

## The Pampshifter: Chapter 16

Written By: CrissieBaby & the Interactive Story Club

“Well, what’s it gonna be, mittens?” said Luna, taking a jab at Mason’s effeminate hobby. She didn’t particularly care whether or not Mason came with her or not, though she would prefer not to be sent hurtling through space in what was essentially a tin can on her own. Just the thought was enough to make her anxious but she couldn’t let Mason see that. Her mind was too important to be flushed down the toilet with the rest of these brainwashed idiots.

While Luna had been quite skilled in hiding her emotions, Mason was too much of a softie, wearing his heart on his sleeve for all to see. And right now, the most prominent emotion he felt was guilt. He glanced over at the picture of the entire crew taped prominently to his captain's console before hanging his head shamefully.

Pressing her index finger to her lips, Luna concealed a very pointed smirk. Mason was a loyal dog, sure, but it was clear from the moment he ditched Meg and Roland in the hall that his cowardice would win out. Still, now was far from the time to gloat. Instead, she placed a hand on his shoulder, feigning sympathy as she spoke, “You’re making the right choice. The others would want you to-”

“No,” said Mason starkly, wanting there to be no confusion between himself and Luna, “I’m not abandoning this ship...I’m not abandoning my crew. We’re going to stay here and figure out a plan to save Meg and Roland and Ellis and Donnie too.”

Luna’s expression flipped on a dime, dropping her faux concern in favor of a condescending glare. She folded her arms and began tapping her foot. “Whatever. If you want to end up shitting yourself with the rest of these losers, be my guest. I’m outta here,” she said, flipping Mason the bird as she headed toward the cockpit doors. She wouldn’t make it far, though, as the cockpit’s only door suddenly shuttered, “Cute, mittens, cute. Mother, open the door.”

However, Mother did not reply, keeping the door closed tight. “NEGATIVE, MISS VICKERS. THE CAPTAIN HAS ORDERED A LOCKDOWN OF THE CABIN,” said Mother’s AI voice over the intercom.

Looking back at Mason, who was standing at the captain’s console with his pointer finger holding the door lock button, Luna scoffed. “Really? You? A Captain? Give me a break,” she said, rolling her eyes at Mason’s naïve gumption.

“According to the chain of command, I am now the only person left who is qualified to pilot this vessel. So yes. Me. Captain,” he said, throwing Luna’s attitude right back at her, “Now, if you would take a seat. I think I have an idea to keep us safe AND potentially rescue the oth-”

\*SLAM!\*

Suddenly, before Mason could finish his sentence, something hard and heavy impacted the back of his head. Dazed and feeling a searing ache spread across his noggin, he collapsed to the floor, not unconscious but definitely reeling from the hit.

“I’m so sick and tired of the hierarchical bullshit on this culty fucking ship. I don’t care who’s captain. I’m the one paying for this venture, so that may as well make me the Goddess-damned Queen in your eyes,” said Luna, using every bit of restraint within herself to keep from kicking Mason while he was down. She had her karma to think about, after all, “Mother, the captain of this ship has been incapacitated. No one is left to assume command. Open the cockpit doors and prepare the escape pod.”

Unfortunately for Luna, she wasn’t actually the only one left despite her proclamation otherwise. Refusing to sit by and let Luna steal the ship’s only escape pod, Mason staggered to his feet and leaned over the captain’s console. “Sit down...or else,” he said, his voice deepening in an attempt to sound more authoritative.

Sadly, he was unable to completely mask the shakiness behind his words, something Luna was quick to notice. “Psssh! Or else what?” she said, not taking kindly to Mason’s attempt at being serious.

Mason wouldn’t be dissuaded by Luna’s obstinance, though, his hand hovering over a big, red button on Ellis’s console. “Or else I launch the escape pod right here and now. And I highly doubt you can race down there in time to make it,” he stated firmly, causing Luna’s cold demeanor to falter ever so slightly. He wasn’t bluffing and he was going to make that absolutely clear, “So, are you gonna sit down and listen? Or are we doing this the hard way?”

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“Meg! Where are you?! The captain would like to have a word!” shouted Donnie and Roland in unison as their slimy tentacles tore apart the med bay in search of Meg. In the midst of Roland’s assimilation, his diaper conjoined to Donnie’s, linking them together, body and soul. Together, their strength, in combination with the tendrils of their gooey nappy, was great enough to snap the bed that Donnie was once in hospice on in half, “So...powerful...I must have more... MORE!” Their booming voices were so loud that they echoed through the vent and into the maintenance shaft that Meg was in the process of climbing down.

Stepping off the rusty, metal ladder, Meg could feel her heart beating in her ears as she entered the bowels of the Juventas. Hot steam and warm exhaust from the heavy machine scattered about and filled the air, combining to make the entire engine room dank and sweaty. She wiped a few droplets from her forehead as she looked around the dim, hazy area.

TO BE CONTINUED...