Thank you for the repair work.”

She turned to leave.

“Kira.”

She stopped.

“I miss it too.” He paused. “But missing something doesn’t make it smart.”

“If you say so, Lieutenant.”

She walked back to the panel. The door hissed shut behind him.

That evening, Commander Chen called her to the command center.

“Bay Seven’s repair went smoothly. Good work coordinating with Engineering.” Chen pulled up data. “Which is why I wanted to inform you first. Webb’s being transferred.”

“Transferred where?”

“Station Kepler-Nine. Fifteen light-years from here. They’re having critical system failures—reactors unstable, multiple bays offline. They need someone who can improvise, who understands aging systems, who can train local engineers. Webb’s the best we have. They requested him specifically.”

“When?”

“Four days. Transport ship departs Sunday, 0800.”

“How long?”

“Minimum six months. Possibly longer.” Chen closed the display. “Petersen will remain your primary engineering liaison. Bay Seven won’t suffer.”

Kira left. Walked the corridors on autopilot. Four days. Six months minimum. Fifteen light-years.

In her quarters, she typed: Chen told me about the transfer.

The response came immediately: I wanted to tell you myself. Didn’t know how.

When did you find out?

This morning. Right before the repair. I almost cancelled—told Chen I needed time. But that would have compromised Bay Seven. So I did the repair first.

Always the systems first.

Always.

Can I see you? Before you leave?

Long pause. Then: I don't think that's a good idea.

Why not?

Because it'll make leaving harder.

Maybe it should be hard.

Another pause. Then: Observation deck. Tomorrow, 1400. One hour.

I'll be there.

## The Locked Door

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At 1400 hours she went to the observation deck. Entered the access code. Seven-seven-four-alpha.

The door didn't open.

She tried again. Access denied.

Her comm buzzed. Marcus: They changed the code. New protocol after my transfer announcement. Only maintenance personnel with active assignments. I'm sorry.

Kira stood at the locked door. Their place. Not anymore.

Where are you?

Cargo Bay Three. Packing equipment. Security restricted during transport prep.

Then where?

No response.

She walked back to Bay Seven. The purple-white light felt harsh. The chemical smell too strong. Everything the same but different.

Marcus was leaving in three days. She wouldn't get to say goodbye.

That evening, Lieutenant Commander Jackson Pierce stopped her in the corridor—head of station security, three gold stripes with a star.

She'd met him once at a department briefing.

"Ms. Sato. Saw you tried to access the observation deck. Access protocols changed this morning." He paused. "I can get you temporary clearance if you need it."

She looked at him. Observant. The kind of person who noticed things without being asked to.

"Thank you. But I'm fine."

"Offer stands."

She nodded and walked on.

She typed to Marcus: When do I get to say goodbye?

No response for twenty minutes. Then: I don't think we should. Goodbye makes it final. I'd rather just leave. Clean break.

That's not fair.

Nothing about this is fair. But it's what I can handle.

The connection went quiet.

## Sunday Morning

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Sunday morning, Marcus Webb left Station Kepler-Seven at 0800 hours. No ceremony. No formal goodbye. Just a transport ship departing for a six-month assignment fifteen light-years away.

Kira didn't go to the docks. Just worked in Bay Seven, monitoring systems.

At 0900, her comm buzzed. Marcus: I'm sorry I didn't say goodbye in person. Working with you was the best part of my assignment here. You're an excellent hydroponics specialist. Bay Seven is lucky to have you.

Professional. Distant. Like everything between them had been reduced to work.

She replied: Good luck at Kepler-Nine.

Thank you. Take care of yourself.

You too.

She deleted the message thread. Every message from the past three months. Gone.

Over the following weeks, Jackson Pierce appeared occasionally—once to check her emergency protocols as part of a security review, once to bring coffee and ask whether she was eating properly. He was

observant in the way that good security officers are: he noticed what people didn't say. He made no demands and offered no speeches. He was simply present.

She appreciated it without quite being able to explain why.

One evening he stopped by the bay with two cups of actual Earth coffee—real, not synthetic, which was rare.

“Commander’s discretionary supplies,” he said when she raised an eyebrow. “You’ve been working fourteen-hour days for three weeks.”

They drank in comfortable silence, watching Bay Seven’s systems cycle through their routines.

“You’ll be okay,” he said when he left. Not a question.

She thought about it after he was gone. Decided he was probably right.

James came back from California in another three weeks—his father had recovered—and Marcus remained silent. Kepler-Nine had a habit of creating emergencies that required everyone’s full attention.

Kira pushed Bay Seven to one-fifteen percent efficiency. Petersen installed new sensors. The work filled the days.

## Week Twenty-Four

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Week twenty-four—six months after his departure—Marcus Webb returned to Station Kepler-Seven unannounced.

Kira was in Bay Seven running evening diagnostics when station-wide alarms sounded. Three short bursts, pause, three more.

Her comm buzzed. Jackson: Reactor Four cooling failure. Stay in Bay Seven. Lock down.

The alarms continued. Through the small viewport she could see emergency lights flashing.

Two hours later: Crisis contained. Coolant leak sealed. No casualties. Stand down.

That night, lying in her quarters, Kira heard footsteps in the corridor. Heavy boots. Familiar rhythm. Her door chimed.

She opened it.

Marcus stood there. Thinner than before. Darker circles under his eyes. Same gray eyes, same scar through his eyebrow. Same presence.

“Hi,” he said.

She couldn't speak. Just stared.

“I’m back. Emergency recall. Kepler-Nine’s systems are stable enough for local engineers now. Station Director pulled me back for Reactor Four.” He shifted his toolbox. “Can I come in?”

She stepped aside.

He set down his toolbox and looked around her quarters—same as when he’d left. Nothing changed.

“I wanted to see you before shift tomorrow. Before everything gets crazy with repairs.” He ran his hand through his hair—longer now, shaggier. “How have you been?”

“Fine. Bay Seven’s at one-fifteen percent efficiency.”

“I heard. That’s impressive.” He looked at her. “You look good. Healthy.”

“I’m managing better. More support now.”

He nodded. “I’m glad you have support.”

“Is it? Because you left without saying goodbye. No contact for six months. That didn’t feel like wanting me to have support. That felt like abandonment.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I thought a clean break was better. Let you move on.”

“Did you move on?”

Marcus looked away. “No.”

“Then why assume I would?”

“Because I’m not—because he’s better for you. Stable. Present. Not constantly deployed fixing other stations’ problems.”

“Who?”

“Pierce. I heard about that. Station gossip reaches Kepler-Nine.”

Kira looked at him for a moment. “Jackson Pierce is kind. He checked on me when I was struggling. He brought me coffee.” She paused. “That’s not the same thing as what we had.”

Marcus sat down on the edge of the chair. “Why are you here, Marcus? In my quarters. Right now. What do you want?”

“I don’t know. To see you. To apologize.” He looked at her. “To tell you I was wrong. About the distance. About the clean break. About thinking I could just leave and stop—” He stopped.

“Stop what?”

“Caring about you.”

The words hung between them.

“You left,” Kira said. “You chose career over connection. Again. Just like when you got promoted. Just like when Chen warned us.”

“I do. Because the work matters. Because if I don’t, systems fail and people die.” He looked at her. “But I’ve spent six months at Kepler-Nine and every single day I thought about you. About Bay Seven. About observation deck visits and shared meals and you crawling through maintenance tunnels at 0400 because I asked you to.”

“Then why didn’t you comm?”

“Because I thought you were better off without me. I was trying to do the right thing.” He met her eyes. “Was I wrong?”

“Yes.”

“I should go,” Marcus said. “I didn’t mean to—I just wanted you to know I’m back. That I never stopped thinking about you.”

“Marcus.”

He looked at her.

“I don’t know what to do. I spent six months trying to move forward. And now you’re back and I don’t know what that means.”

“It means you have a choice.” He stood. “But Kira—I came back. Not just for the reactor repairs. I told Station Director I’d only take the recall if it was Kepler-Seven. If it meant coming back here.”

“You did that?”

“Yes. Because six months of trying to forget you taught me one thing: I can’t. I don’t want to.” He picked up his toolbox. “If you want to talk—anytime—comm me. I’ll answer.”

He left.

Kira sat in her quarters, mind racing. Marcus was back. Jackson had been kind, present, genuinely decent. Two different versions of her life.

She sat with it for a long time.

## The Observation Deck

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The next morning, Marcus appeared in Bay Seven on official business—routine inspection, Petersen assigned elsewhere.

They worked in silence. Marcus checked systems, ran diagnostics, documented everything. Professional. Distant.

“Why are you doing this?” Kira asked finally.

“Doing what?”

“Last night you said you came back for me. Today you’re treating this like a standard inspection.”

“Because we’re working. Work is separate.” He descended from the catwalk. “But you’re right. We should talk. Observation deck. 2000 hours. I got clearance restored.”

That evening she entered the access code. Seven-seven-four-alpha. The door opened.

Marcus was already there, standing at the center, looking up through the dome. Stars overhead. Earth visible—still a blue dot, still impossibly far.

“Thank you for coming.”

“You said we needed to talk.”

“We do.” He turned. “What do you want, Kira?”

“I don’t know. I know what’s safe. I know what’s certain.”

“And me?”

“You’re neither of those things.”

“No.” He moved closer. “I spent six months fixing other people’s broken systems. Twelve, fourteen-hour days. I’m good at it. But the whole time I was miserable. Because the work without you felt hollow.”

“Your work matters. You said it yourself—fifty thousand people depend on those systems.”

“They do. But I can’t just be the guy who fixes things. I need—” He stopped. “I need you to be part of it.”

“You can’t promise you won’t leave again. You can’t promise the work won’t pull you away.”

“No. I can’t promise easy. But I can promise I won’t disappear. I’ll comm. I’ll fight for this instead of walking away.” He took her hands. “I know that’s not everything you want.”

“It’s more than you gave me before.”

“Yes.”

She looked at him. Gray eyes. Scar through his eyebrow. The face she’d thought about for six months.

“Okay,” she said.

“Okay?”

“Okay.” She stepped toward him. “Don’t disappear again.”

“I won’t.”

He pulled her close. They stood under the dome for a long time—talking, not talking, just being in the same place again. The stars wheeled overhead. Earth hung in the distance.

In the morning she would have a conversation with Jackson Pierce—brief, honest, kind, the kind of conversation decent people have when they owe each other clarity.

But that was tomorrow. Tonight there was just the dome and the stars and the hum of a station keeping fifty thousand people alive.

## One Year Later

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Bay Seven ran at one-twenty percent efficiency—new station record. Kira had expanded operations: three additional bays under her supervision, training two new specialists, her protocols becoming the model for the station.

Marcus was Chief Engineering Officer—three gold stripes, department head, responsible for all station systems. He still improvised. Still borrowed parts from redundant systems. Still fixed things that shouldn't work.

They lived together now—joint quarters, a viewport showing stars, his toolbox by the door, her hydroponics manuals on the desk.

One evening they stood on the observation deck. Their place. Where everything had started.

"I've been thinking," Marcus said.

"About?"

"About the future." He pulled something from his pocket. A small box.

Inside: a ring. Simple band, no stone. Made from reclaimed station materials—titanium-alloy, polished smooth.

"I'm not good at speeches," he said. "I work too much and I'm covered in grease half the time. But I love you. I want to spend whatever years

we have fixing broken systems and growing food in space and watching stars from this deck. Will you marry me?"

Kira looked at the ring. At Marcus. At the life they'd built—improvised, complicated, real.

"Yes."

He slipped the ring on her finger. Perfect fit.

"How did you—"

"I'm an engineer. I measure things." He pulled her close. "Besides, I've been planning this for six months. Since I came back. Since you said okay."

"I chose you before that. I just didn't know it yet."

They stood under the dome. Stars overhead. Earth in the distance. Two people who'd found each other in maintenance tunnels and hydroponics bays, who'd chosen work that mattered, who'd chosen each other.

"Thank you," Marcus said.

"For what?"

"For calling me when Bay Seven's pump failed. For crawling through maintenance tunnels. For being my backup. For choosing me."

"Thank you for fixing my systems. For showing me the stars. For coming back." Kira kissed him. "For being worth waiting for."

Outside, the station rotated. Inside, fifty thousand people lived and worked and depended on systems that two engineers kept running.

And in the observation deck, under impossible stars, two people who'd found love in the darkness held each other and knew—this was exactly where they belonged.