

Built to Last Chapter 1

Amadis Dubois opened her eyes and wondered where the hell she was.

Maybe *hell* was the wrong idea. Her surroundings certainly didn't look like a place of punishment. Everything around Amadis was stark white, as pure as resonator crystal wafers.

She stared straight ahead for several seconds as her brain oriented itself. A window slanted off toward a blameless blank wall...no, it was a ceiling. She was lying on a soft but supporting surface, on her back. Inside a padded capsule.

Another second elapsed, and she remembered. She was in a cryosleep chamber, on board the transport *Golden Ray*. The cargo ship headed to Space Station Nu on the frontier of the Interplanetary Trade and Commerce System, commonly referred to as the ITCS.

Amadis was in charge of a mission to bring lifesaving supplies to Nu, which had been stricken with a flesh-eating virus that was slowly but steadily overwhelming the station's medical staff. The cryosleep chamber, as explained to her by the *Golden Ray's* captain, was set to awaken her a week before they reached Nu. It was a three-month journey from Amadis' home, Space Station Alpha.

She stretched and yawned. A voice suddenly spoke up, startling her into a yelp. "Greetings, Amadis Dubois. This is the *Golden Ray's* automatic piloting system, which has been enabled on an emergency issue. Are you fully awake and functioning?"

Her first instinct was to snarl no, she wasn't functioning. She didn't function until at least two cups of coffee were sizzling through her veins, and she damned sure wasn't functioning fresh out of cryosleep.

Coffee or no, the word *emergency* revved her out of her just-woke-up stupor.

"Emergency? What emergency?"

"Captain LaFarge has collapsed on the bridge. This system detects no life signs from its commander."

"Shit!" Amadis clambered out of the capsule and hissed when her bare feet hit the ice-cold floor. "Shitshitshitshit!" she chanted as the room's chill dashed past her thin underclothes. She yanked off the electrodes adhered to her bare skin, and the monitors tracking her recently hibernating functions beeped a soft complaint before shutting down. She ignored them in favor of dancing against the burn of too-cold floor.

"Apologies for the room's temperature," the smooth electronic voice said in its irritatingly calm manner. "The emergency protocol didn't allow for the chamber to be warmed to comfortable levels before you were awakened."

Peeling the last electrode from her chest, Amadis swallowed against a heave in her gut. "Or the usual anti-nausea treatment?"

"Affirmative. You will find a portable-sized bin by the door as you exit should you need to vomit. To guide you most effectively, I will light the corridors you need to join Captain LaFarge on the bridge."

"Hell of a way to start my mission." Which she'd lobbied her boss Tosha Cameron hard for.

She grabbed the bin the system had told her of on her way out, reflecting how funny it was to be nauseous after three months of hibernation. Nutritional needs in cryosleep were minimal, but apparently necessary enough that something in her digestive tract rebelled after being brought back to consciousness. The feeding tube had been retracted prior to her awakening and the small incision healed.

The blinding whiteness of the cryosleep chamber was left behind for the gentler illumination of the corridor beyond. If her eyes could have sighed in relief, they would have.

The rest of her was far from any respite, however. “How long ago did Captain LaFarge collapse?”

“Ten minutes.”

Amadis had been brought up faster than the usual safety regulations would allow, but ten minutes was a lengthy stretch if a life was on the line. “There’s no sign of response from her?”

“Ship’s sensors detect no respiration. Other functions, such as pulse or brain activity, are beyond my ability to measure.”

Amadis forced herself to jog despite her stomach’s complaints. Ahead of her, lights flickered on, showing her the way along the gray-paneled corridor. “Any signs of trouble before the captain...passed out?” She wasn’t willing to say *died*.

“Nothing out of the normal as I understand it. However, this ship has never had the pleasure of Captain LaFarge’s command before this trip, so I am unaware of what might have been unusual in her medical file.”

“You don’t have access to that?”

“Just regulation checkups. Her medical status was in proper order as of seven months prior to this mission.”

“How much farther before I get to her?”

“The hatch at the end of this corridor opens to the bridge.”

Swallowing against her rocking stomach, Amadis put on a burst of speed.

The door opened obligingly when she reached it, and she found herself in a rectangular space. There was an impression of video monitors, gauges, and lights both steady and flickering, but her attention immediately centered on the crumpled form on the floor.

“Captain LaFarge!” she leapt down from the raised floor that ran the edges of the bridge, ignoring the two steps to the lower surface. She knelt next to the still figure. The captain had fallen face down, curled into herself.

“Vital signs sensory equipment is located in the emergency medical hatch on the aft wall of the bridge.”

Amadis’ fingers pressed to the captain’s neck. She couldn’t find a pulse. She stood and looked wildly at the walls. “Where?”

She happened to be looking at the back of the bridge when a small panel slid open. She ran up and yanked a metal container with a bright red cross emblazoned on it. She carried it to the motionless figure and opened it up.

“What am I looking for?” Despite being in charge of a medical rescue mission, she had no such training. She was an executive assistant, not a doctor. The system should have activated one of the cyborgs that was part of the ship’s cargo if it had wanted to save LaFarge.

Except it has no preferences on the matter of human lives. It has a program to carry out, and as mission leader, I was the go-to.

Amadis felt anxiety that she was in over her head. Nevertheless, she picked up the chrome-sided box the system identified as the vital signs scanner and pressed the black button it told her to.

A small monitor flipped up from the scanner. A steady beep issued from it.

“Point the end of the scanner at the top of the captain’s head and slowly wave it down her body to just below the chest. It is unnecessary to shift her position,” the system advised in its polite tone. “Then press the black button again.”

Amadis obeyed. When she'd completed the task, the monitor scrolled down a list that blazed in fluorescent green lettering:

Heart Rate: 0%

Respiratory Rate: 0%

Systolic Blood Pressure: 0%

Brain Activity: None Detected

And finally:

Patient Status: Dead

"Shit," Amadis groaned. "We're too late."

"This system records the death of Captain Theresa LaFarge at twenty-three hundred hours, seventeen minutes, three seconds, standard ITCS time. If you will transport the body to the Medical Department for an autopsy scan, the cause of death can be determined, the ITCS informed, and a valid death certificate issued."

The body. Amadis marveled that a woman alive minutes before had already been relegated to such a remote designation.

It was then that she gave up the battle with her guts. Fortunately, the bin she'd hauled from the cryochamber was right there to catch the small amount she brought up. A few seconds later, she pushed the receptacle away. She sat on the floor and studied her deceased companion.

"Her name was Theresa?"

"Affirmative."

"Family?"

"An elderly mother on Station Beta with whom she lived. No other family noted. Will you be transporting the body to the Medical Department now?"

"Do me a favor, okay? Continue to call her Captain LaFarge. Let's have a little respect for an officer and somebody's daughter."

"No offense was intended. The system will comply with its commanding officer's request."

Amadis frowned. "You mean I'm in charge of the ship now?"

"Affirmative. You are the only human alive on board, which places you in command as long as your orders do not constitute an attempt to deprive the ITCS of its property, namely the *Golden Ray*."

"Well, I asked to be put in charge. I guess I should have paid attention to that adage, 'be careful what you wish for,'" Amadis muttered. For the system's benefit, she raised her voice.

"As for taking Captain LaFarge to the Medical Department, I doubt I can." LaFarge was a large woman. Very large. Apparently, the body contouring so many spent their money on hadn't been high on her priorities. Maybe she wasn't paid enough to indulge in surgical maintenance...especially if she had an elderly woman to care for. Regular contouring was expensive.

"Gurneys are available in the Medical Department. Do you believe you could lift Captain LaFarge onto a collapsed gurney?"

"Depends on how low it collapses. Maybe." Amadis' toned frame had nothing to do with contouring. She could have afforded it, but she enjoyed tough workouts that gave her real strength instead of the mere appearance of it. "I guess I have no choice but to try."

“Agreed. Decomposition will set in before this transport vessel can reach its destination or a return trip to Station Alpha, should that be your choice.”

Amadis frowned at the disembodied voice. It hadn't occurred to her to wonder how early she'd been summoned from cryosleep until that moment. “Which is closer?”

“Station Nu is the nearest of docking options for offloading a deceased individual by a margin of thirty-six hours.”

Amadis had studied the route and distances to various stations before the trip. “Wait. We're halfway there?”

“If Commander Dubois is referring to an approximate time rather than specific, that can be computed as correct. We are eighty-eight ITCS days from Station Nu, slightly less than ninety-one from Station Alpha. Would you like to select a course now? Or confer with ITCS Flight Control?”

“Give me a second.” Amadis rubbed her forehead and tried to order her thoughts.

Space Station Nu was in grave trouble. The flesh-eating virus had seemed contained until two months prior, raging despite aggressive quarantine protocols. When Amadis had left dock, it had been estimated the casualty rate would climb to fifty percent within another three months.

She was no savior galloping to the rescue, but she was in charge of what would: a cyborg medical staff impervious to the disease, antibiotics to bring it under control, and printing machines to replace limbs amputated in order to keep victims from dying,

Even with an immediate heads-up, it would take the ITCS and Life Tech, the medical company that had sent the supplies, a few weeks to put together another emergency transport. Amadis knew the issues regarding shipping the materials intimately...she'd done the research herself. Many on Nu couldn't afford any delay. The fatalities and mutilations would be horrific if the equipment and medicine were postponed by more than a week.

“Can this ship reach Nu without a captain?” she asked the system.

“The system is programmed to pilot a set course and dock at its designated berth without human input. The captain is required only in the case of unscheduled changes and diversions in our path.”

“I have no intention of diverting course. We need to arrive at Nu as soon as possible.”

“Automatic pilot can succeed, as long as the ship encounters no anti-ITCS rebels or pirates.”

Worry tugged at Amadis. The frontier was dangerous, but Lafarge had been the only crew on the transport. The route was safeguarded. If the *Golden Ray* continued on its flight plan and the ITCS did its part in guarding the established route, she should be fine.

“As soon as the autopsy's done, send the ITCS the relevant information as to Captain Lafarge's death. Also inform them that I'll be continuing on to Space Station Nu.”

“Affirmative.”

Amadis eyed the unfortunate captain, noting again her heft. She might be able to roll her onto the gurney...but maybe she should accept some help.

“Light my path to the bay where the cyborgs are stored. Uh, after I put on some clothes,” she amended, realizing she was still clad in only a halter bra and panties.