

Shards: Book Three

Peter W. Prellwitz

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SHARDS

Book Three

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Chapter One

Sunday, June 15th, 2679

“This is Recon Five. Eyer here. I’ve got a wrecked NATEch hov and six bodies. Send a salvage team

and burial detail. Out. Harris! You and Mobieki check 'em for identags. Verilli, you take your triteam out on a five-kilometer skim. You two rookies get down there and assist Harris."

I dimly heard skimmers rev up their micron drives and race off. A few moments later, there came the clanging of metal and low tone of voices as they searched the ruined hovercraft.

There was the soft sliding sound of boots on sand coming closer, then I heard a man's voice. Judging by the jumpiness in his tone, it was one of the rookies.

"Check out this one, Jill! She must have taken a dozen rounds in her back alone. And have you ever seen so much blood?"

"Careful, Manuel! Remember what Sergeant Eyer said about--"

"About what? About dead people? Look at her!" I heard him approach and kneel beside me.

I should have tried moving my hand closer to my holstered gun, but I was too sleepy to even make the attempt. Besides, I was nice and warm where I was. Warm on the outside, and cool on the inside. I could have spent the rest of my life in this lazy, hazy twilight.

But the rookie didn't know enough to let sleeping dogs lie. I felt his hands on my shoulder, then he rolled me onto my back. I couldn't reach my gun, but I could still jam the palm of my hand into his nose, shoving the bone into his skull.

My arm jerked and my half clenched hand shot toward his face. It felt incredibly heavy. I wasn't strong enough to make it more than halfway across my body before it flopped down onto my bloody combat jacket. I looked up at him with half open eyes.

The rookie jumped back and I heard his partner draw her gun.

"Geez! She's still alive! Get clear, Manuel! I'll quiet her down." I heard the whine of a charging pistol. I closed my eyes, and waited. If she didn't hurry and fire, I'd fall asleep for my own execution.

"What the hell are you two doing?" I heard the squad leader shouting.

"We gotta live one, Sergeant. She tried to attack me! Jill was just going to finish her off."

"And just why would you want to do that? Haven't you heard of the word mercy? She's no danger to us." I heard her tone change as she spoke into the comlink. "We need a medhov, top priority. There's one survivor, in critical condition, bleeding heavily." She paused a moment. "Acknowledged."

I heard her approach, and a quiet hand lay on my shoulder. I wanted to retaliate, but couldn't do more than thrash slightly.

"Hey, settle down, miss. You'll be fine once the medhov gets here. I need to look at your wound. Don't worry." She started to fumble with my jacket then noticed I had no blouse on underneath. "Lukens! Turn your back."

I heard the izer open, and she became very still. I heard her swear under her breath, then close my jacket. She rose quickly to her feet.

"Romero, grab the hov's medkit and bring it here. RUN! You! Lukens! Have you had your medtraining yet?"

"Uh"... yes, Sergeant," he stammered. "Uh, I mean about half. The next class is--"

“Good enough! I need you to assist me. Get over here!”

“But she just tried to kill me!”

“No she didn’t, Lukens,” the sergeant’s voice took on a clipped, patient tone. “She tried to defend herself. Now get down here.” There was a movement. I tried to open my eyes, but couldn’t. It didn’t matter. I wasn’t all that interested.

There was the sound of running feet coming toward us, and I felt them working on me. My jacket was pulled free and water was splashed on my bloody, sandy skin.

“Look at that cut!” I heard Jill’s voice above me. She sounded like she was going to be sick. “She must have come out second best in a knife fight and these guys were evacuating her when they all got hit.” An icy liquid spilled onto my wound and I felt frigid tingles as it cold-cauterized the wound and began soothing the raw nerves.

“Oh Lord, save me from the young,” the sergeant said with an exasperated tone. I found the whole exchange mildly interesting, as though it was only background noise. Her hands moved quickly and expertly over my body as she bound the large slash.

“Lukens, give me your shirt.”

“Why?”

“Okay, let’s try again. Lukens, give me your shirt and fifty pushups.”

She placed the shirt over me. While Lukens grunted nearby, she leaned over close to my ear. I partially opened my heavy, heavy eyelids and saw a blurry face and red hair. Another blurry face stood watching behind her.

“Hang on, kid,” she whispered quietly. “I can tell you’re not NATEch. Not that it matters; we’d help one of them, too. You’re a dog, just like me. My name is Jody Eyer. I’m the sergeant for Company B, 179th Regiment. The medhov’s just pulling up now. We’ll take care of you.”

* * * *

The ride back to their rendezvous point was slow and smooth. I stayed awake long enough to see a doctor lean over me while two aids prepped me for travel. They moved me up to the hov with a continuous gliding motion that bespoke much practice. The hov swung around and began accelerating, and I passed out.

I was out for quite awhile, too. When I regained consciousness, the doctor, a man in his thirties or so, had already removed the field bandage and was working on my wound. Though we were alone, he had thoughtfully draped the removed shirt to protect my modesty. He was concentrating on his sounder, carefully closing the wound, but looked up at my movement.

“Please don’t move, ma’am,” he smiled pleasantly. “It’s bumpy enough in this hov as it is. I’d like to do a proper job at my facilities, but I don’t think you can wait. Lie still and try to relax.”

“Where”... where are we going?” I whispered. My throat felt cracked and raw. He noticed and put down his sounder long enough to get me a drink. Not a single drop of the cool water reached my stomach; it was all absorbed by my mouth and throat. Despite a second helping of water, my body was still ravaged by thirst due to the loss of blood.

He went back to his work, shaking his head.

“Sorry, but that’s not for you to know. Sergeant Eyer says you’re a dog, but SOP dictates we don’t tell you anything until we’re sure.”

I nodded understanding and closed my eyes. It didn’t really matter where we were going. Nothing mattered at all. Everything I had loved was gone, dead and buried in a scorched hole that had been my home. In that hole was my life.

“Were there any survivors?” I asked quietly.

“Survivors? Very few. Two troop transports pulled out moments before the explosions. But no one from the Third made it out. Except you, if you were with them.” His voice was neither supportive nor accusatory.

He continued working on the slash on my chest. The cut had been made by one of the NATech commandos I had killed in a wild frenzy. He had laid open a cut along my ribs from under my right arm, underneath my right breast and clear to the sternum. After the explosions had thrown me from the ruined hov, the wound had ripped open further, turning into a jagged tear.

“Your wound is fairly serious. The actual knife cut is bad, but it was clean. The real damage came when you tore it open.” He picked up the sounder and used it to stimulate a cool gel he had placed along the ragged edges. “I’m going to be able to close the wound, but I afraid you’re going to have a scar.”

He adjusted the field my left arm was lying in. A violet field bathed the elbow and ten centimeters on each side, providing fluids and nutrients. “The most immediate problem is the loss of blood. If we hadn’t gotten to you when we did, you would have bled to death within a half-hour. If I had a fully operational medical facility, it would take two days to get your blood supply to normal. As it is, it will be nearly five.”

“Aren’t we going to your base?” I asked.

“Yes, we are. But although it’s only about ten minutes of high speed phasing from here, you’d be dead two minutes after we started.” That told me how serious my blood loss was. We had taken back badly wounded comrades through phasing, and although it was brutal on them, they always survived.

“Ten minutes? Then you responded to our auto call?” Whenever one of our bases went to emergency full alert, a planet-wide distress call was sent out on a narrow band to all Resistance Regiments. Those that can respond within ten minutes do so at the discretion of the Regiment Lieutenant.

From the doctor’s sour look, I’d guess that the 179th had chosen discretion, not valor. He shook his head with more than a little disgust.

“No, we didn’t. Lieutenant Posen felt that our response would not be in time to affect the outcome, so he decided to ‘preserve unit integrity by not committing resources to an already lost battle scenario’, as he put it.”

I remained quiet and turned my head away. Inside me burned an anger I had only felt against NATech to this point. How dare he! You never weigh odds when going to the aid of a dog. As long as there’s a chance, you go. I pushed down my anger. There was probably more to this than what I knew. I turned back to the doctor.

“So when did your unit show up? And why?”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry. I’d better not say anything more until you’ve been cleared. Just relax for

the rest of the trip.”

“Five days of lying here? Be realistic, Doctor. I’m ready to go now.” I started to rise, half expecting him to push me back down. He didn’t move, but didn’t have to. I lifted my head about ten centimeters, then slumped back. He smiled slightly.

“Don’t mean to come off like a ghoul, but I told you so. You’re strong enough to breathe and that’s it. And while you’re going to be on your back for five days, the trip is really only three days. But since we’ll be forced to do some surface phasing every now and then, you’ll need extra time to recover.

“By the way, my name is Scott Ressler.”

“Abigail Wyeth.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Wyeth.” He gave a short bow from his seated position.

“Since it’s just you, me and the pilot, and he’s going to be busy for the next three days, what shall we talk about?”

* * * *

“As far as we can tell from the location and severity of the wounds, Major, all five of them were killed by the same person in hand-to-hand. He must have been a big guy to take them all on.”

“And the girl?”

“No sign of her, sir. There was a patch of bloody sand nearby with a blood-soaked combat jacket, female issue, lying next to it. And the hov had been ransacked. Judging by the footprints and skimmer paths, it was a Resistance recon unit performing a salvage mission. Our guess is that they also took the wounded woman away with them, as well as the person who took out our squad. They did take time to bury the five commandos. We exhumed the bodies to verify identity. There was one woman, but she was identified as Private Mary--”

“Thank you, Sergeant. Please forget this conversation occurred. You will receive three thousand creds immediately, and one thousand each additional year you keep this knowledge to yourself. Payment will continue until you die. Good day.” The terminal went blank. Both men understood the double-edged implication of the closing comment.

Major Deiley leaned back in his chair and contemplated the dark terminal. So close! He now knew that Miss DeChant was responsible for the microsat attacks. Rather, another of Miss DeChant’s personas. Although it was three days since the attack on the Third Regiment, no one had yet connected the two missing microsats with the devastating reprisal, and it was unlikely they ever would. Of course, they weren’t aware of the similarity with his own experience. And Deiley would make no move to inform them.

He tapped into the NATech Orbital Schematics bank on Lunar Five and marveled again at the forgery. Yesterday, microsat AT142 had reported a jammed thruster. Thrown off course, it had struck microsat UE59 while it was still transmitting standard heat trail information to the presently decommissioned Antarctic base. It was impossible to determine that the data, flight paths and reports were completely false. Perhaps, if Deiley pressed a little further, he might find a flaw in the data, but he chose not to. Anything or anyone capable of this level of infiltration probably had a beacon set to notify any deep investigation, and Deiley wasn’t ready to betray his presence yet.

The only reason Deiley knew this data was false was because he had calculated these two microsats as

being in the best position to strike the Fifteenth Armored. And the loss of these two so shortly after the counterattack was all the proof he needed. It was proof that fanned his already burning curiosity and stoked the flames of his ambition.

The counter-attack had completely obliterated the Fifteenth Armored and all but destroyed the Eleventh and Twenty-third NATEch Xeno brigades. Only fifty-nine of a total 300 troops survived, departing less than sixty seconds before the first of the deadly orbital missiles had struck with impossible accuracy. The battle site itself was a charred crater.

Should Deiley be able to find Miss DeChant, he would be in a position to gain control over this incredible skill. The difficulty lay in locating Miss DeChant, primarily because she was no longer Miss DeChant. She was undoubtedly the original persona, the one who had been chosen by some unknown but influential person to become Miss DeChant four centuries ago. That was the persona, the soulner, who had this bombardment ability. How she got it, Deiley wasn't sure. But he had an idea.

Deiley stood up and walked across the high stone room to his bookshelves. Although he was in his commandant's office--his own destroyed house was still being rebuilt--he used the same metaphor when accessing. He pulled down LeClaire's work and began reading it again. Had the book been real, it would be dog-eared now from Deiley's constant accessing. His reading took him, as always, to the section on keyed memory encapsulation. He could not put his finger on it, but he was certain this abandoned technology, used only once before its creator was destroyed, was a vital piece of the puzzle.

He absently reached for his tea, but of course there was none. Miss DeChant was no longer his housekeeper. She was a Resistance fighter, hidden from his searching, safe from his reach. That situation would not remain so indefinitely. She had started sharding, and if she was like most sharded Cues, she would one day be back in Glendale, under his authority. And his care.

* * * *

The staff corporal in NATEch's Alexandria headquarters was running late with her report. There had been too many anomalies and not enough hard answers to the destruction of the Fifteenth Armored. Between that and the relocation of the remnants of the Eleventh and Twenty-third Brigades, she was swamped. The brigades were to be sent to a new retraining base located in Australia. It was hoped that they would be able to deal with the horrible memories of the attack on the Third and become usable Xeno troops again. She finished up the dictation to the official log and stepped out of the puterverse to catch lunch with her civilian boyfriend. She hoped he wouldn't pick his teeth today.

The data located itself in one of the many data pools. It rested there for a moment, then duplicated itself and broke away from storage, easily evading the security watchdogs. It came upon a worm, trained to identify infiltration and follow the line back to the source. The worm was unaware as the bolt of data penetrated it and passed through unhindered.

The data packet followed a very specific path, overriding all blocks and lockouts. It penetrated all barriers by locating a programmed breach the thickness of a two dimensional line and passing through. It sped toward the Quantum data river, where it struck a large energy conduit. The conduit began glowing a brilliant pink. The packet was stripped of its destination header and sent down to the river's edge. The conduit continued building up the packet's energy signature, then launched it directly across the river.

Traveling at right angles to the river flow, the packet disrupted data as it passed. A professor at Oslo's university lost all his afternoon's lecture notes. A cred account in the name of Grant Wilson tripled in size briefly, then disappeared. Four thousand people in Brazil were denied access for three minutes. The observatory in Flagstaff thought they located a large solar flare, but later determined it was equipment

malfunction.

The packet continued its journey across the river, occasionally colliding with other streams and destroying them with a flash of color. It was a great distance across the Quantum, but the packet had more than enough energy to make it safely.

* * * *

Doctor Ressler had done his best to prepare me for my new home, but he failed to lower my expectations enough. He himself had only transferred in six months previously, and already had soured on the regiment. I should have taken the hint.

Their base was more of a cave than a facility. I knew that the Third had built up a reputation as one of the best regiments in the Resistance, but I hadn't realized the disparity between units was so great. When we pulled into the hanger entrance, there was only the slightest shimmer of the shield, and the comlink remained unbroken. Sloppy. One lucky scan and NATech would nail this base's position on the first pass.

The hov spilled down the ramp and eased gratefully to a stop in the middle of the hanger. I was still on my back and could only see out through the overhead portal, but I knew they broke another SOP when the hov didn't swing around for immediate deployment if needed. Again, not especially dangerous but still sloppy.

The rear port opened and a couple of husky lads came on to guide my stretcher to sickbay. The base looked to have roughly the same layout as ours, so I couldn't help but make immediate comparisons. When I determined there was no comparison, I felt my already low spirits sag further.

Sickbay was larger than Barrett's and held eight beds. I was put onto the one furthest from the door and reattached to the uvive, the ultraviolet intravenous unit, this time by my right arm, which I preferred, being left handed. When they stepped clear of the bed, I noticed a slight glimmer as a ghost field dropped down around me. Cautious people. The way I felt, a six-year-old with time on his hands could have sent me to my eternal reward and still gotten in his afternoon nap. Ah well, I sighed, I was their guest and I would follow their rules.

Doctor Ressler had followed the two men in, rolling his eyes when they couldn't see him, but I could. Maybe it wasn't a total write off. He seemed to have a clue. He waited for them to leave and was not pleased when only one did. The other planted himself outside the shielding at the foot of my bed.

"That will be all, Cooper," Ressler said, just a hint of annoyance in his voice.

"Yes, Doctor." Cooper didn't move.

"I'm sorry, Cooper. What part of my statement missed you? I said, you are dismissed."

"Yes, Doctor." Cooper didn't seem upset. "The Lieutenant gave orders to post a guard over the hostile."

"Hostile!" Ressler laughed. "First of all, Private, Miss Wyeth here is not a hostile, she's a member of the Third Regiment. Second, she's my patient. Third, she's so weak the most hostile action she could take would be to sneer at you."

"Yes, sir." Cooper was unmoved and unmoving. "Still, the Lieutenant wants to be sure. I don't blame him. You can't be too careful, sir. NATech's everywhere."

"Even in our hospital beds, it seems. Very well, Cooper. Just keep your back turned whenever I'm

examining Miss Wyeth.”

“Of course, sir.”

Ressler looked like he wanted to say something else, but walked to the opposite side of the room where his terminal was. He began accessing, keeping a tight field. Cooper turned toward me and shot me a dirty look.

“Because of you, I have to waste my time hanging around sickbay.”

“Nice to meet you, too, Cooper,” I said. “How about we make the best of it and try to be friends, okay? I’d bow, but I’m a little tied down right now.”

“Save your bow, lady. I’m a Company A anchorman, not a babysitter. I hope you are a dog, ‘cause then I can give you payback for having to pull jerk duty.” He turned his back to me again. Wonderful, I thought. Well, at least I sort of had privacy. Besides, Cooper didn’t strike me as the kind of friend material I wanted.

Fortunately, I didn’t have to wait long for some proper friend material to show up. About twenty minutes after Cooper and I exchanged pleasantries, Sergeant Eyer came in, looking clean and sharp. She looked around and spotted me in the corner and waved. She went and spoke to Ressler for a few minutes, then walked over to Cooper. She studied him as though he were something smelly she’d found on the underside of her boots.

“So they finally found a duty to match your talents, huh, Cooper? It’s nice to see even trash can be recycled.”

Cooper gave her a dirty look. He seemed to be good at giving dirty looks. “Sergeant, if you have something to say to the patient, say it and leave.” He made the word patient sound like prisoner.

“Yeah, I do want to talk to her.” She jerked a thumb. “Privately. Take a hike.”

“Sorry, Sergeant, but the Lieutenant gave very specific orders” ...“

“You forget, Cooper. I was there when he gave you those orders. And I say you can obey them while standing outside sickbay. If you wish to object, I will stand guard while you double check with the Lieutenant. Now leave.”

He left. He wasn’t pleased, but he left. He no sooner left than she had the shielding turned off. She pulled up a stool and sat down next to me. She was a tall woman, well built, with fiery red hair and freckles. She’d have been a real charmer as a kid, but was now a handsome woman, with a competent air about her.

“Sorry, kid. Cooper’s a real pain. Most of Company A is a pain.” I nodded but said nothing. “I heard you just came in, and I wanted to see if you were doing all right.” She lowered her voice. “I also wanted to tell you how sorry I am about the Third. They were a good regiment. One of the best.”

“I thought until I was checked up on, I was going to be treated like a prisoner.”

She flushed and looked down. “Yeah. Sorry about that. This place is kind of paranoid about infiltration. I don’t know why, it’s not as though we do too much to get noticed. We don’t take it to NATEch like your regiment. But Lieutenant Posen makes the rules, so we follow him. What else can a dog do?”

She was right. You followed orders and made the best of it. I didn’t like serving under an inferior

superior, but chain of command had to be maintained in all but the most extenuating of circumstances, and sometimes even then. At its worst it was lousy, but still better than anarchy.

“So, Abigail, what was your position in the Third?” I hesitated for a moment, not wanting to tell Eyer without first reporting to the Lieutenant. She recognized my hesitation and added, “My mistake. I’m here at the orders of the Lieutenant for your official debriefing. What you tell me goes in the log, so don’t lie too much.”

“You mean the Lieutenant isn’t going to do the debriefing himself? Doesn’t that go against SOP?”

“Yes, it does. If it helps, he’ll take what I tell him and come here for a few minutes tomorrow so it looks as though he conducted the whole thing.” She made a face. “I’d object except that I think I’m better at this than him.” I got the impression she thought she was better than him at most things. “So. Official question number one: What was your position in the Third Regiment?”

“I was the anchor for triteam one in Company A.”

She looked at me for a moment, then stood up and reactivated the shielding, setting it far enough out for both of us to easily fit in. All sound was cut off. She sat down again, sliding the stool even closer.

“Then you’re a Cue, right?”

I nodded. “Yes. I was reintegrated in November of 2676, about two and half years ago. I’m”... I’m“...”

All the emotions of the past few days flooded over me. I closed my eyes, and the pain washed over and over and over me. All my friends. All my comrades. And the man I loved, the man I was to marry. I wanted to weep, but couldn’t, it hurt so bad. It was as though a massive weight was crushing me and not allowing me to breathe deep enough to start the tears. I opened my eyes and blinked them a few times. Eyer waited patiently, a look of understanding in her green eyes.

“I’m sorry, Abigail. Let’s pick this up later, okay?”

“No”... no. That’s okay, Sergeant. I think I’d like someone to be here right now.” I smiled weakly. “And you’re a vast improvement on Cooper.”

She smiled back. “A box of greasy machine parts is a vast improvement on Cooper. And call me Jody. Okay, we’ll continue. It’s probably better this way anyway. Otherwise you’d have to spend too much time with the Lieutenant.”

We continued my debriefing for another hour. Although I was starting to feel comfortable with Jody, and I knew I should report as fully as I could, I did withhold some information. The main piece was my familiarity with the puterverse. I didn’t feel bad or guilty about that; not many in the Third knew the full story, and those few considered my achievements to be secret. I continued that approach and only mentioned that I was good in the puterverse.

“Really?” Jody seemed very interested. “That’s going to come in handy here. Nearly everyone we recruit has only a nominal skill in the puterverse. What level do you access at?”

Now there was a good question. The fact was that I no longer used level access protocols. I’d bypassed them about a year ago, seeing them as nothing but a burden. Once I saw the proper way to access the puterverse through unbound trinary code, it was so“... so”... obvious that the only real way to use the puterverse was with an oscillated structured broadcast. But I couldn’t tell her that and stay out of a straight jacket at the same time. Nor could I tell her the last restricted plateau I had used was level sixty-seven untethered. I don’t think anyone had been higher than thirty for more than a few

seconds--level thirty was as far as anyone could go without UTC shielding--and then only at a horrible price. And I knew that I was the only one who even knew there were three levels above the accepted maximum of sixty-four. So I made a suitable number up.

"I used twelve limited fifteen for that New Denver raid I mentioned earlier." At her doubtful look, I added, "But that was a special circumstance. My normal access is nine straight up."

She seemed satisfied with that and moved on. I felt a little proud of myself. A teenager's first urge is to normally show off, often with the best of intentions, but show off nonetheless. I had resisted that temptation and for a while felt a little better.

We finished the debriefing eventually and Jody stood up, stretching.

"I'll get this reported to Lieutenant Posen right away. Sorry, but you know I have to inform him you're a sharded Cue." I nodded glumly. I'd give anything to keep that information quiet, but knew that it simply had to be this way. Jody continued. "I'll see what I can do about getting you a few of the things you'll need to start fitting in. Clothes, billet, gear, that kind of stuff. I'm pulling to get you in my company, if," she smiled wryly, "you don't mind serving with lowly B dogs."

"Well," I said with tongue in cheek, "I suppose I could live with it. Although it is a little beneath me. I should be up serving with your top dogs. You know, like Cooper."

Jody laughed out loud and reset the shielding to exclude her. She gave a friendly wave and walked off. Cooper came back in and planted himself in front of my bed and turned his back to me, not forgetting to sneer first. I should have asked Jody if she could have dropped off my sidearm for me. A couple of shots with my sonic inducer in the back of Cooper's head might have cheered him up. It certainly would have cheered me up.

* * * *

That night was the worst since my "... no, it was the worst in my life. During our trip, the hov was able to maintain enough energy to sustain me. I even made a little progress. But most of the time I was in a dim world not unlike the experience on the desert sand. I was not in my proper mind to grieve for my friends then. Now I was.

It was hard. Very hard. Knowing I would blame myself for living while they had died should have helped me but didn't. Not that night. It lasted forever, and I didn't sleep one minute. Neither, I'm afraid, did Doctor Ressler. Shortly after I started from a fitful half-sleep, he was there to fiddle with my medicine and plasma duplication, perform unneeded examinations and fill out utterly useless medical history questions. In other words, he was there for me.

The anguish and sadness threatened to crush my ribs, the weight was so heavy. Only four nights ago, Aaron proposed to me underneath the stars. And now he lay buried in an unmarked pit under those same stars. That evening he had mused how we fought and gave up our normal lives, and no longer knew how to act like regular people, regular "... lovers. Yet even on an issued blanket, weapons close by and lying in a spot that was used by many others in our unit as their turn came, even in that regimented atmosphere we found a few hours of normalcy. We laughed and kissed and dreamed and "... and now it was gone, crushed by the very thing we had tried to escape for the sweetest and briefest of moments.

And Susie. With me since the day I became a Cue. I had woken up in a body that was ownerless and soulless. I had gone from being a mature, confident, strong, respected man of thirty-one to a scared, young, nearly helpless girl of fourteen. I was so disoriented, I wasn't even aware of what had happened. My body told me I was a young girl, and my mind listened, oblivious to the mistake that had been made.

And when my mind finally saw the error, it nearly shut down.

Susie was there to help the whole way. She helped me realize who I had become, and I stepped away from the danger of withdrawing into a permanent shard and instead became the woman I was today.

The woman I was today. I sniffed and wiped away a small tear. I still was not able to fully weep for them, but a tear could come. The woman I was today. That is what I would live for. My friends would not wish to see me destroyed by this. I didn't believe in friends living on in the memories of the living. I believed in heaven and in hell, and in a loving God. But I did not see why I should not honor their memories, speak well of them, and live my life to show what they had done for me. I made my decision. Lying on my back with precious little strength, my life blood still being replenished and still helpless to the care of my doctor and under the watchful eye of a suspicious guard, I made my decision.

I would continue to live. I would be the Abigail Wyeth that Susie and Lieutenant Sanchez and Sarah and Dusty and "... and Aaron wanted me to be. Very few people outside of the Third Regiment knew my confused past. Other than the Kovins I couldn't think of anyone. I hadn't told Ressler yet, or Jody. And I certainly wasn't going to tell their Lieutenant Posen. Fine. I'd let my past stay in that crater. My decision made, I could relax.

Doctor Ressler seemed to notice my calmness and mentioned casually that it just happened to be time to administer a mild sedative and that he wouldn't have to bother me again until morning.

A trace of warmth spread out from the ultraviolet light that oozed through my body, making it wonderfully relaxed. I gave him a slow, dreamy smile and my eyes closed on their own. He was a good man.

* * * *

Six hours later I didn't think he was such a good man. There was a fire in my right arm and I was feeling very queasy. Ressler was massaging my neck and shoulders and encouraging me to wake up, which seemed almost beyond me.

"Abig--uh, Private Wyeth. I need you to wake up. Private! Wake up, please. You have a visitor."

"Wha--what is it, Doctor?" I opened my eyes, but the light stung, so I closed them again. "How come my arm hurts? And my stomach feels so--"

"I'm sorry, Private. I had to waken you prematurely from the sedative I gave you. You'd been asleep for only six hours, so I had to use a drug to wake you up. The uvive doesn't take such aggressive medication, so I had to use a light needle. That's why your arm stings and why your stomach is upset. Both will wear off shortly."

"Why did you wake me up?"

"I'll let Lieutenant Posen answer that one." His tone suggested that Lieutenant Posen himself was the answer.

"Very good, Doctor. You may attend to your other duties."

I flickered my eyes open at looked at the source of the annoyed voice. Posen was at the foot of my bed looking down at me. Tall, thin and angular, he was dressed in a crisp, clean uniform and carried a tabinal like it was his best friend. He was consulting with his best friend now, no doubt going over Eyer's debriefing. I felt the urge to interrupt him. I should have fought it down, but hey, I was young. And I was grumpy about being so rudely awakened.

“Um, sir?” He looked at me with a slightly annoyed look, and I felt a wicked taste of satisfaction. “With the Lieutenant’s permission, could Doctor Ressler maybe grab me some breakfast from the mess? I’m pretty hungry.”

Oh, I hit the right button, all right! Being a teenager meant you always knew how to get an adult’s goat. He looked flushed and irritated. I saw his eyes flicker towards Cooper, and I realized I’d made a big mistake. I shouldn’t have done this in front of one of his men. Oops. I felt my satisfaction getting trampled by anger. Anger at myself. It was times like these I seriously considered having my mouth filled and sealed until I turned twenty and could handle such a dangerous weapon responsibly.

“I think Doctor Ressler is far too busy a man to be handholding a rookie who’s lying around in bed. You can wait for your breakfast.”

Well, I had that coming, except for the rookie crack. But I’d already blown it, so I would have to pay now. I resolved to behave myself and try to patch things up. Maybe he wasn’t such a bad guy, given a chance.

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry, sir,” I said contritely.

He ignored me and turned to the doctor.

“Again, thank you, Doctor. You’re dismissed.” He didn’t wait for a reply, but spoke to Cooper. “Private, you will remain at the ready during the debriefing.”

“Yes, sir!” He leered at me and drew his pistol. I almost laughed, he looked so ridiculous. Doctor Ressler looked displeased, but left without saying anything with his mouth. His stiff walk spoke volumes.

Lieutenant Posen pulled up the stool Jody had used yesterday and put his foot on it. His boot was so highly polished that I could make out the faint purple reflection of the uvive. He continued to study the tabinal, but now he was doing it to establish some kind of superior position for the interview by making me wait. I let it bounce off me. If I stayed calm, I could still try to improve our poor start. He finally seemed to reach a point where he could begin. Without taking his eyes off the readout, he spoke.

“According to this, you are Private Abigail Wyeth. You are--or rather were--the anchor for the first triteam of Company A in the Third Regiment.” I carefully avoided looking at Cooper. “You also say you have accessed the puterverse at level twelve And Sergeant Eyer reports that according to their findings, it was you who took out five NATEch commandos in hand-to-hand all by your lonesome.” Those last words didn’t sound too good. I was getting a bad feeling. He set down the tabinal and looked directly at me.

“So, tell me, Private, how does such a pretty young thing like you accomplish so much?”

I felt a deep drop in the pit of my stomach that had nothing to do with the wakey-wakey drugs Ressler had given me. He didn’t believe me. I had reported faithfully to him, except about my access levels and that was to lower them, and he didn’t believe me.

“T”... I’m sorry, sir?“ I spoke slowly to hold my emotion in control, but I still felt my cheeks burning. “What did you say, Lieutenant?“

“Oh come now, Private. You heard me clearly. I said, how could somebody as young as you actually have this kind of record, these kind of achievements?“

“Sir, I’m sure Sergeant Eyer reported my”... my status?“ I glanced at Cooper this time. A Cue had to be very careful about admitting she was a Cue. We had no rights whatsoever, and were at the complete

mercy of anyone who had the whim to harm us.

Posen saw my glance at Cooper and smiled. “You mean your status as a sharded Cue?” I flinched at his blunt, loud use of the phrase. “Yes, she mentions it, although she doesn’t go into detail. I take it you’re claiming to have gotten so far up in the Third’s main enforcement Company by strength of your previous life?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying, sir. My expertise in combat comes from the service I gave to my country during the Ethiopian Campaigns of my time. My computer expertise is just hard work.” I hedged a little on the last. He’d never believe that I not only knew Chris Young, the father of the webbing techniques still used, but that he had worked for me.

“Ethiopian Campaigns, eh?” He frowned. “That’s the twenty-second century.”

“Twenty-first century, sir.”

“No, it was the twenty-second, Private.”

This was getting stupid. “With all due respect, sir,” I said with rapidly thinning patience. “I was there. It was the twenty-first century.” I took a breath and plunged in. I had to establish my word as being valid. “I served as a recon platoon leader from 2015 until 2018. I completed seventy-nine missions in that time and finished with a field commission of major.”

“You’re saying that they let women serve as officers that far back? That’s a little far-fetched, don’t you think, Private?” He had made the totally understandable assumption that I had always been a woman. I wouldn’t correct him.

“No, sir. Women served as officers as far back as the twentieth century. The United States had a female colonel during World War Two. And I believe a nation known as the Soviet Union had a female fighter pilot who was a Major during the same war. You know it as the Second Great War.”

“Hmm.” He looked at his notes. “And did you take out those five commandos?”

“Yes, sir. That’s how I picked up this wound.”

“And what were you doing out there with them?”

“I don’t know,” I answered truthfully. “After the initial attack, Corporal Lendler and I had taken up position at the personnel entrance into the hanger. We were laying down crossfire on the NATEch soldiers who were behind our hoves when I received orders to shift to a covering fire while the main group in the armory counter-attacked. Since the corporal and I had only sidearms, I--”

“A counter-attack? That’s suicide! How could you take on two brigades of NATEch Xeno troops and hope to survive?”

“No hope involved, sir. They brought it to us. It would have been suicide not to counter-attack. As I was saying, sir, I needed to get heavier fire power to lay down a more effective cover. I had Corporal Lendler lay down a covering fire while I ran to a friend of mine and retrieved her plasma rifle. It was when I--”

“You said you gave orders to a corporal? And what about your friend? Did you just take her rifle? And how could a small thing like you hold such a big gun?”

I was getting very tired of the Lieutenant’s belittling remarks. I waited a slow five seconds, then

continued.

“In the order you asked them, sir: I gave orders to a corporal because it was a combat condition and I’m the anchor of Company A’s first triteam. Everyone, except Lieutenant Sanchez and Sergeants Thawell, Abdih and Halteman, follow my orders in a combat situation. As for my friend, she was dead, sir. She’d taken a slug through the head and an incendiary in her gut. Finally, I’m small, sir, but I’m also trained in over sixty weapons and twelve major categories of hand to hand combat.”

He looked at me with disinterested, unbelieving eyes. “Go on.”

“Yes, sir. Just before I’d picked up the rifle, we’d been hit with a plasma punch gun. That’s how I picked up this.” I touched my right cheek. “Small arms fire at that time damaged my jacket. Most of the bruises are faded on my back, but they’re still there. When I headed back, they punched us again, and the next thing I was aware of was waking up in the hov with three of their men pawing at me. I went wild and got lucky. I managed to kill all five, getting nicked during the free-for-all. I was heading back to the hanger when the whole area exploded.”

“I see. And what caused the two explosions that destroyed our base, two Xeno brigades and NATEch’s Fifteenth Armored?”

“I don’t know, sir,” I lied. “There was a red glow in the sky and a loud scream. The impact was great enough that it turned my hov around from four kilometers. The next missile hit only seconds later. The shock wave from that one destroyed the hov’s gyro and grav integrity field and threw me, tearing open my knife wound.”

“A missile, you say? Then you do know what happened?”

“No, sir, I don’t. I think it was a missile. I know we don’t have guns that heavy and accurate, or that can do that kind of damage. It must have been a missile. Don’t you think so, sir?”

He hardened his face at my question. “What I think is none of your concern, Private.” He stepped over to the panel and placed the shielding on, careful to stand outside it. The sound shield remained off. Posen had things to say.

“Frankly, Wyeth, I don’t believe a word you are telling me. This is too preposterous, too outrageous, too fanciful to be real. I mean, look at you!”

“I realize I’m not at my best, sir. And I realize I don’t look like much. But I am telling you the truth. I’m not overly fond of using my combat skills when unneeded, but make no mistake, sir, I am a dog.”

“That remains to be seen, Wyeth. You will remain here under guard until I can verify your identity and your story. Maybe you were assigned to the Third in a support role as a clerk or laundress or cook. Or maybe you’re a rookie with a chance to impress us with this fanciful story. But my guess is you’re a girl one of the men brought back from Alexandria for an evening’s entertainment.”

That last one did it. He had systematically shredded my word, my patience and now my character. My face flushed and I rose to my elbow.

“Sir, I will follow your orders as you give them to me. I will perform the duties you assign me to the best of my ability. And I will gladly die for my fellow dogs in the 179th even though I’ve never met them. But if you ever call me a prostitute again, Lieutenant, I will kill you.

“You say you doubted my word and my abilities. I’m telling you right now, sir, that had I been off this machine, I could have killed you and Cooper in less than five seconds, and not one sound would have

escaped this sickbay.” I told them in detail what I would have done, and Cooper’s shocked face told me he understood completely.

“You have no idea what happened,” I continued. “Nor do you have any idea what kind of service I’ve given over my life. I’ve seen more combat than you, in two different centuries, and I’ve survived it all.

“I don’t expect to be instantly given previous authority and position. Neither do I expect you to swallow everything I’ve told you without checking, though I doubt you’ll find a way to check either the battle or my twenty-first century service. I do expect, however, to be given the benefit of the doubt, and given respect as a person despite my non-rights status. And I expect”... I expect“...”

Everything became woozy and I was forced to lie back down. Ressler must have been watching, for he rushed up, shutting off the field.

“That’s enough! Lieutenant, I must insist that you leave.” His tone, which reached me with a dim echo, carried authority that had to be obeyed. “You may continue this debriefing later. Tomorrow, perhaps. Right now, Private Wyeth needs to be kept quiet. She’s still weak from blood loss. And take Cooper with you. You have my assurance that she is incapable of leaving her bed for at least another forty-eight hours.”

“I’m sorry, Doctor, but your assurance is not enough. She’s made it clear to us that she could become hostile, despite her small size. Cooper.” Cooper stepped alongside the bed, brushing the doctor back. He smiled wickedly at me and reached for the panel over my bed. I felt a flash of heat in my right arm, and a large animal, maybe a horse, sat on my chest. My eyesight faded, although I don’t know that I closed my eyes.

“Wait! Step away from that! This is a medical”...“

Ressler didn’t stop talking. I just stopped listening.

Chapter Two

“And the tour ends here.” Jody’s swept her hand toward a corner in the women’s barracks. My newly issued gear was lying on the stripped bed with blankets and sheets roughly folded and sitting on my pillow.

“Thanks, Jody. I’ll have to owe you the nickel, though. I’m a little light right now.” I opened my foot locker--some things never change--and tried to picture how I wanted to place my things in there.

“A nickel? Why would you owe me metal?”

I smiled. “Sorry, ancient expression. A nickel was a coin of value in that time, worth five percent of the main unit called a dollar. When you were taken on a whirlwind show of a place it was called the ‘nickel tour’.”

Jody had started helping me put away my things but laughed at my explanation. “That is so incredible! When did that expression first get started?”

“Around the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Why?”

“I just find it so exciting to be talking to someone who actually lived at that time!”

“Well, I was born in 1995, so I just slipped in under the millennium. My only memories of the twentieth century include wetting my pants in day care, losing my first tooth, and kissing my first”... “I broke off and modified my sentence.” “...having my first kiss when I was five years old.”

“That’s so cute! You actually had a crush on a boy when you were only five?”

This was going to be difficult, dodging around these kinds of questions about my past. Maybe I should just jump right in. So I smiled.

“A huge crush! I’d wait for the number five bus during kindergarten, but he took the number three bus.” It was amazing how easily I could switch the pronouns. Maybe not all that amazing, considering I had to do it to myself for over two years now. “I thought if I was just fast enough, I could sit next to him on the way home. But I could never make it. There were two bells, see, and he got out on the first one and I got out on the second. I never thought”...“

I stopped talking because I’d clearly lost Jody. She was shaking her head as though I were speaking a different language.

“What are you talking about, Abigail? What’s a bus? What’s kindergarten? Maybe I should take this a little slower.”

“That’s okay, Jody. I shouldn’t really talk too much about it, anyway. I could get careless. But when we get a chance, I’ll tell you about television and airplanes and baseball and lots of other things from the ancient mists of time.” I spoke in as deep a voice as I could to make the end sound ominous. We both laughed.

We had finished unpacking and fixing up my bunk. I stepped back and admired the work. “All right! Private Wyeth, reporting for duty! Just one thing missing.”

“What’s that?”

“My sidearm. I imagine you confiscated it until you could verify my identity and story.” I glanced around to be sure the other dozen or so women in the barracks weren’t listening in. They were watching us on the sly, but couldn’t hear us. “Lieutenant Posen didn’t look too pleased when he came to tell me I was to report to you for duty. I almost think he was hoping to find out I was a liar so he could ship me out of here.”

“You’re right, he wasn’t happy. He was even less happy when orders came down that he had no choice about keeping you, at least for a while.” She looked at me considering, “We’re never bothered by TAU, let alone given orders. You must be something special to have them issue orders about you.”

I shrugged. “I have a knack with the puterverse and planned many of our raids. TAU probably doesn’t want that talent wasted.” We used the word TAU as an acronym for Those Above Us. We didn’t talk about the Resistance central organization too much, and they didn’t deal with us too much, except to set up general coordination and shipping of surplus supplies and, in rare circumstances, to give a very specific order.

“You planned some of those raids? How about the New Denver hit?”

“Uh-huh. That was last one I went on. I was laid up after that one.”

“Sorry to hear. Were you injured?”

“No.”

“Oh.” She didn’t press the point because it was rude to keep asking about something that you already know the answer to. “So how did you know that the generator would explode? In fact, how did you even know to hit that facility?”

“We did our research and figured out how to bring down the weather net in just the right locations, times, and sequence to create the weather. As for the target, that took a lot of hard work before we determined it was a riping facility. Even then, we acted on a lot of empirical evidence.”

“I envy you, Abigail. We never take on targets that big. The Lieutenant is, well, never mind. That’s personal opinion, and not something a sergeant should share with one of her privates.”

“I understand. I kept my negative opinions of superior officers to myself, too, with my recon outfit. Anyway, back to the original question: When can I get my sidearm back?”

“You don’t, Abigail. Sorry.” She looked uncomfortable, which she should have. “We keep all weapons locked away in the armory, and issue according to need.”

“That’s crazy!” I said, my voice getting loud. “A dog should always keep her sidearm handy! What if we get discovered and attacked?”

“Since it hasn’t happened, the general feeling is that it won’t. Besides, if NATEch did decide to hit us, what good would small arms do against what they would throw at us?” She sounded totally unconvinced with her own words, as though she were parroting something she didn’t want to.

“What good”... “I broke off and lowered my voice. ”You’re not serious, are you, Jody? What kind of an attitude is that to take? The Third was never hit before last week, and now they’re...” My voice caught. “And now they’re gone. But if we didn’t have our guns with us, we couldn’t have responded with any sort of effectiveness. I know we couldn’t have gotten to the armory where we kept the big guns. As it was, it took the Fifteenth Armored and two full brigades to take us out. And precious few of them survived.”

“That’s enough, Private! This isn’t the Third, this is the 179th. And in the 179th, you will obey our procedures.” Jody didn’t say it with relish, but she said it.

“Okay, Sergeant,” I blushed a bit; I had stepped out of line. “But we will get our own sidearm when they are issued, right?”

“Why?” her eyes narrowed.

“I had Dusty, our weapons specialist, make some modifications. If you don’t know what you’re doing, you can do some serious unintentional damage.” I didn’t elaborate.

“I see. I’ll speak to the Lieutenant about assigning that specifically to you, though we normally don’t.” She held up her hand. “I don’t want to hear it.”

I sighed. “All right. Just make sure nobody fools with it unless I’m there. Moving along, now. How about puterverse access? Do I have any clearance yet?” Access to the puterverse was limited only by the user’s rights, which everyone had in varying degrees. But it was possible in isolated areas like our base to limit access to the terminals, requiring special voice coding prior to entering the puterverse voice access code. I had woken from my drug induced sleep four days ago and I still didn’t have terminal access. I didn’t care what access they gave me; once in the puterverse, I could do whatever I wanted. But first I needed terminal clearance.

“Sorry, but you not only don’t have it yet, it’s unlikely the Lieutenant is ever going to give it to you. You

don't rate clearance."

"I don't rate clearance?" I replied, stunned. "Jody, anybody who can breathe rates clearance! I have to get on! I've got some details to take care of, and some personal business as well."

"Abigail, I'm sorry, but that's the way it is here. You can access under my account, but only for five minutes at a time and only with me in control. If either of us breaks those rules, I'll lose my terminal clearance as well. Please, don't push it."

I didn't push it, but I was getting upset and more than a little nervous. If I stayed off too long, Mike would assume I was dead and would begin accessing the UTC sequences that gave him permission to begin detonating the UTC charges we had been laying for the past year and a half. I didn't want that to happen yet because the pattern wasn't fully laid and wouldn't be for several more months. On top of that, I hadn't even begun creating the safety zones needed to protect non-NATech sites from serious damage. Even then I lacked the one piece of information that would make detonations fully justifiable: the source of the limitations that had been placed on the puterverse.

I still had a month left before Mike would access the permissions, but there was no point in letting these things go until the last minute. Yet I also couldn't let Jody control my access to the puterverse. Not only was I hesitant to let others see Mike and Kiki, but taking Jody to my plane of existence in the puterverse would kill her. Belatedly--as seemed to be my habit--I realized that had I put the safeguards in first, instead of the UTC charges, this wouldn't even be a problem.

"All right, I won't push, Jody. But see if you can get me access, okay? Even a sub-level would help a lot."

"I'll see what I can do. In the meantime, let me take you over to your new detail."

We left the barracks and headed down the tunnel--unlike our corridors, this was a very quick job--toward the mess hall. I had a sinking feeling in my stomach we were heading for the laundry.

Jody took me to the laundry door, then walked past it. I breathed a sigh, but then let out a small groan.

"Jody! Not KP!" Centuries after its coining, the word KP still struck fear and despair into the hearts of even the most hardened soldier.

"What?" she smiled sweetly. "Are you too good for KP?"

"Yes! I mean, no. No, I'm not too good for it, every dog draws the detail sooner or later. But I do mean yes. I don't think this is taking full advantage of my training and expertise." She grabbed me by the arm and pulled me to a corner.

"You don't think I know that, Abigail? I know it was you that took out those five commandos in hand-to-hand. I believed you when you said you were Triteam One anchor. And I believe you when you told me about your puterverse skill. After the debriefing was over--mine, not the Lieutenant's--I would have paid real creds to get you in my company with full access to the puterverse. Giving you KP is like using a phase hov as a paperweight.

"But this is the way it has to be. I don't run this outfit and I do follow orders. The Lieutenant was livid at being told what to do with you. I think it hurt his feelings that a kid like you rated such attention."

"So he put me here? Why? Why doesn't he take advantage of me? If TAU thinks I'm useable, why doesn't Lieutenant Posen use me?"

“I don’t know. If I did, I wouldn’t tell you. But no, he didn’t put you here. I did.”

“Jody!”

“I put you here because the Lieutenant wanted to put you on a Company A recon team.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad.”

“It is. They hit the jungle for three weeks per loop. All they do is drink, sleep and get sick. Unless there’s a woman with them. Then they find other things to do. If you came back a virgin, it would be because you had killed the entire team.”

Her words came as little surprise to me, which was scary. The 179th’s Company A was shaping up to be a different kind of animal than the Third’s.

“But I didn’t put you here to save your virtue.” She smiled and winked. “My guess is you can protect yourself enough, though I can’t see how you do it with such a small frame.

“The reason I put you here is so you can be my little spy.” She held up a hand. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have said little.”

“At least calling me little is truthful. Calling me your spy”...“

“Sorry again. A bit of the dramatic in me. Too many romance novels. Come on, let’s grab some coffee and I’ll explain.”

So we sat down and had some coffee and hot chocolate, and Jody gave me the details. By the time she’d finished, I knew this was one seriously messed up outfit. I also knew that I’d be her little spy, and told her so.

“Thanks, Abigail. I hope I’ll get a chance to use what you tell me. Otherwise, we’ll be stuck in this scavenger mode forever.” She rose. “Well, it’s time for afternoon defense classes. You’re welcome to come along, though I don’t think you’ll learn much. Class is two hours. Your start duty in three hours. The lunch and dinner shift goes ten hours from 1000 to 2000.”

“One last thing, Jody. My price tag. Even Mata Hari got paid.”

“Mata who?”

“You should study up on your history, Jody. She was a famous spy in the early twentieth century.”

“That was almost eight hundred years ago!”

“So talk to more Cues. Or access the historical libraries. But don’t change the subject. My price.”

“You want me to pay you? You ungrateful little bitch!” Her tone took all the sting out of the words. “I just saved you from Company A recon!”

“Sounds more like you saved Company A recon from me. Doesn’t matter. I’m now performing duty above and beyond the call of duty. So I want compensation. Two things. One: Nobody uses my sidearm but me.”

“I can do that. Pritchard, our armory master, owes me a couple. And number two?”

“You have got to get me access to the puterverse. I’ll take you along, but it must be me accessing.”

“Why?” she asked a little suspiciously. It seemed some of the paranoia here rubbed off on everyone.

“I can’t tell you as much as show you. But that’s my price.”

She looked at me carefully. “I’ll be honest with you, Abigail. It’s been very hard visualizing you as a Cue. I’ve met so very few. You look like a sixteen year old girl”...“

“That’s because I am a sixteen year old girl.”

“Yes and no. You’ve got memories and training and skills that I’ll never have in my entire life. I can see why Lieutenant Posen would be envious. He’s in his thirties and is a lieutenant. You’re sixteen and have made major.”

“Believe me, Jody, I doubt he would want to take the path I’ve taken.”

“Probably not, but he’s just looking at the result. So am I. But while I’m a little envious, too, I’m also glad for you and sorry for you.” She paused, then nodded. “It’ll take a couple weeks, but I’ll get you access.”

“Fair enough.” I finished my hot chocolate. “Now let’s see what kind of workouts you people have. I need to limber up some.”

We stopped off long enough to get me into a workout uniform. I was just a little self-conscious about changing in front of so many unfamiliar women, but I figured I had to get used to it. I was even more self-conscious when I saw some eyes open when they looked at me. At first I thought they were staring because, well“... but it wasn’t that.

They were looking at my scar. I looked at it, too. It was still red and wicked looking. Although Doctor Ressler had done a good job, we’d been too far from base for full treatment, so the scar would be permanent. Running in an almost horizontal line across my lower chest, it branched out in several places where I had ripped it open after being thrown from the destroyed hov. I looked up, smiling shyly.

“Not too pretty, huh?”

Nobody said anything, but one of them, an athletic looking blonde with hazel eyes, smiled a little. I finished dressing and followed them to the workout area.

It was basic and simple. An open space with a treated floor that would soften on bodily impact, but remain hard to footfalls and other forms of striking. We spread out and started stretching. I noticed, with some concern, that we were all women.

After about five minutes, the Lieutenant and another man walked in on us. Immediately everyone took her place. I nudged the woman next to me.

“What kind of defense class is this? Where are the men?”

She motioned me to be quiet. I heard the Lieutenant clear his voice.

“Good afternoon, ladies. I take it you’ve finished warm ups. We’ll begin immediately. Sergeant Olecki?”

The big man stepped up and before he so much as spoke a word, I didn’t like him. He seemed brutish and condescending. He looked at us as though we were a bunch of little girls, our hair still in pigtails.

“All right, we’ll pick up from where we left off last week.” His eyes scanned the thirty of us. He came to me, but looked right past me, settling on a tall woman far to my left. “Stingle, we’ll work with you first.”

She rose and took position. Olecki went to a standard basic attack position, and Stingle went to the defensive. She had no more than set when she was on her back, gasping. Olecki was quick, I'll give him that. He helped her to her feet.

"That's why we're going to work on today's defensive positions. Had Stingle known the move I'm going to teach you today, she would have easily blocked my attack."

I felt my face get red as my blood began to heat up. He was nothing but a bully. Why in world would you injure someone just to show the importance of something you hadn't taught yet? I nudged the woman next to me again.

"What is it with this guy? And what's with these basic moves? Are you all rookies or something?"

She looked like she didn't want to answer, but did. "Quiet! Some of us have only been here for a year, and these defense tactics take time to learn. And when we--"

"Vetter!" The woman stiffened at her name, and I saw a quick look of fright cross her face. Fear? Over a workout? I felt the beast in me and quickly fought it down.

She rose silently and went to the sergeant. She assumed her position, again a defense posture, one arm close to her body, the other at right angles. Olecki closed fast and struck for her head. She deftly blocked it, but made no counter attack. Too late, she saw his right foot step in. She swung free, avoiding the leg, but leaving herself wide open for the right arm that thudded into her ribs. She dropped and didn't move. The Lieutenant motioned, and two of the women up front helped Vetter to her feet. The three started off to sickbay, Vetter only barely conscious. I think I knew now why they had eight beds in sickbay.

"It was my hope that you had all practiced over the past week." Lieutenant Posen's voice had the disapproving tone of a disappointed father. "That hasn't happened, I'm afraid. Very well. Sergeant Olecki will review last week's lesson before going into this week's. As always, any injuries are a result of your poor preparation. I'm sorry, but you will learn the importance of defending against a superior aggressor."

I had had enough of this. The practice was only three minutes old and two women had been injured. That wouldn't be so bad if we were also learning something; getting hurt comes with the uniform. But the way I saw it, the only thing these people were learning was how to be useless. I stood up.

"With the Lieutenant's permission, I'd like you to try me, Sergeant Olecki."

Every head swung toward me. The Lieutenant smiled slightly. Sergeant Olecki just stared.

"Sit down, Private. You're not ready for this level yet. I'd just hurt you."

"That's all you're doing to the others now. I don't see you teaching us anything, Sergeant."

He took a step toward me. These Company A goons were great on posturing.

"Very well, Private Wyeth," the Lieutenant spoke with his slick, clipped voice. "You said you were on Company A in the Third. Let's give you an opportunity to show us how good they were." He emphasized the word were, and I felt myself tense up.

I walked up to the sergeant and assumed a defensive posture identical to Vetter's. He smiled.

"This will be quick. Don't worry, girlie, the doc can set broken bones quicker than anyone I've seen."

His arm shot forward toward my jaw.

He almost nailed me, too. I was upset enough; his calling me girlie with that tone of voice made me angry. But it was a bad, uncontrollable anger. I jerked my left arm up and deflected the arm past my head. He brought it down on my shoulder, trying to break it. I slid down, cushioning the blow, but still falling; he brought a leg across my chest, putting a knee to my breast. I blocked it down, but it hit my scar. I felt a stab of pain and grunted. He stepped back.

“I’d heard you were an anchor. Looks like you were an anchor all right, holding everyone back.”

I wanted to kill him, but in the wrong way. I rose to my feet and took a couple of deep breaths, keeping my eyes on him. I approached him and went to defensive.

“Again, Sergeant.”

“With pleasure, Wyeth.”

He shot in, using his left leg for a feint to my groin and bringing his head down as the main attack. I jerked my own head back and felt his forehead thud into my chest, knocking the breath out of me. I didn’t pay any attention to that attack, however. I wanted to see how he positioned the rest of his body during the attack. I had my right leg against the inside of his and kept my eyes on his arms as they spread wide with the hit. I again slid down, softening the blow, but going to the ground. He stepped back smiling. The Lieutenant also had a smile on his face.

I stood up. I had his measure now. I could feel his weight shifting while my leg was pressed against his, and knew he had very poor balance. He was a clumsy brute. With the kind of training I was used to, I could attack and defend aggressively because I knew my opponent would be well trained, and was capable of at least deflecting my blows. But I had to be careful with Sergeant Olecki. I wanted to teach him a lesson, not kill him. I stepped into the same defense.

“And once more, Sergeant.”

He laughed.

“I think you’ve had enough! Sit down and maybe I can teach you something.”

“You can’t teach me a thing, Sergeant. I know your moves, and they’re very basic and poorly executed. You might be all right for boot camp, but you wouldn’t even rate Company C in the Third, and they were rookies. So, once more, rookie.”

Just as he had thrown me off with his taunts, I now threw him. He didn’t even set up but went straight to his attack. He kicked up to put his left foot in my chest, and again he almost nailed me. But this time he almost nailed me because I wanted it that way. The object of hand-to-hand was not to make the opponent miss by a lot, but by a little. If I kept him in close, I could counterattack, which I now did.

I sidestepped his awkward kick and slid in along his leg. Putting my left foot on his planted right ankle, I grabbed his thrusting left leg with both hands and lifted it about a half meter. I now had him bent away from me, his left leg in the air, his arms flailing to maintain the balance that focused all his weight on his right ankle. In normal circumstances, my opponent would already be disabled by my next move. If it were a combat situation, he would be dead. But I stopped at this point because it was time to teach everyone a lesson.

“I can now do one of three things, Sergeant,” I said with my best instructor’s voice to the suddenly attentive women. “I can lift your leg another half meter while shifting my ‘girlie’ weight to your right ankle,

crushing it. As a bonus, I could collapse your right knee with my right foot while letting you fall to the ground.

“Or I can release your left leg and send either my right fist or right foot into your groin, turning the contents of your scrotum into a fine paste.” Several laughs escaped from the crowd.

“Either of those attacks would disable you, Sergeant, but I think I’ll do the third attack, the one I prefer.” I released one hand and slipped my knife from my left boot. With my right hand below his knee, I jerked his left leg down. The movement was so quick that he was unprepared for his suddenly regained balance. He landed on his feet and our bodies were right next to each other, my knife hand, blade down, clenched just under his breast bone.

“This is a seventeen-centimeter boot knife, and if I had given you the blade instead of the hilt, it would be tickling your heart right now. You’re dead, Sergeant Olecki.” I pushed him away and turned to sit down.

I heard a grunt and quick step behind me. The idiot! It had been practice, now it was real. Flipping the knife away so I wouldn’t be tempted to use it, I dropped flat, twisting my body over and pulling it in. Of course he went for where my head was. He was fairly tall, but he had stooped to deliver his blow.

Partially coiled on my back and shoulders now, I jerked straight and shot my right foot at his unprotected head. At the last instant, I unlocked my knee and flattened my foot so the sole caught him squarely where his jaw joined the upper throat. Had I left my foot pointed with a locked leg, the attack would have broken his neck. This way, the blunted kick spread the impact so more could be taken by his shoulder muscles.

His head snapped and he lurched forward, his momentum carrying him into the front row of women. They were apparently nervous about terrible rumors going around of having the Sergeant’s head in their laps, because they generously gave him the whole floor to fall on. As he hit softly, I regretted the downside of technology that still couldn’t tell the difference between a real person hitting the floor and a jerk hitting the floor.

I stepped over him and sat down, sheathing my recovered knife. Lieutenant Posen’s face was study in scarlet. Red ears, red face, even his eyes seemed to have a red tint to them. I don’t know what he was so mad about.

“On your feet, Wyeth!”

But it wasn’t the Lieutenant who said gave the order. It was Jody, who stood behind us. I went straight to my feet and stood at attention. Anything Jody was going to tell me, I was going to do. Better her than Posen.

“How dare you attack a sergeant! What excuse do you have for your actions?” She shouted, her mouth only centimeters from my face.

“Well, it was a drill and--”

“I don’t want to hear it, Wyeth! I don’t want to hear it because there is no excuse!” She pointed to three of the women near me. “You three! Get Sergeant Olecki to sickbay immediately! I want the Lieutenant to have a full report within ten minutes! Got it?” From the way they jumped, I’d say they got it. Jody turned back to me.

“Well, you’ve messed things up nicely, Wyeth! Seems to me you should be the one to fix them up.”

“One moment, Sergeant Eyer.” Posen had stepped up, trying to take over the situation. I hoped Jody

knew how to handle herself. She did.

“Excuse me, sir. All due respect, sir, but this is a disciplinary action that is beneath your attention. Since Wyeth is my problem, I’ll take care of her and report to you within the half-hour. Sir!” She saluted sharply, and I thought she’d kissed up to him too much. No way he’d buy this.

But he did. His face color went closer to normal and he visibly relaxed. The most important thing to him, keeping face in front of his troops, was achieved. I made a mental note to not show him up again in public. I wished it was a mental note I’d use. Sadly, I knew it wouldn’t be. Officers like Posen really bugged me.

“Very well, Sergeant. See that this”... this“... private is suitably disciplined. I will not tolerate such violence under my command. And I’d like that report within fifteen minutes, not thirty.”

Jody saluted again. “Of course, sir. Thank you, sir.”

Posen stalked off, the proud commandant having solved another impossible scenario, to bask in his success in handling soldiers. He was a proud man. A proud man and something of an ass.

“All right, Wyeth! Let’s take care of you, first.” She looked over toward our departing leader, continuing to cuss me out until he was gone from sight. She brought her focus back to me, making me the center of everyone’s attention.

“Since you’re the one who’s injured poor Sergeant Olecki, it seems to me that you should fill in for him while he’s laid up. If I could, I’d give you ALL his duties until he returned. Maybe longer, just to teach a lesson.” She carefully avoided mentioning who was going to learn the lesson, but everybody caught it.

“Regrettably, I can’t do that. I can give you this duty though: Until poor Sergeant Olecki is sufficiently recovered from his terrible injuries,” her eyes were sparkling, “you’re in charge of hand-to-hand combat training for the women of the 179th. Is that clear, Private?”

I would have paid real money to have saluted right then and there. But Jody wasn’t an officer. She just should have been one.

“I understand, Sergeant! I’ll do the best I can.”

“You better! Starting now!”

Nobody cheered, but I could feel the relief going over the crowd. Jody stepped back and I walked to the front, facing my new class.

“All right, class, pay attention! First things first, dogs! Get on your feet!” Everyone jumped to their feet. “Good! Now let’s learn a little about defense, shall we? What Sergeant Olecki and I just demonstrated was the proper way to defend, by going over to the attack as quickly as possible. I’ve discovered it’s easier to defend against dead enemies than live ones.” Scattered smiles appeared. “As Sergeant Olecki so capably showed us, someone who’s unconscious, bleeding, or dead is normally in a poor position to attack you.” I shook my head in wonder. “Truly, the man has a gift.” More than a few laughs broke out, and I was ready to start.

My first class was two hours. I spent the first ten minutes finding out what they already knew, which was precious little. I had no idea why these women had been taught so little, and I couldn’t think of any good reason. I wondered if the men were as poorly trained. With someone like Olecki in charge of A Company, they probably were.

We continued basic training, but at a much accelerated pace, and with an attitude toward the offensive. They eagerly took my approach and caught on quick. I only bruised a couple of them, and cut one. Most had strained muscles and sore hands. But they were a happy crowd when we dismissed. They knew their opponent was not indestructible, and they weren't made of porcelain. Just that change in attitude made for a successful class.

Jody and I waited for the last of them to leave then made for her quarters. I wanted to clean up, but decided to wait until the showers were less crowded. It was always best for a drill instructor keep some distance, at least until she had earned her students' respect. Besides, that blonde with the hazel eyes was looking at me funny. Her smile stirred an uncomfortable memory of "... of" ... something.

Jody's quarters were just like Sus' ... my old one had been. Small, efficient, but with only one bed. She pulled out a new uniform--she had rejoined us in the last half hour of drills and was pretty good--but seemed in no hurry to go.

"That was a first rate class you gave, Abigail. Were you an instructor?"

"Not with the Third, Jody. I did some training during the Ethiopian campaigns, though, and things" ... "

"What Ethiopian campaigns? We don't have anything going on over there, do we?"

"No, no. I'm talking about my first service in the early twenty-first century. I gave my men training as needed before missions."

She looked like I'd slugged her in the face with a two-by-four. She stared, trying to take in what I'd just told her.

"You" ... you served that far back? I--I--Abigail, that sounds so incredible!" She shook her head. "I'm not calling you a liar. It's just that" ... Wow! That was six and half centuries ago!"

"I know. It's hard to explain." I wonder what she'd say if I told her the whole truth. "I take it 179th doesn't deal with too many Cues?"

"No, we don't. When I was in the Thirty-fifth Regiment, we cued as many as two a month. But here?" She shrugged. "Like I said, we tend to take low risk missions, and only every other month or so. We've never rescued a ripe, though most are ready to give it a shot."

"Never? Now it's my turn to be incredulous, Jody. In just the two years I've been serving, we've rescued over fifty ripes."

"Don't rub it in. And I don't want to talk about it, as it's a sore point."

"Sorry. Oh, I meant to ask a couple of questions. One, can I increase the number of classes to three a week? And two, am I off kitchen duty now?"

"Yes and no. Yes, you can increase them. I was going to ask you to anyway. You taught them more today than they've learned in past six months. And no, you're not off kitchen duty. In fact, you're on kitchen duty in thirty minutes. I'm tempted to give you a little extra time between the drills and kitchen duty, but the Lieutenant would have my head mounted on his wall if I did."

"What is it with him and Olecki anyway? I think you're right, the Lieutenant doesn't like being pushed around by TAU. But that doesn't come anywhere near to explaining the pleasure he seems to get out of our people getting roughed up. And that's another thing. How come you train separately? And why is it so basic? I can't believe that it's taken a whole year to get so little training in. Has Olecki been the

instructor the whole time? Why not you? You're much better than he is. I can tell. So why is he doing something he--"

Jody clapped a hand over my mouth, laughing.

"It's going to be hard thinking of you as a Cue, Abigail, but I'm having no difficulty thinking of you as a teenager. We'll talk later, after your shift. I'll stop by about twenty minutes before you get off and we'll eat together. Now go get cleaned up and report. Scoot!"

She turned me around and pushed me out the door. Jody reminded me of Susie. Oh, Susie! I went to the women's barracks to gather my uniform and get ready. I'd like to tell you my mood, but I just didn't know.

* * * *

"Private Wyeth, reporting for detail!" I announced to a large man with his back to me. He turned around and looked me up and down carefully. He was sweaty and his shirt was spattered with dough and sauce and I don't know what else. He looked like a walking seven-course meal. I had a horrible thought that I had just drawn another Jackson detail. Jackson had abruptly disappeared a few weeks after he goaded me into my first sharding episode and nobody had tried too hard to find him. That didn't mean there weren't other Jacksons around. And an inactive unit like this would really draw them.

"You ain't much on size, are you Wyeth? Well, that doesn't matter. We'll keep you busy." He smiled broadly and shoved out a dough-encrusted hand. "My name's Hank. How 'bout you start out with dishes and we'll get acquainted. During lunch and dinner, I'll put you out on the floor, cleaning tables."

"Great. Call me Abigail." I shook his sticky paw, then looked at my own. "So, what are we serving for lunch, Hank?"

He inspected his own mitt. "Not sure, exactly. It's got a lot of flour in it, though. Some sauce, too. I'd have a better idea if I knew how to cook. Oh, well."

So I spent the next ten hours washing dishes and cleaning tables. Like with the laundry, society had made some advances, but they weren't to be counted among the 179th's assets. As Hank had pointed out, there's wasn't much need for labor saving devices when there was so much cheap labor lying around collecting dust. I appreciated his point, but wished it wasn't being demonstrated on me.

Hank may have joked about not knowing how to cook, but he was really very good. This outfit didn't offer choices for their meals. You ate what was served or went hungry. Fortunately, Hank was a top-notch chef. For lunch we had a kind of pizza, only he used a good deal of corn and.

CUCUMBER PASTE WITH DILL

cucumber paste with dill mixed into the dough. It was an unusual taste, but delicious, too. Dinner was fish with lemon. I had always enjoyed lemon on fish, but it didn't seem right. I would have just used a little salt"...

I shook my head and returned to my dishes. Miss DeChant had been an excellent cook for Professor LeClaire, and if I kept up this line of thought, I'd be in danger of sharding. I'd need to be very careful about that.

Quitting time rolled around and I gratefully peeled off my overapron and hung it up. Hank walked in from the serving line.

“Ready to go already?” he said with mock shock. “How can you leave such a fun place? Well, go ahead and abandon me then. May as well take this.” He brought out a plate and offered it to me.

It had a piece of the pizza from lunch. He must have seen me making a pig out of myself on it earlier. Using sauce, he’d bordered the triangular slice and then put a line across the middle, making a red A. I giggled.

“Why, thank you, Hank. I’ll assume that’s a red A, and not a scarlet letter!”

He looked puzzled until I told him what I meant. Then he turned as red as the sauce. Hearing my laughter, he recovered his composure.

“No, that’s not what I meant!” He laughed. “I just wanted to say thanks. You really worked your tail off, and that’s nice to see. I like it when someone takes their work seriously.”

“Hey, we all serve as we can, Hank. I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

“Count on it. We never close. I, personally, haven’t slept since April 6, 2664. This kitchen is my life.” He shook his head. “And that is so depressing. Good night.”

I went out into the mess area, looking for Jody. She said she’d meet me here right after my shift, to let me tell her what I’d picked up while bussing the tables. I had some interesting tidbits, mainly about the morale of the outfit and gripes against Company A personnel. This was a badly damaged unit.

But she must have been held up or forgotten, for the hall was empty. So was her room when I stopped by. I considered asking the computer for her location, then remembered I had no access. It didn’t matter too much, though. It wasn’t as though what I had to say was all that important. Munching my pizza, I trudged off to the showers to prepare for some serious sack time.

Forty minutes later, clean and comfortable, I gratefully slipped under the covers. The barracks, which held perhaps sixty bunks, was half full. Most everyone was asleep, but there were a couple groups talking quietly. They looked over at me when I entered, and a few of them waved, but they left me to myself. For tonight, that was fine. I wanted to get adjusted to my new schedule and also let everyone know me a little better--and I them--before I started mixing up with groups. So I waved back and rolled over on my back, putting my hands behind my head. The dark, shadowy ceiling was five meters up, just the right distance for contemplating both it and my future.

And what kind of future did I have? I was a sharded Cue in danger of becoming a full-fledged Shard. All my friends were dead and the stability they represented had been torn from me. I could and would begin making new friends. Even so soon after the attack I already counted Jody as a new friend. Hank, too, and Doctor Ressler.

Most of all, Aaron. Aaron, was gone. He’d been my first love, my only love. During my years as John--how strange it now seemed!--I had been very career-minded. And when I was drafted, it was into the US Recon Forces, where everyone was a soldier to be trained in camp and used in battle. My company had had thirty-one women in it over the three years I was in command, but I only noted it as a quick general estimate of their advantages and disadvantages in combat scenarios. As I came to know each of my soldiers, I refined my assessment of them.

My chief had recruited me into NATEch before I’d finished my service, so there was no down time between the two. Once in NATEch I had dated some women employees outside of my projects, but their faces were all forgotten, and not just because I no longer had any romantic interest in women. They had been only informal relationships, each one enjoyable but not deep. More friendly than romantic.

My parents had raised me to respect both myself and the women I dated, so I neither believed in nor practiced casual sex. And my faith, firmly established since infancy, held me in good stead. Because of this, I didn't dally with a woman's affections in the twenty-first century, nor with a man's in the twenty-seventh. By the time of my accident at the age of thirty-one, and going through the first two years of my new life, I had not had one single long-term relationship. Until Aaron.

And now Aaron was gone. Could I have another? I knew in my heart that he would want me to, but it was far too soon. It still hurt too much. Oh, Aaron. I rolled over to my side and stared at the barracks.

Chapter Three

“Psst! Wake up, Private!”

My eyes snapped open and my hand shot for my pistol, which I kept at the top of my bed, below the mattress and against the wall. It wasn't there. But I always left it there when“...

I remembered where I was and settled down, feeling sleepiness creeping over me again. That's right. I was in the women's barracks and was now a member of the 179th Regiment, Company A. No, Company B. What had woken me? I lifted my head and looked around.

It was Jody. She was kneeling by my bed and shaking my shoulder. I moaned and plopped my head down, curling tighter around my pillow.

“Go ‘way.”

She went from shaking to shoving.

“Wrong answer, Wyeth. Get up. Now.” She stood up and began rummaging through my trunk at the top of my bed. I went up to my elbows and was greeted by a face full of shirt. “Here. Get dressed and meet me outside the hanger in five minutes.”

I wanted to say something witty and cutting, but I had all the comeback response of strawberry jam. Besides, she was already gone. Moaning, I slowly dressed into a loose top and shorts. Stomping into my low shoes, a kind of sneaker, I trudged out to the hanger. I was really tired. I suppose it would be a few more days until I was back to full strength. I was fine for standard duties during the day. It was at night that it all caught up with me.

The hanger was deserted. I'd never seen a hanger like this. We always had something going on, whether it was repair, raid preparation, or shipment unloading. Even during the quiet times it was always active since we ran the regiment in shifts. Apparently the 179th ran a single shift, and everybody slept at night.

I mentally shrugged it off and jotted it down as yet another example of unit unreadiness. If they ever wanted to get active, this regiment had a lot of work in front of it. I walked past the hovers and went up the ramp to the hanger shield. By now I half expected it to be turned off. To conserve power or something. It was on, but I passed through with little resistance.

Jody was waiting for me on the other side. Sitting on a rock, she stood when I trudged over to her.

“So, what do you think of the 179th, Abigail?” she said without preamble.

“Well, it's hard to say. I've only been active one day, Jody. And most of that was in the kitchen. So it would be difficult to pass--”

“So, what do you think of the 179th, Abigail?” she repeated.

“I don’t see how you can even consider this a regiment, Jody. It seems to be equipped okay. And the structure’s in place. But everyone seems to be wasting their time. There’s no real training going on, the whole base is slipshod, security is a joke and what there is of it is directed toward enhancing the paranoia the whole place has towards NATech.” I took a breath. “I’ve even seen it in you, Jody.”

She looked away. “Go on.”

“My one night cleaning tables just reaffirmed my first impressions. There’s very little camaraderie, talking is quiet and discouraging. And everyone seems to walk on eggshells around the Company A personnel. I don’t blame them too much for that. Your Company A strikes me as a bunch of rough bullies. That might be okay if they pulled their weight in a fight, but if Sergeant Olecki’s skills are any indication, they’d just be cannon fodder in combat.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes. I’m not one for talking down officers, and I’ll obey the orders I’m given, but Lieutenant Posen strikes me as .” I chose my words carefully here, “having skills that would be better suited elsewhere.”

She gave a short laugh. “That’s incredibly diplomatic of you, Abigail. Especially for a youngster like you.

“And your impressions are very close to accurate. This unit is as close to inactive as it can be. In the past four months, we’ve gone on five raids. Four of them--”

“Five raids in four months isn’t too bad,” I interrupted.

“No? Four of them were salvage missions. The fifth one was a real target, a convoy supplying the Douala garrison. But it was called off ten minutes before contact.”

“Why?” I yawned and rubbed my eyes. I couldn’t seem to shake the cobwebs.

“Officially? Because NATech reinforced the convoy halfway from Alexandria. Unofficially, because the Lieutenant canceled the raid due to ‘uncertain risk factors’.

“Abigail, those reinforcements were a total of two transports each carrying twenty troops. The whole convoy didn’t have one heavy gun and couldn’t phase. Hell, we could take out the Douala garrison itself. We have the manpower and supplies. What we don’t have is the drive and leadership.”

“Don’t blow a gasket, Jody.”

“What’s a gasket?”

“It’s a seal used to hold”... never mind. I’m just saying don’t let it eat you up. I have to admit I’m very disappointed in the 179th myself. But what can I do?”

She stared at me in the bright starlight.

“What can you do? Abigail, I’m surprised to hear that from you. You seem to have some pull with TAU. I was hoping I could talk you into getting the Lieutenant out of here and putting a decent officer in charge.”

“Now it’s my turn to say I’m surprised to hear that from you.” I was wide awake now. My opinion of Jody took a nosedive. “You’re not seriously suggesting a coup, are you? If you are, count me out. I don’t like Lieutenant Posen. He’s an effete ass who has a low opinion of women, little ability to handle

those under his command, and is castrated by his fear of NATech. But he is my commanding officer, and I will obey his orders and, if necessary, die for him.” I took a step back. “I’ll not repeat what you said to anyone, but I don’t think I want to work with you anymore, Sergeant. Good-night.” I turned to leave.

Doctor Ressler was there, blocking my way. How he got behind me without hearing, I don’t know. But there he was. I jumped back and reached for my boot knife. Too late, I realized I was in my short shoes and was unarmed. I whirled around. Jody would be the greater threat.

But she hadn’t moved. She was just standing there, her arms behind her.

“Okay, what’s going on?” I asked.

“Good question, Abigail,” Doctor Ressler spoke. “I’m sorry Sergeant Eyer had to do this. But we needed to find out how far you were willing to go. I can’t tell you how relieved I am that you stopped where you did.”

“What are you talking about, Doctor? Were you listening to us?”

“I sure hope so,” Jody said. “Otherwise I’d be in deep trouble for trying to incite a mutiny. Abigail Wyeth, let me introduce you to Doctor Scott Ressler. Major Scott Ressler, TAU Intelligence Arm.”

He bowed at the waist. “Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“All right,” I said tiredly. “Give me some proof.”

He snapped up from his bow. Jody stepped closer.

“What did you say, Abigail?” she asked.

“I asked Doctor Ressler to show me some proof of his identity. What did you expect me to say, Jody?”

“I don’t know exactly. But I expected more of a reaction from you.” Suspicion crept into her voice. “I know I certainly reacted when he told me his identity four months ago. And I consider myself a normal person.” Which implied I wasn’t normal. I wasn’t offended; I wasn’t normal. Ressler stayed quiet, allowing Jody to do the questioning.

“So what do you want me to do? Run in circles? Faint? Slap my cheeks and shout, ‘Oh, no! This can’t be!’? Get real, Jody. I used to do this kind of intrigue six centuries before either of you were born. If Ressler wants my cooperation, he has to prove his credentials.” I glanced at him. “Were you expecting something else, Doctor?”

“Well, yes, I was. I imagined that someone of your training and discipline would accept my word. It’s a little surprising--”

“Stop treating me like a rookie, Doctor. You’re not surprised, or shouldn’t be. You revealed yourself to me because you think I’ll be useful to your mission. That must mean you have researched my background or have a high opinion of my intellect. Either way, you must have expected this.” Jody looked like she’d been sandbagged.

“Very well, Private. Yes, I anticipated this. Let’s go to the infirmary. I’ll not only give you proof, I’ll let you find it yourself.”

“What do you mean, Major?” Jody was way out of her league. To be honest, that made me feel much better. Jody as a faithful and competent non-com was far better than Jody as a conspirator, regardless of

the motives. She just didn't strike me as a cloak and dagger type.

"What he means, Jody, is that he's going to give me puterverse access at what he thinks is my full level."

He smiled. "What I know is your full level, Abigail. I know you won't accept this as proof, but let me say two words: UTC and Mike."

Both words hit home and very nearly convinced me that moment.

"It looks like you are from TAU, Doctor. Or is it Major?"

"It's both. But I really am a physician, so I prefer doctor."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Jody was waving her arms. "This is getting out of hand. What are you two talking about? Who's Mike? What's UTC? I thought I was the primary stooge in all this. Now I feel like baggage."

"Believe me, Jody, you're not," I assured her. "I don't know what you two are doing with the 179th, but what the doctor is referring to concerns me and NATEch. He's right, those two words have a huge impact on me. But he's also right that I don't accept it as proof of who he is. Now he's offering me the chance to verify it." I glanced at him. "More importantly, for him, he's making sure I'm who I say I am. Isn't that right, Doctor?"

He smiled but said nothing and instead waved his hand toward the hanger entrance.

* * * *

"All right, the sickbay is fully secured. I've used my own codes to lock access, and the perimeter alarms have been set. You may access at any time, Private." Ressler sat near me and Jody behind us. I looked at him.

"In a moment, Doctor. Before we do, I'd like the two of you to prepare for a rough ride. I'll be able to shield most of the effects of my access, but not all. Also, it will take me a moment to enable shielding, so the first few seconds will be the worst."

"Come on, Abigail. You told me you accessed at level twelve. I've never been that high, but I'm in pretty good shape. Let's get on with it."

"Listen to her, Sergeant. We know for a fact that Private Wyeth has a current access of Level thirty-five. I once went to level twenty-eight for ten seconds and it's like nothing you've ever experienced." He turned toward me. "I've been using level twenty-one for several years now, so don't worry about me."

Oh, how I loved being a teenager! It was for moments like these that all the angst and frustrations and uncertainties were worthwhile. As an adult, I could never enjoy a moment like this. I laughed.

"Level thirty-five, huh?" I laughed again and saw a flash of worry cross Ressler's face. I still considered him a friend, but it was nice to see I could make him cautious. It made his TAU connection more bearable. "If you're only prepared for Level thirty-five, Doctor, then I recommend you don't move around until the shielding is in place." I grinned and kept looking at him.

"Total access."

Mike must have been on a constant, aggressive watch, because he responded immediately and with flair. Instead of the room fading away into the puterverse, it exploded. A white ball of flame leaped from my

middle and melted everything in sight. What few slivers of reality remained were ground into bits of yellow data and left as glowing embers on the clear floor. Overhead the sky was a brilliant emerald green, with gold and orange spires shooting up toward them. In the distance I could make out the banks of the Quantum river. I felt the exhilaration of the puterverse hit me like a meteor and fill me with its energy. I raised my arms over my head, twirling and laughing.

Halfway through my spin, I saw Jody and Ressler on the ground. Blood was pouring freely from their ears, nose and mouth, quickly choking them. Abigail, you idiot!

“Mike! I need a couple of boxes for my guests. Hurry!”

“You got it, Abby!” There was a crackling of whips along with a tinkling sound and I saw flat planes of sparkles surround them then begin forming around each one. They were safe now, although it would take a couple more minutes to recover.

“Man o man! Am I glad to see you, Abby!”

“Yeah, well that’s nice. I notice your manners aren’t improved, though. Get your butt down here and let me hug you!”

The emerald sky changed to black as the color collapsed into a ball of green flame, which in turn plummeted toward us. It exploded over my head and washed through me, lingering. I felt a moment of panic, remembering my recent experiences in Glendale. But I pushed it down. I wasn’t going to let past abuses control me.

“You jerk!” I shouted, only half-angry. “I’m not some kind of easy hussy. Hands off!” I tightened my body and threw him clear. He laughed and formed himself in front of me, his bright green eyes playful and happy.

“Well, how long do expect me to go without copping a feel?”

“I expect you to go your entire life without copping a feel, you pervert. Got it?”

“Yeah, yeah. I know you like it.” He went over to Ressler and bent over, putting his hands on his knees. “So who are your friends? Not too tough, are they?”

Ressler was slowly getting to his feet. Jody needed help, so I touched her and charged the field a little extra. She moaned and looked around.

“Where are we?” She coughed and wiped some blood away. “Is this level thirty-five?”

Mike laughed his nasty laugh. “Level thirty-five? What’s that supposed to mean? Look, lady”...“

“Who are you? Why do you look like that?”

“Careful, Jody. You don’t want to get Mike upset,” I offered helpfully. “Here, let me help you up. If you start getting sick or woozy, just reach out and touch me. You too, Doctor. My aura will perk you up some. Don’t go to the well too often, though,” I cautioned. “My signature is pure UTC, so you’ll pay for it when we leave the puterverse. Which gives me a thought.” I changed my tone. “Mike, I’d like you to give Sergeant Jody Eyer, 179th Regiment, the day off tomorrow. While you’re at it, verify the credentials of our other guest. He claims to be Major Scott Ressler with the TAU Intelligence Arm.”

Mike bowed at the waist. “Yours to command, milady. Hold still, Major.”

“Why? What do you”... aaahhh!“ Ressler jumped back as Mike passed through him, sparks flying as he penetrated the shielding. Ressler started scratching himself furiously, then stopped as the ground beneath him turned emerald green and began bubbling. Mike erupted from the roiling surface and came over to me.

“Okay, that’s the first part. Next, playtime with TAU’s systems. I really hope,” he added wistfully, “that they’ve fixed some of their holes. It’s no fun breaking in anymore. Back in a jiffy.” His legs exploded into a jet and he shot up into the sky, disappearing almost instantly.

“Wait!” Doctor Ressler called after him, still scratching his arms and neck. He looked stunned and lost. I liked him better this way.

“Yes, Doctor?”

“Don’t I need to go with him to provide my access codes and serial numbers?”

“Why?”

“If he doesn’t have them, he won’t be able to enter TAU security, let alone verify”...“

“I don’t think that will be a problem. Mike doesn’t have a whole lot of respect for security systems.” I liked the implied offer, though. It made me a little more trusting of Doctor Ressler. “TAU has one of the best, second only to NATech. All that means for Mike is that it’s just that much more fun, but not challenging. Come on. While we’re waiting we may as well head over to the Quantum. I’m sure our conversation’s going to take us there anyway.” I opened my arms up and out.

“Abigail!” Jody spoke sharply, causing me to stumble.

“What? Is something wrong? Is the shielding a little weak? I could--”

“No, the shielding’s fine. It’s you.” She was staring at me. “Look at you! That’s not the figure you have in the real world,” she said accusingly.

“Umm.” I felt myself flush, causing my yellowish light to tinge gold. I’d forgotten about that. Shortly after coming into my own in the puterverse, I’d started adopting a more womanly figure. Okay, I was vain. But it reflected how I felt about myself when I was in here. Still, it was a little embarrassing. More so, now that I noticed Doctor Ressler staring at me. Well, not staring. It was a good long look though.

“I--I--I kinda like this form, Jody. I suppose it’s part of me wanting to grow up. Some of it’s because I feel older in here, more in control of myself.”

“It probably is closer to what you were like in your first body, too.” Ressler offered, feeling my discomfort.

“Yes, that, too. I was thirty-one when I was first ripped.”

“I’d also guess a small part of it is to fluster Mike,” Jody said with a smirk. “I know I’d like to get his goat.”

I laughed. “You know, Jody, I’d never thought of that. But you’re right. My figure does ruffle Mike’s ego a bit. He has true feelings, you know.” At their surprise, I smiled. “We’ll talk about that at the river. Come on.”

I opened my arms and let my wings appear. They erupted along my arms, feathered and shimmering.

They tapered off toward my ankles. I bounced up on my toes, and the electron breeze snatched my wings, lifting me. About ten meters up, I looked back down. Jody and Ressler were staring up at me.

“Come on. The river’s this way.” I started gliding slowly along, letting my two grounded friends keep up. Jody called up to me.

“So what level is this really, Abigail?”

“Ask the good doctor, Jody. Maybe he knows.” I laughed at his sour look.

“Okay, Abigail, I admit it. We had no idea you were this high up,” he said honestly. “Frankly, I haven’t a clue what level we’re on. The theoretical limit is sixty-four. So this is, what--forty-five? Fifty?”

“I’m glad Mike isn’t around to hear that, Doctor. He’d really get ticked off. I don’t operate at any level. Neither does Mike. I have unrestricted access to absolutely everything in puterverse. By the way, the real limit for non UTC is sixty-seven, not sixty-four.”

A frown came on his face. “That can’t be right. Why sixty-seven, Abigail?”

“Because sixty-seven is a prime number, silly.” I smiled at his confused look, but not too much. I’d been pretty muddled about the unique and powerful characteristics of prime numbers too, until I understood trinary code. Then it was easy.

“Who is Mike, Abigail?” Jody asked. She was jogging easily along, leading Ressler, who seemed to be struggling a little more. He still had energy enough to answer, though.

“As far as we know, Jody, Mike is a program written in Unbound Trinary Code by Abigail.” He turned his face back up to me. “No level at all, Abigail?”

“None, Doctor. As the writer said, ‘This is my world and welcome to it.’”

“Unbound Trinary Code? There’s no such thing.” Jody’s face was a little flush. The UTC boost lasted for awhile, then wore off quickly. I swooped down and brushed her with my wings. Her pace picked up immediately and she began to breathe easier.

“Sure there is, Jody,” I answered, climbing a little higher. “It’s just that no one knows how to visualize it yet.”

“No one except you, Abigail,” Ressler countered.

“Almost true. Mike knows how to use it, too.” And Kiki, only I didn’t say so. Thinking of Kiki, I had a notion. I looked up ahead of us. “I see we’re almost to the river. I’m going to go up first and wait for Mike. ‘Bye.’”

I accelerated quickly. Mike was faster and flashier, but I was no slouch. I arrived at the river in two seconds and landed in three at the base of an orange spire that sat next to the riverbank. Jody and Ressler were about a kilometer behind me. I threw up a doppelganger of me waiting for them and jumped back up into the air, using a cloak. I aimed for the peak of the spire about two kilometers up. At the top was a small platform, which I landed on. Far below me I could see two little spots working their way toward our meeting place. They were going a little too fast. I thought about it a moment and softened the ground while warping their path. They slowed down and began weaving back and forth. From their viewpoint, nothing had changed. I now had about five minutes, which was plenty. And all I wanted to take. Staying up this high from interface surface kept me from prying eyes and ears, but the energy drain took a toll.

“Kiki!” I called out.

From the middle of the small landing a crystal flower poked up. The leaves, a clear light green, opened and the blossom appeared. The petals opened and Kiki was inside. Instead of jumping to her feet, though, she stayed on her knees, her whole body quivering.

“What’s wrong, little sister?” I said with a worried voice.

“Abby, I’m so sorry! Please forgive me! I should have been more careful! I didn’t mean to--”

“Slow down, Kiki. The microsats, right?” She didn’t say anything but kept sobbing. “It’s not your fault, Kiki. Understand?”

“But I killed them, Abigail!” She began wailing. I stooped down and picked her up, cupping her tiny form in my hands. Her blue glow flowed in with my yellow, turning my arm an emerald green, the same shade as Mike.

“No, you didn’t, sweetie, they were already dead. NATEch killed them. You punished NATEch, under my orders.” I would never tell her that had I not been knocked unconscious and taken, I might have called off the attack. “The responsibility was mine. Remember, that’s my world, not yours. Out there, you have to trust me, right?”

She sniffed and nodded.

“All right then, trust me on this. It wasn’t your fault. You did exactly as I told you. I wish it could have been different.” I felt a tugging at my heart, but still didn’t cry. “Susie told me once that I did stupid and reckless and dangerous things. She also said that one day it would be necessary that I do one of those stupid and reckless and dangerous things.” I stroked my finger down her back, then used the tip to lift her chin. “When I called for that microsat attack, that day had come. Please don’t blame yourself for something I did.”

She felt better after that and I was glad I’d taken the time to visit. I didn’t know when I’d see her again, so I needed to resolve this now. She smiled at me and her blue gleam brightened and lightened. I smiled back at her.

“That’s my Kiki! Sorry to put this on you so fast, sister, but my guests are almost at our meeting place and I have to get back down there. I don’t know when I’ll have access again, so I need you to do a few things for me.” I told her what I wanted and she became very happy. Kiki’s emotions were not as stable as Mike’s. Not because my code was flawed but because I wanted someone I could talk to about how I felt. Emotionally, Kiki and I were twins.

“Wow! This’ll take me a least a week, Abby! Thanks for the challenge.” She jumped lightly from my hand and floated to her petal. As her foot touched, a small terminal sprouted from the blossom and activated. I saw her touch her face and when she turned back to me, I laughed out loud, then coughed in the thin electron air.

“Why in the world are you wearing those?” She had on a pair of round, black spectacles. I could even see the sheen of the lenses.

“Do you like them?” she asked eagerly. “I discovered them while browsing through twentieth century archives. I think they make me look very sophisticated. Do you think Mike will like them?”

“I’m sure he’ll be speechless when he sees them. For Mike, that’s a good thing. I like them.” I looked back down. Jody and Ressler were almost at my doppelganger. “Look, I gotta go. When you finish up

your projects, send me a message through Jody's access. She'll pass it along." I jumped off the landing. "Take care, Kiki!"

"G'bye, Abby!" I heard her shout.

I let myself plummet toward the ground. Halfway down, I told my doppelganger to get aloft. It shot up toward me, meeting me about three hundred meters from the surface. It disappeared and I was left with a pair of wings. To those below, there would have been only one me, since I decloaked as the doppelganger disappeared. I finished my now controlled fall, breaking and landing lightly in front of Jody. My wings folded back under my arms and disappeared. She clapped her hands.

"That was fantastic!" She sounded like a little girl, overflowing with excitement. Even Ressler was smiling with his friendly smile now.

"Fantastic barely describes it. I never thought it was possible to have that kind of mobility in the puterverse, Abigail. Doesn't the interface affect you at all?"

"Maybe. I'm not going to give away too much until I know who you are, Doctor."

"And if I'm not who I say I am?" he prodded gently.

"We had a phrase for it centuries ago. It was called 'dead man walking'."

His face went stiff for a moment, then relaxed. He smiled weakly.

"Makes me glad I am with TAU, then." He strolled over to the data bank and sat down on the short purple grass. Jody and I joined him. My heart jumped when Jody sat closer to me than Ressler. It gave me comfort to know she seemed to prefer my company to his. Silly competition for friends, I know. But I really needed a friend now.

The silver and gold of data currents, eddies and streams in the river, swirled only an arm's length away. For as far as we could see out, it was like that. Although this wasn't as nice as my favorite place, it was very pleasant. Occasionally, a sliver of light would erupt briefly from the river as someone in our relative vicinity would access. There were more flashes in the middle of the stream than on our shore. There was no access on the far bank, which was only half seen through the faint ion fog that floated just above the surface of the river. Jody saw my distant gaze and pointed to the far bank.

"Have you ever been over there, Abigail?"

"No."

"Can you go over there?"

I hesitated. I was sure by now that Ressler was who he claimed to be. Mike would have successfully acquired his records by now and verified his identity. If Ressler hadn't checked out, the shielding around him would have disappeared and he'd be exposed to the full elements of unlimited access, which was a one-way trip. But just because he was TAU didn't mean I was going to pour out my plans to him. Not that I didn't trust him. But by not telling him anything, I didn't have to trust him.

Still, I should give some kind of answer. If I was too secretive I'd never get access while at the 179th. Worse, TAU, who had been passively supporting my efforts in the puterverse, might get tougher if I didn't cooperate at some level. It wasn't yet time to give everything away, I decided. It was, however, time to start letting the Resistance in on my ideas.

“Yes, I can go over there, Jody. I haven’t tried yet, but I’m sure I can.”

“Why haven’t you?” Ressler inquired, scooting closer to us.

“Because of what I think is over there, Doctor.” I took a breath and plunged in. “I think that there is a hostile being over there that is forcing restrictions on the entire puterverse and has actively retarded the development of Earth’s society for at least three centuries.”

Had I turned into a giant tree sloth and started singing the “Star Spangled Banner” they wouldn’t have been more shocked. Jody especially, Ressler not as much. This might have been another one of those times kids like me enjoy, but the subject was far too serious to appreciate the moment. They both started to say something at once, but Jody won out.

“That’s impossible, Abigail!” she exclaimed. “A person who’s been alive for three centuries and has enough power to dictate the direction of an entire planet? Do you know how incredible that sounds?”

“Of course she does, Sergeant,” Ressler said thoughtfully. “It sounds just as incredible as a sixteen year old girl who has unlimited access to the puterverse and can create a living being out of impossible code.”

“But three hundred years!” Jody protested. “Medicine has never been able to extend life beyond one hundred and twenty years on Earth, let alone three hundred.”

“I didn’t say three hundred years, Jody,” I explained. “I said at least three hundred. And I didn’t say that it was a human doing this.”

We heard a roaring sound and Mike streaked into view. He was skimming along the softly undulating hills leading to the bank. About a half kilometer from us, he plunged into the ground, splashing green for a hundred meter radius all around him. Moments later, he surfaced again, next to me. He didn’t say anything, instead just lay back onto the grass beside me. He gave a brief nod and started contemplating the sky.

The doctor and Jody had lapsed into stunned silence. I lay back on the grass and looked up into the black, starless sky of the puterverse.

“The best place to start is at the beginning. But I haven’t found a beginning yet. Not for what’s on the other side. So you’ll have to bear with me while I start at my beginning, two years ago, and work in both directions.

“As you both know, I was born in the late twentieth century and lived for thirty-one years in my original body. At the time of my ‘death’, I was working for a sensitive laboratory and think tank that tried to anticipate upcoming problems and find solutions for them.” That was close enough to the truth for my purposes. “Because of that, when I was accidentally electrocuted through faulty security systems, I was in about the only place that could possibly work out a solution to save me. It was this agency that created, I believe, the original persona transference that eventually became known as riping. The next few centuries are--”

“A moment, please,” Doctor Ressler broke in, “I’m somewhat familiar with history of that period. I was aware of the United States’ role in the development of the riping process. But it had always been recorded that riping techniques weren’t introduced until the twenty-second century.”

“As I said, what they came up with eventually evolved into riping. And not all of our technologies were made available for public consumption. Anyway, I have no memories of my other personas, and I don’t recall anything until waking up in Dr. Barrett’s sickbay on November 11, 2676. Although I have had

occasion to experience a few of my ripes, I'll not go into detail now about them.

"Waking up as I did was a big change. It took weeks for the shock to wear off fully and for my mind to come to grips with the many differences I'd woken up to. After I had made--"

"Sorry, Abigail," Jody said apologetically. "Don't mean to interrupt, but what changes are you talking about? I mean, I know you went from being a thirty-one-year-old to a fourteen-year-old, but how hard was it really?"

Oops. I'd almost slipped. Jody was assuming I'd always been female, an assumption I'd been cultivating. Fortunately, she hadn't had any experience with Cues, so I knew I could worm out of my apparent overstatement.

"It's not just having seventeen years shaved off, Jody. I had to go through the same changes again, but with a different body. Not to mention the big time leap and change of scenery. In a minute's time--to me--I'd gone from a mature adult working with the government to a semi-helpless twerp tied up with rebels. It's a little more intense a change than, say, going to sleep in your bed and waking up on the floor. It takes time.

"But I had the time and adjusted. Corporal Lendler and Lieutenant Sanchez noticed my ease in the puterverse fairly quickly and I was given access immediately. It was during our first tour together in the puterverse that they showed me the Quantum river and the invisible far shore. They were curious about me and my past and even then asked what you did just now, Jody. Could I cross?"

"I wondered about their question. Why was it so important to cross? Had anyone ever crossed? Did they know what was over there, and just wanted to see if I knew?"

"Why you, Abigail?"

I looked at Ressler, but his blurred puterverse face didn't betray very much. I shrugged mentally and committed.

"Because Chris Young, the creator of the puterverse's webbing techniques, had lived at the same time I did. The truth is, he and I worked for the same company and I knew him quite well."

"Romantically?" Ressler inquired.

"Uh, no, Doctor. Professionally." Then he didn't know my full story. I had worried that TAU had informed him of my original sex. His question showed they obviously had not.

"They hoped that I, knowing Chris, knew his techniques to cross the river. It was an unfounded hope. Chris had developed the webbing, but this kind of advancement didn't take place until long after he'd died. Sure, knowing him and his style, it was a lot easier for me to get the hang of the place, but other than that, I had no special insights."

"Then you didn't get your trinary coding skill from your original persona?" Ressler seemed surprised.

"Excuse me, Doctor, but I am me. What you mean to say is my original lifetime."

"My apologies."

"That's okay. No, I didn't get them from the twenty-first century. The fact is I don't know where I got them. I do know that I need to be careful that whatever is over there doesn't find out I have UTC knowledge. I don't want to put too much importance on myself, but the being over there probably

doesn't know UTC, and would consider me a major threat if it discovered me. Fortunately, I have both NATech and the Resistance to work behind."

"NATech is in on this?" Jody whistled. In the puterverse, it sounded like a kazoo. "That makes sense. They're in on everything. Then they're the ones working with that thing?"

"Yes and no. They have a common goal--suppression of Earth's social and technical development. But the motives are different. NATech is looking for a captive consumer market for achieving profit. A stupid goal in my opinion. I don't know what the other being's motive is, but it's nothing so trite as a handful of cash.

"Getting back to my story. I spent the first few months with the Third figuring out the puterverse and getting used to my new body. To make matters worse for the former, I still hadn't realized my coding ability. At first, I had no idea of the scope of the puterverse. And with severely restricted access, it was a frustrating maze of walls and red doors. Still, I picked up the feel and flavor fairly quickly.

"The big break came after my first sharding episode. I was out of it for three weeks. I don't remember anything during that time. When the episode finally did end, I was a basket case for another week. Eventually, I was bored just lying around in bed and I accessed to do a little light netting. But it was so different. Where there had been massive black walls, they now looked fragile. I pushed against one, just to test it, and it crumbled to ion dust, giving me complete access to everything behind it. I had the ability to visualize and use unbound trinary code."

"Fascinating. Did you or Dr. Barrett ever determine whether your talent was triggered by the episode, a remnant from a previous shard, or a catalyst that activated a latent ability?"

"No, Doctor, we never could determine it, though not for lack of trying. I was ready for active duty after another week, but I stayed in sickbay for an additional week. I was as eager to find out how this came about, and how long it would last. Dr. Barrett didn't find anything. Not a hint, not a clue, not even a trace of how this had come about. The only thing we could determine was that it was permanent. And even that is hard to explain. If I could teach you UTC, you'd know that once you have the concept of UTC, it becomes a part of you.

"We eventually gave it up and I returned to active duty, transferring out of support and moving over to Research. Now that I had the keys to the kingdom, as it were, I really started to poke my nose into all the corners of the puterverse. I could go everywhere, so I did. Everywhere but across the Quantum.

"One of the biggest perks of accessing with UTC is there's no toll on my physical body. The primary reason for access levels is security--or at least that's what we're led to think. Another major reason is that the higher the level, the greater the toll on the user's real body. Accessing too high can literally suck the life out of you. But UTC freed me of that, so I was able to shed access level restrictions."

I had been staring out over the Quantum while talking, so I snuck a quick peek at my audience. Jody was staring up into the sky and Ressler was staring at me. I saw his eyes avert abruptly and I had a vague feeling. Intuition? I don't know. I returned to my story, but I was suddenly certain somehow that while Jody was hearing for the first time, Doctor Ressler had heard it all before.

"But the puterverse was too big. I had gotten very fast moving around, and became even faster after I fashioned my wings, but there was too much to see. I needed help. That's when I decided to write Mike, here." I nudged him playfully with my foot. Sparks jumped up and floated away, several fizzling out in the data river. He smiled at me, making me feel warm. Mike had heard this many times over, but always enjoyed the telling.

“Writing him was one of the most difficult things I’d ever done. Oh, the coding was pretty easy. After all, in the physical world, he’s just a bunch of zeros, ones and twos. Ouch!” Mike jabbed me in the ribs, so I slugged him. “Hey, it’s true! Lemme alone, jerk.”

“Why in the world did you write him to behave like that, Abigail?” Jody asked, looking at Mike with something between amusement and distaste.

“Hey, lady, don’t ever talk to me like I’m a program or something!”

“Why not?” Jody challenged. “That’s all you are.”

“That’s all I am? Ha! Not even close! How ‘bout I drop your shields and we’ll--”

“Knock it off, both of you. Mike’s right, Jody. He’s much more than a program. He’s the code he started as in the same way that we’re the infants we started as. In fact, that’s not an analogy, that’s hard fact. As the time has passed here in the puterverse, Mike’s code has matured quickly. It will even reach a point when he’ll stop being rude to my friends and quit making passes at me. Soon, I hope.” Mike sulked, but didn’t explode--figuratively or literally--so I continued.

“And I didn’t program his personality, that developed on its own, with me acting as a kind of--”

“Sweetheart.”

“--big sister. Mike’s the little brother I always wanted to kill. But instead of taking it out on him, we’ve been working together past eighteen months, laying out our own--umm--strategy for countering both NATech and whatever’s on the far side of the Quantum. I should be ready to cross in about four more months. By then the safeguards will be in place. I’m very interested in seeing what could be so important to a creature that it would try to corrupt and ruin an entire planet’s society.”

“No less interested than we are, Abigail,” Ressler said, nodding as though approving that I hadn’t lied. “As for what TAU’s been doing during that time, Jody, we’ve been monitoring all of Abigail’s activities for over two years. At least we thought we’d been monitoring them. It’s pretty obvious now that we’ve only been seeing what she’s wanted us to see. A humbling revelation.”

“Sorry, Doctor,” I said, smiling a little. “Both TAU and the Resistance have been very accommodating in helping me with resources and access. But I couldn’t risk revealing too much. I still can’t. I don’t have the fear of NATech that the 179th does, but that doesn’t mean I don’t respect their power and influence.”

I looked at Jody. “Speaking of the 179th, you’ve heard my story. Now you tell me yours. What’s with all this cloak and dagger? The 179th doesn’t strike me as the kind of unit that NATech would worry too much about, let alone infiltrate.”

“There’s a reason,” Jody said glumly.

“More to the point, that is the reason,” Ressler said cryptically. “The regiment is ineffective because NATech wishes it to be ineffective.” He stood up and absentmindedly brushed off his legs. “Why don’t we continue this conversation outside? I’m feeling a little disoriented and I don’t want to be too sore in the morning.” He looked back toward the way we had come. “And we still have a ways to go before we can safely end access.”

I stood up as well, helping Jody to her feet. She was probably in better physical shape than either the Doctor or I, but she didn’t have the experience in the puterverse that we did. She was looking a little ragged around the edges, literally. Her virtual form had started showing small tears near her hands and

feet, and the color was fading. She was in no danger, not as long as the shields were up, but there was no point in overstaying one's welcome.

"Good idea, Doctor. I could charge up both of you quick enough with another shot of UTC, but we're pretty much finished here. What you have to tell me can be said in the flesh, and Mike can check it easily enough. Even better, we can end access right now. Since this entire area is mine, one point of exit is as good as another. Before we do, though, I'd like a quick minute with Mike."

"Fine," said Dr. Ressler, although it didn't look very fine with him. "We'll wait outside"..."

"If it's all the same, Doctor, I'd like you and Jody to wait here. I'll only be a minute and besides, those shields won't allow you to exit anyway." I bit my tongue as I said it. I had to constantly remind myself to never volunteer information. Grow up, Abigail.

"All right," he agreed, which was not too necessary seeing as he had no control over the decision.

"Thanks." I lifted my arms up, and the shielding around Jody and Ressler fell away, joining together and forming a sound-proof box. They could move around and talk to each other, but they couldn't hear me. I turned my back to them and faced Mike. He had come to his feet and was looking at me intently, his emerald eyes bright.

"You don't trust him, do you, Abby?"

"Sure I do, Mike. I trust him to tell TAU absolutely everything he learned from me tonight. I only hope it wasn't too much."

Mike shook his head. "I don't think you did. I ran the entire conversation and movements through logistical semantics and there's a less than one percent chance that the good doctor picked up anything in addition to what you intended, and a ten percent chance he didn't get everything." He considered a moment. "Though that number maybe a little high. He's a pretty smart cookie for a flesh. No offense intended."

"Liar," I said bluntly. "All right. So we got our message across. Now can you tap into our conversation and follow what he has to say?" He started to look indignant, so I raised my hands and laughed. "Hey, no offense."

"Liar."

"Yeah, yeah. Well, I gotta go, Mike. I'll try to get back to you in the next couple of days. You take care of yourself, pervert. Oh! I've got Kiki working on some UTC routines for me, so leave her alone." I turned to leave, but Mike grabbed my hand.

"Hey, beautiful." His voice was so quiet, I snapped my head around to him. He suddenly sounded so mature and concerned. "You make sure you come back sooner than later, all right? I can't watch over you out there, and it"... it bugs me that I can't protect you."

I put a hand along his cheek and kissed him, spreading yellow along his green skin where my lips touched. "You're so sweet. I'll be careful. Another few months and we'll have time for a real adventure. Bye."

"Bye."

I turned back to Ressler and Jody and stepped into the box. There was a rumbling sound and the dense cybersky turned into a heavy black cloud that poured down onto us. Just as the first fringes touched us,

ending our access, I looked back at Mike. He was still standing there, arms straight by his side with a light blue flicker emanating from his chest. With surprise, I realized this was the first time I'd ever seen him scared.

Chapter Four

It was nearly two in the morning when I crawled back under my covers. The bed creaked a little, as though disapproving of my late night rendezvous. I rolled onto my back and stared into the emptiness above me. I was exhausted.

And worried. After exiting the puterverse two hours ago, we carried on our conversation, this time focusing on Jody and Ressler's problems. I had expected to find out that I would continue to encounter difficulty with the command structure of the 179th regiment and I was right. I had also expected to learn that ultimately it would have little to do with my overall plan to cross the Quantum River and face what was there. I was wrong. Or at least, I thought I was. The uncertainty more than anything worried me.

The 179th Regiment was a mess. And the problem wasn't just a commander who was a clueless ass and a surly A Company with an overblown opinion of itself. Ressler was convinced that NATech had been actively trying to disable the regiment. This pleasant bit of news had come while he was still treating Jody and himself for the effects of their rough ride with me in the puterverse.

* * * *

"Here, Sergeant, drink up." Jody took the cup from Ressler and drank up. The clear pink liquid gave off a pleasant fragrance that made me think of early morning. She stopped about halfway and began coughing. This was her third episode and like the other two, the violence of her coughing gave her a bloody nose.

"I am so sorry, Jody!" Guilt mixed with worry gave me an awful feeling. "I had no idea that UTC would have this effect on the two of you." Like Jody, Doctor Ressler had had several fits of twitching, coughing and bleeding. He had treated himself first to better give treatment to Jody, and his side effects had faded significantly, though his right arm and head still jerked on occasion. Jody continued drinking the pink liquid while the doctor sat by her as I sat on her left.

"It's not your fault, Abigail," Ressler assured me for the tenth time. "We brought you into our little spy story, and you were perfectly right in verifying my identity. I wouldn't have approved your trip unless I accompanied you, and you wouldn't have helped us without going. Besides," he smiled thinly, "what I saw makes how I feel all worthwhile." He laughed and stretched with a groan. "And I feel awful."

"Me, too. And me, too." Jody handed back the empty cup to Ressler and also smiled thinly. "I feel like a hov is parked on top of me and I'm still glad I went. I had never in my wildest dreams imagined how beautiful the puterverse was. Nor how alive." She looked at me with wonder. "I'm surprised you don't just step in there and never come out. Accessing doesn't bother you in the slightest, and it's a lot nicer world in there than it is out here. And safer, too, with the kind of power you have, Abigail."

"The temptation pops up from time to time," I admitted. "But even though I've never been affected by access, I still need to eat, drink, sleep," I gave a short giggle, "and use the bathroom. Besides, while the puterverse is exciting, it's only partly real." Ressler's eyebrows raised slightly and I hurried on. "Partly real in the sense that we are at least mentally present in it. It's out here that's real."

"And as for safety, well, that can also change. I've told you how in there. Now you tell me how out

here.”

Jody and Ressler exchanged quick looks. Ressler nodded and Jody began.

“I’ve been attached to the 179th as B Company sergeant for just over five months. I had transferred over from the Thirty-fifth, rather suddenly. My commanding officer had said it was a golden opportunity to move up. It was, too, on screen. I’d been heading up a half-strength Company D for a year, and prospects weren’t good. So I took it as an atta-girl commendation and went.

“It started off for me about the same as it did for you, Abigail. Fortunately, I arrived healthy and with the proper papers, so the Lieutenant didn’t give me the grilling he gave you, Abigail. But he wasn’t happy either, which seemed odd because all along I was coming here to lead Company B. It wasn’t until I’d been here for a very miserable three weeks that I discovered it was the doctor here who had arranged my transfer.”

I looked over at Ressler, expectantly.

“I’ve been here about six months, arriving shortly before Sergeant Eyer. TAU had been suspicious of this unit for two years, and we felt it was time”...“

“Suspicious in what way?” I inquired.

“Nothing that we could point to at first. Failed missions, canceled missions, barely achieved objectives. As you know, every unit has its moments when nothing seems to go right. But the 179th hadn’t had anything go right in twenty-eight months. Nothing catastrophic, but nothing good either.

“Then seven months ago, the regiment was ordered to make an attack on a convoy that was supplying the Douala garrison on the coast. TAU was certain that in addition to supplies they were transporting prisoners from the failed raid on Tripoli. We very much wanted our people back.” I nodded in understanding. I remembered that raid. We wanted to take part in it, but had been tied up knocking out the Hong Kong microsat launch facility. And the rescue effort was very believable; the Resistance always used every means at their disposal to rescue captured dogs. It was a matter of pride. TAU fully supported these actions, partly because they had no choice and mainly because they had all been dogs themselves once.

“The attack point was missed by Posen’s force. Faulty equipment we were told. Since the transports NATech was using had been damaged in the fighting in Tripoli, they were restricted to surface travel only. Ours weren’t, so a second attack point was scheduled. They missed that one, too, arriving thirty minutes late.

“In all, four separate attack plans were implemented over the two days it took the convoy to travel from Tripoli to Douala. Lieutenant Posen was unable to make any of them. By this time, TAU wanted to relieve him of command.

“Then, unexpectedly, came news of a fifth attack, one implemented by Posen himself, literally underneath the sonic cannons of the Douala garrison. The 179th put up a good fight and Posen showed a flash of brilliance in its execution. They had attacked too close for the cannon to be used—one shot and not only would the 179th be wiped out, the garrison shields would have been ruined and the foundations badly ruptured. Posen took a calculated risk. He reasoned that NATech would be willing to ruin their defenses temporarily in exchange for destroying one of our regiments, so he kept his B Company back in reserve, out of range of sonics, but in sight of the garrison. If NATech breached their shields to destroy A Company, B Company would swarm in. The garrison has heavy guns on the outside, but is believed to be poorly protected inside. They didn’t fire, so apparently we’re right. Then, as an escape route, he took

a path along the shielding perimeter, accelerating to full speed. Once he had done that, he simply scattered his force out across the desert, giving the guns nothing but fast moving targets that quickly sped out of range.

“So the attack was successful. The convoy was badly mauled, and some supplies were taken. TAU was almost ready to forgive and forget.”

“And the prisoners?” I asked quietly, captivated by Ressler’s story.

“Yes. The prisoners. That’s why I said almost. Unknown to Lieutenant Posen, TAU had acquired a manifest of the convoy prior to its departure. Included in the shipments was four tons of frozen nitrogen, destined for the Douala backup data core. Following standard NATech procedure, that hov traveled at the front of the convoy. The prisoners were being transported in vehicles located in the middle of the convoy. None were rescued, none were killed. And today that nitrogen is being used by the data core in this facility. Posen never reported the nitrogen.”

He paused to let that soak in. It didn’t take long. The only way that Posen could pull off a raid underneath the garrison defenses would be to hit the rear of the convoy, then work his way to the front. To reach the frozen nitrogen, he’d have to first reach the prisoners. If there had been stiff resistance by NATech, it was just possible that he’d be forced to abort the rescue. But that would also mean he’d be unable to advance further to capture the nitrogen. Not only would he have an unwieldy vehicle to turn around, he’d also have to fight his way back through the same firefight that had supposedly prevented him from rescuing the prisoners in the first place.

Ressler’s comment on there being no prisoner fatalities was not wasted on me, either. Intense fighting is the norm during NATech/Resistance battles. The only thing in the minds of the soldiers on both sides is a numbing desperation and mad fury to kill everything in sight as quickly as possible. Mercifully, such battles were of a small scale and very brief, some lasting only two or three minutes. Sadly, any unarmed personnel caught in the middle, such as prisoners, were helpless laser fodder. Riding in thinly shielded prisoner transports, and dressed only in fatigues and without armor, this group suffered the greatest number of casualties. That there were no prisoners killed in the fight meant that the fight had taken place elsewhere.

“So Lieutenant Posen had never intended to rescue the prisoners,” I voiced my conclusion in disbelief.

“Lieutenant Posen never intended to rescue the prisoners,” Jody repeated, barely keeping her emotion in check. “That little jerk with his shiny boots only wanted the goddammed nitrogen! And he got it, too, with--”

“That’s enough, Sergeant,” Ressler broke in with a firm voice.

She broke off and stared at him a moment, then nodded and sat back down.

“But as bad as this raid was, it doesn’t sound like it would merit a covert and long-term investigation. From what you’ve told me,” I prompted quietly.

“No, it didn’t. As you’ve probably guessed from the details of the fight, TAU had already started looking into the 179th Nothing out of the ordinary, really. Whenever a unit shows signs of losing its edge, we try to rotate personnel in with the recruits.” He said it as though spying on your own people was the most natural thing in the world. “Our person in the 179th was only looking for irregularities and inefficiencies that could be addressed through normal channels. We didn’t expect anything criminal.

“What we got was totally unexpected. The convoy carried a fighting compliment of ninety Company A

musters 148, with 145 effectives on the day of the raid. The fighting, as reported by our agent, who was in B Company, was intense, lasting nearly four minutes. And although the escape route was well chosen, the sonic guns should have scored at least two hits, especially on the slower nitrogen transport. To be blunt: Despite the excellent execution of the raid, there should have been some casualties. There were exactly three. Through careful monitoring of the Douala transmissions and using other, classified, means, TAU was able to estimate NATEch casualties at five.”

* * * *

I heard a creaking from a bunk to my right and turned my head. In the dim light, I could see it was the athletic blond woman who had smiled at me earlier today. She was getting up to undoubtedly make a midnight trip to the ladies room. I was tempted to whisper to her as she passed, just to say hi, but didn’t. I was too tired. Instead, I turned over to stare at the wall, hoping it would help me think better than staring at the ceiling.

* * * *

“After the raid,” Ressler continued, “TAU had all they needed to open up a covert investigation. Clearly, Posen and NATEch were in cahoots. Whether it was the Douala garrison taking advantage of a weak Resistance officer or if it was an official NATEch operation working with a traitor remained to be discovered. This kind of investigation was beyond the scope of TAU’s inside man, so I was introduced. One of the casualties had been the regimental doctor, so he was transferred out to recover from his wounds and I was transferred in.”

Ressler stood up and refilled his and Jody’s cup with the clear pink liquid. A kind of quick-acting nutrient, the fluid greatly diminished the effects of puterverse travel. Jody took it gratefully and sipped it. Again I smelled a morning freshness fill the sickbay Ressler took a swallow out of his cup and continued.

“Within days of arriving, it became obvious that A Company was as rotten as Posen. They had to be, or there would have been a lot more NATEch casualties during the fight. I needed help, but B Company was useless. In order to keep full control over the 179th, yet still allow for the normal movement of personnel in and out of the unit to allay TAU suspicions, Posen kept B Company undertrained but honest.

“Seeing that B Company was clean but weak, I requested TAU to send me a solid replacement sergeant. Since Posen had an aversion to women serving in his unit, I made an unusual condition and specifically asked for a female non-com. Three days later--”

“An aversion to women?” I interrupted. “Isn’t that a bit strong? I’ll admit that I’ve noticed some tension here, but”... ow!“ Jody smacked me on the back of the head.

“Geez, you really are a teenager, aren’t you? Don’t interrupt all the time. The doc’s right, Abigail. Hadn’t you noticed that A Company is a boys only club?”

I hadn’t noticed. It had never occurred to me to notice. Sexual discrimination still existed, sure. It always would as long as there were physical differences between men and women and the world was populated by sinful people. But it had faded quite a bit from the time when Mama Wyeth’s little girl was a little boy, and I’d missed it entirely. Besides, I was too worried about discrimination against me because I was a Cue to notice it might exist because I was a woman.

“Thank you, Jody. I’ve been wanting smack her myself for about three days.” Ressler’s quick smile told me he was only kidding--mostly. I didn’t blame them; I did have a mouth on me. I smiled and rubbed the back of my head.

“Sorry. I get caught up sometimes. So you needed a strong right arm to help you out, huh? Why didn’t you call for one of your buddies from TAU?”

“Because it could be checked on. We’re able to get into units without too much difficulty since we’re normally injury or transfer replacements. Jody wasn’t either. The sergeant here was competent, healthy and still had four years to serve.”

“So where did you bury him?”

“Eh?” Ressler seemed startled. “That’s pretty cynical, young lady. And wrong. We didn’t bury him. We messed up his service records and requested his presence at our Bern processing center. Once there, he transferred into TAU, effectively creating a hole that no one would think we’d fill with one of our own. And we didn’t.”

“So my atta-girl promotion was mostly a sham,” Jody picked up with a touch of anger. “Even worse, I stepped from a crack unit into a pile of backstabbing traitors who spent ninety percent of their time doing nothing and ten percent trying to do NATEch’s bidding. I hated it.” She finished her drink and slammed the metal cup onto the table. “Nobody tried to hide anything. They put all their faith in Company A, tossed Company B the scraps, and didn’t even have a Company C.” She laughed with derision. “Scratch that. They did have a Company C; it was a Company B they didn’t have. I was appalled at the lack of training and discipline in my people, but even more appalled when I found out that I wasn’t even allowed to get them into shape. Company A and Sergeant Olecki handle that.” She grinned. “At least until today. Not to change the subject, but I loved the way you handled him today, Abigail. The look on his face when he realized he’d been caught with his legs open by a girl!”

I flushed and smiled and she laughed. Ressler cleared his throat.

“Yes. Well, I heard about it and I’m glad that Company B will finally get some proper training. Perhaps Olecki will step down and Jody can start doing her job.”

“Uh-huh. And maybe you’ll hit the lottery,” I added.

He looked at me funny, but went on. “In any event, when Jody showed up, I had my ally. And a good one, too. I had decided to wait about a month to let her size up the unit herself. After that, I’d approach her and begin testing the waters about making her an active partner.

“Imagine my surprise when she approached me, worried about the regiment’s demeanor. That’s when I knew I’d chosen right.”

“Okay, that’s great. Wonderful. All the spies are happy. But what’s going on now? What are your plans and where do I fit in?”

“To be honest, Abigail, we didn’t have any plans,” Jody confessed. “It wasn’t until after you showed up and we found out a few things about you that we thought we really had a chance to do anything other than spy on this outfit. Now with your talent in the puterverse to help, we should be able to provide some concrete proof, maybe even take action.”

I looked at her silently for a moment. She was way over her depth in this. That a TAU agent wouldn’t have a plan of action would be like a dog stepping into a free-for-all with an empty slug gun. Yet Jody honestly believed him. I glanced over at Ressler.

Oh, he knew I wasn’t falling for it! He had Jody bamboozled, but not me. How I hated this! I was more than half tempted to blurt out something to tip his hand, whatever it was. I would have paid real money to

see the look on his face when I casually leaned over to Jody and said, “You understand you’re being played the sucker here, right? That Ressler only wants to use you as either a diversion from himself or to deflect the blow when he tells Posen to his face that the 179th is the proof that NAtch is using the Resistance to perpetuate this endless war. So, would you like to borrow my knife?” And for the briefest moment, I did see the look on his face. He saw my eyes and knew for certain he’d overestimated me. He was certain the immaturity and curiosity in me would overpower the full-grown soldier in me and I’d wreck his precious TAU plans. And I came this close to doing it.

But I didn’t. Ressler had won my conditional trust and despite my friendship to Jody, I would follow the rules and keep my trap shut. Maybe it was because of my friendship with Jody. She’d had enough tossing around with this intrigue and hidden agenda and dirty spy fighting. Jody was a fist and blaster type of dog, and would much rather approach things straight on. Why ruin her trust in TAU? Why tell her that the war she was fighting was to the benefit of NAtch? It would gain nothing, and ruin her trust in the Resistance. I decided I’d corner Ressler later and get the gory details.

“Well, you and doc have my whole support, Jody.” I got up and stretched, unable to stifle the yawn that came. “Of course, right now my whole support is committed to keeping me standing, and failing quickly. I have got to get some sleep.”

Ressler came to his feet quickly, partly out of concern for me, his patient, and partly out of relief that I’d held my tongue. His small smile was just what I needed to make me feel a little relief myself.

“I’m very sorry, Abigail. Of course, you should turn in. You too, Jody. We’re all pretty worn out. There’s not a whole lot we can do tonight anyway. Why don’t you stop by tomorrow before your shift and I’ll give you a once over.” Which meant I’d find out what I needed tomorrow.

We all said our goodnights. Jody and I walked down the dark corridor to the barracks.

“What do you think of him?” she asked in a quiet voice.

“Good question. Part of me is glad he’s TAU. Another part just wishes he was just a doctor. My life is complicated enough without getting involved in these kind of shenanigans.”

She chuckled softly. “Shenanigans? I’ve never heard that word before. What does it mean?”

“Skullduggery. Tom foolery. Messing around.”

“You mean like bugging? Or Adospinning?” I saw the gleam of her smile.

“Goodnight, Jody.”

She laughed. “Goodnight, Abigail. By the way, I’m glad Doctor Ressler is here, this stuff is way out of my league. I’m even gladder you’re here. You seem between the two of us, and I think I’ll be able to cope a little more now.” She gave me a quick hug then walked off to her quarters, leaving me in front of the barracks.

* * * *

Now, lying in my bed, feeling sleep finally creeping over me, I gave a small thought to Jody’s question. What did I think of Doctor Ressler?

When I’d said I had mixed emotions, I wasn’t kidding. His being who he is was going to help out a lot. With all puterverse access denied to me, he was my only link to Mike and Kiki. Without access, it was impossible to move forward with my plan. But having that access meant sacrificing some of my freedom.

I'd known TAU had been keeping track of my work from the beginning. They'd planned to use my rescue as a propaganda coup against NAtch. After all, I had been one of their first senior officers and also their first guinea pig in ripping. Never mind that the Resistance also managed to change my dance card; it was still propaganda fodder and a terrific moral victory for the dogs who fought to rescue us.

Those plans changed abruptly when it became apparent that I had real use in this century. My skills with the puterverse were strong to begin with, but after my first sharding episode, they increased to a fantastic height, and my value to the Resistance with them. I knew, had been told, that the Resistance had never planned on winning this war outright. They knew they couldn't. But they could win it by not losing, and that had been their goal from the outset--to wear NAtch Supreme down to the point that they would lose their grip on our planet and normal relationships between business and government could return.

That changed with me. They now thought it might be possible for me to actually eliminate NAtch. And they were right, that was my goal. Of course, if TAU knew what I knew about NAtch Supreme, they'd probably do everything they could to stop me.

I had researched the problem thoroughly, with Mike doing millions of scenarios and billions of simulations. There was only one solution. It would destroy NAtch, but the price would be high. Very high.

How had I my thinking arrived here? Oh yeah. Jody had asked me what I thought of Ressler being a TAU agent. Boy, talk about drifting tangents. My thoughts had reached this point when sleep caught up to me. I stretched once, then curled around my pillow. I'd think about Ressler tomorrow.

* * * *

Doctor Scott Ressler was having no difficulty keeping his thoughts focused. And just as Abigail had been thinking about him, so he was putting his thoughts toward her. The similarity went further. He didn't know exactly what to think of this youth with the killer instinct, quick mind and most disturbing self-confidence. She seemed so much the chaotic, innocent young child-woman one moment, so much the cool, decisive and ruthless grown woman the next.

The ordeal in the puterverse had ravaged his insides--he was certain there had been some minor internal bleeding. But while it tired him physically it had charged him mentally. He'd known of Abigail for some time, though just through cursory references during strategic meetings at TAU. She was so very different from what he'd pictured. And her abilities in the puterverse went far beyond anything he'd prepared for. When he'd first been instructed by TAU three days previously to make contact with her, they had provided what information about her they felt he needed. As always, it was adequate, but he'd wished he'd gotten more. Now he knew more than TAU did.

Unlimited level! There had been excitement and hope when constant analysis of Abigail's movements in the puterverse had indicated she'd broken level thirty-five. No one on the planet was known to have ever accessed that level. No one was known to have the stamina to survive at level thirty-five, let alone function in it. And now, just hours before, this slip of a girl had casually mentioned that she'd disposed of any restricted access as too confining. With the same breath, she'd destroyed the known fact that level sixty-four was the highest theoretical access; access, it seemed, was based on prime numbers and there were three additional levels above sixty-four. And finally, with a certainty that only a teenager could have, she made it sound so obvious that was the real structure of puterverse coding, and that even level sixty-seven was behind her, because she had unlocked the secret of unbound trinary code.

His thoughts still racing, he looked down at his hands. They were trembling. They hadn't trembled like this since the night Diane was "... He took a deep, controlled breath to calm himself, then felt a lance in

his lower ribs. He must have pulled a muscle. He massaged the area, but when he couldn't rub the pain away, he determined there must still be a little internal bleeding. He rose and prepared another dose of pink hemolixer and charged the closure sounder. He needed to make his report very soon, and hoped his strength held out. He would forgo his normal level and access at a much lower 11, which was the minimum level that would reach TAU Intelligence.

* * * *

"Thank you for your report, Major. We will begin analyzing it immediately." The middle of the three figures spoke with a fatherly tone, concerned as much for Ressler as for the incredible data and information he had provided.

"I have a couple of things I'd like to end my report with, if you don't mind, sir." To keep the regimental security snoopers from spotting Ressler's unauthorized transmission, it was beamed on an extremely low power carrier. Consequently, the image of Ressler was blurry and sparked occasionally from interference.

"By all means. You know we very much respect your observations, Scott."

"Thank you." The faded image looked down for a moment, as if still forming the best way to begin. Apparently finding it, he lifted his eyes boldly to the three cloaked and hooded figures.

"What Sergeant Eyer and I saw tonight was unbelievable. The vast openness and beauty of the puterverse can't even be imagined! I'll wager a credit or two it probably can't even be recorded. Private Wyeth has accomplished something that until tonight was supposed to be impossible. It's clear that she's only been showing us what she wants us to see. While I would normally be extremely suspicious of being so easily manipulated, I have to admit to a certain confidence I have in her abilities and motives."

He looked down again, then continued. "This goes against all training and past experience, sir, but"... well"... I have faith in her. Maybe it's because of her raw power in the puterverse. Maybe it's the sheer span of her life, the fact that she's been involved from the very beginning. Maybe it's her own self-confidence and ability inside and outside the puterverse. Maybe it's a combination of these things.

"But I don't think it is. I think it was the look on her face when we were in the puterverse, in 'her world', as she called it. It was a look of constant joy. Even when our conversation took darker turns, I could still see that joy in her eyes. Sergeant Eyer saw it, too. Abigail Wyeth has a shimmer of hope and resolution in her that turns into happiness when it comes out. I'm sorry to be so maudlin, sir, and I know this is completely unprovable and borders on naive. But I do have faith in her. It would be my counsel to continue monitoring her as closely as we can, and stand by to assist at a moment's notice. That is my report. Goodnight." His image sparked and flickered and faded.

The three figures were silent, each staring into the space where Ressler's image had been. A fourth figure passed through a ghost wall and entered the room. Walking to the nearest person, she handed over a tabinal and quietly exited. After a moment, the middle figure stirred.

"So, Melissa. What is the accuracy of Scott's report?"

Melissa pulled back the hood that covered her face from agents. All three wore identical clothing during reporting sessions to completely disguise their identity from visual recordings and analysis, just as voice replicas disguised the audio portion of the transmissions.

"He was absolutely right in at least one way, Kurt." She tapped the screen of the tabinal. "Almost nothing was imaged. There are exactly five recordable seconds of this evening's trip. From the moment they first

accessed until the shielding clamped around them. After that, nothing.”

“And for those five seconds?”

She shook her head slightly. “Almost nothing. A brightness that reaches ninety-nine percent screen output, a vague image of Ressler’s arms and hands as he falls to the ground, and several steady spates of blood.”

“Audio?”

In answer, Melissa lifted up the tabinal and tapped it. A harsh crackling came from it, with partially broken words.

“Mi...! . ne.. a co”... o“... xes”... my .ues“... ry!” Another moment of hissing and spitting, and the tabinal became silent.

“Wait.” The third person raised a hand. “Again, please. From the beginning. What was that sound just before the words?”

Melissa tapped the unit again and adjusted the controls. All sound except interference was lost, so she reset the tabinal and tried again. This time, the interference was greatly reduced, and although the words were still garbled, they distinctly heard the first sound.

It was the boundless, joyful laugh of a young woman.

The third person nodded. “Yes, I understand what Scott meant.” He paused, then came to a decision. “I say we accept Major Ressler’s counsel and continue our present course of polite monitoring.”

“But Thomas, do you think that’s wise?” Melissa objected mildly. “We’ve only now found out that our monitoring is easily restricted by Private Wyeth. Indeed, for all we know, she may be fabricating most of our transmissions, letting us see only what she wants us to see.”

“You could very well be right, Melissa. In fact, let’s assume that for the moment. In that case, she’s allowing us to receive this report from Major Ressler, she allowing us to see much of the make-up of the puterverse from an unbound trinary perspective, she’s allowing us--”

“But even these things can be fabricated, Thomas,” Kurt countered.

Thomas sighed. “Fine. Let’s say they are manipulated. For what gain? If she has that much ability, that much control, I should think Abigail could keep us from ever finding out about Mike and unlimited access and a deep-seated grudge against NATech.

“I don’t think that’s so. Rachel and I had her at our home only a month ago, and I was able to see her in the flesh, to hear her opinions, to listen to her enthusiasm. Most of all, I heard her longing to make things right.” He paused. “I believe that she holds herself partially responsible for NATech’s actions.”

“What?” Kurt was bemused. “Thomas, you’ve never told us this. Why not?”

“Because I could never be sure, Kurt. Not until tonight, when I heard Scott’s report. Susan Lendler, you will remember, was a corporal in the Third and Abigail’s best friend. They had just arrived that evening, and Abigail was already in bed. Rachel, Susan and I were talking when Susan made an odd comment. We were marveling over Abigail’s past when talk drifted to the Pisces Project. We had already determined that Abigail, as John Wyeth, had created a viable way of adapting the human respiratory system to be amphibious. With this new ability, mankind could begin establishing an underwater society

Since Susan was unaware of the level of our involvement, I feigned surprise. But I was very much surprised when we spoke about Pisces' destruction and Susan said, 'Abigail was devastated when she found out. I have an idea that's one of the things she holds NATech accountable for.'"

"She holds NATech accountable for Pisces' destruction?" Melissa said with surprise. "Why? The Rock hit it in 2374, the second year of the first Terran/Martian conflict. NATech didn't rise to power until after the Wars."

"Did it? That's what I had always thought, too. Abigail doesn't think so. You heard Scott's report. That thing on the other side of the Quantum has been influencing our society for at least three hundred years. And the Wars were three hundred years ago. Abigail thinks that NATech is in league with that force, may even be that force. She probably thinks that NATech has been manipulating us far longer than three centuries. If that's so, I agree with Scott; we must continue our hands-off approach."

"I don't know what to think," Kurt said frankly. "I'm sixty-one years old and have been on the Council now for twenty-seven years. I had always considered myself a competent servant of the Resistance, and a fairly intelligent person. But this is quickly getting beyond me. We've been privy to an unbelievable picture of the puterverse, and learned that most of what we thought we knew is only the top layer of something we're only beginning to comprehend. Yet this young girl bounces around without effort. She even has the energy to enjoy it!"

"So you're saying"...?" Melissa prompted.

Kurt sighed heavily. "I'm saying that I agree with Thomas. We can't fool ourselves and think we can control her or the what she's fighting. We can't even be sure what we're seeing is real. How do you cope with that? Let's continue our surveillance. How about you, Melissa? What are your thoughts?"

"My thoughts? They're just as jumbled as yours, Kurt. It's very difficult to accept that we're being led around by the very person we've been trying to lead. Just rewards, I suppose. On the one hand, she's a young girl, perhaps not completely in control of herself. On the other hand, she's one of NATech's first and brightest, the person who created the Pisces people. If I had to decide on my thoughts, I couldn't.

"My feelings, though, that's very different. I heard that laugh. It's been a long time since I've heard such unbounding joy. To be so young and confident again! Let's put faith in that confidence and joy. Abigail isn't telling us everything, but I think that single moment of happiness told me enough."

* * * *

Begin pseudo trinary code programming: Statement: John Wyeth is alive. Probability of statement accuracy is 1 occurrence per 56,812 scenarios. Statement: John Wyeth persona is a threat to This Unit. Probability of statement accuracy is estimated 1 occurrence per 35,000,000,000,000 scenarios. Reassessing probabilities.

[Thread 1: Retrieving known information on John Wyeth persona. Retrieved. Previously recorded system personas of John Wyeth: initial system persona generated by Christopher Balen Young on May 14, 2026. Tangent 1

[begin tangent: Initial system persona. Organic persona John Wyeth terminated as scheduled, March 26, 2026. Organic persona resided in NATech tertiary processing unit 17 Gamma for 523 hours. Transferred to secondary processing unit 8 Beta for programming and warehousing of existing data concerning Pisces project. Modified system persona transferred to NATech primary unit 6 Alpha 4,493 hours after initial download. Persona focused on Pisces project for duration of existence. Persona archived. Probability of survival: 1128 per 1139 scenarios. Probability of threat to This Unit: 0

occurrences per infinite scenarios. end tangent.]

processed. Recorded as terminated and covertly archived February 3, 2045. System persona reprogrammed and merged covertly as primary net access alpha .311 on August 9, 2051. Tangent 2

[begin tangent: System persona primary net access alpha .311. Archived system persona prepared and installed into global net. Persona active for 1,748,645 hours Persona processed 15,737,916,152 routines. Persona focused on compliance of requests of global population, non-security issues, and compliance of This Unit's requests, all issues. System persona closed and transferred. Probability of survival: 989 per 1015 scenarios. Probability of threat to This Unit: 1 occurrence per 6,694,000,000,000 scenarios. Conclusion: Risk acceptable. end tangent.]

processed. System persona reprogrammed and transferred to Orbital Station Gamma January 28, 2251. Tangent 3

[begin tangent: System persona Orbital Station Gamma. Modified system persona introduced to prime procedural core. Persona utilized as orbital station operational system for 204,042 hours. System persona processed 85,901,552,000,006 routines. System persona focused on all navigational, repair and flight control requests for station personnel, and This Unit's classified requests. System persona terminated and transferred. Probability of survival: 713 per 882 scenarios. Probability of threat to This Unit: 1 per 4,840,000,000,000 scenarios. Conclusion: Risk acceptable. end tangent.]

processed. System persona reprogrammed and integrated into manufactured biological unit May 11, 2274. Biological unit subjected to compulsive system transfer December 4, 2315. Tangent 4

[begin tangent: System persona manufactured biological unit. Persona active for unknown hours; estimated at 364,200 hours. Tangent 4.1

[begin tangent: Flesh unit: Female human. Fifteen years of age at time of integration. No defects reported during development. Unit reproductive systems rendered inoperative during fifteenth year of growth prior to system persona integration. No relevant information in this inquiry. end tangent.]

processed Processed routines: unknown. No estimate available. Persona transferred into biological unit at Paris biological manufacturing plant at request of This Unit. Tangent 4.2

[begin tangent: System persona designated Miss DeChant. Unit programmed with high morals, modest intelligence, subdued personality capable of long servitude. Reproductive desires deactivated during 15th year of growth. Unit extremely efficient performing domestic duties. Unit assigned to Philip LeClaire for purposes of long-term study of introducing theoretical pseudo trinary code into a willing subject for purposes of future harvest by This Unit. Tangent 4.2.1

[begin tangent: Philip LeClaire: Human unit with advanced skills in cognitive theory and application. Considered gifted in fields of sonics and mental collaboration. Scanning relative information. Scanning complete. Relevant information: Class of '51. Keyed memory encapsulation: A procedure by which coded knowledge can be compressed to a ratio of 6,500,000,000 to 1, thus achieving maximum synapse efficiency which in turn allowed for a perpetuating development of additional nerve ending and increased synaptic output within a specific portion of a biological processing unit. Because of the organic nature of KME, the procedure is impossible to duplicate using non-organic material. The only known subject to which LeClaire applied his theories was his housekeeper Miss DeChant shortly before they were terminated. Tangent 4.2.1.1

[begin tangent: Historical reference 845889.18399: Termination of Philip LeClaire and system persona Miss DeChant, December 4, 2315, 10:37 PM, Fountainebleau, Paris Anti-terrorist forces invade the

LeClaire chateau under full belligerent status. Report indicates credit of LeClaire's termination awarded to Private Nicole Ferrier. Report indicates termination of Miss DeChant, no credit awarded. Philip LeClaire's body damaged beyond usefulness. Miss DeChant's body, located in her bed, was relatively undamaged and was confiscated for examination. Tangent 4.2.1.1.1

[begin tangent: System persona was archived and the biological unit was surrendered to university resources for further study. Study retrieved. No additional information gathered. end tangent.]

processed. Conclusion: No relevance to calculating threat to This Unit. end tangent.]

processed Biological vivisection of the subject was conducted. An enhanced synaptic capsule was located and analyzed. Analysis determined that preliminary keyed encapsulation layout had begun but was incomplete. Parallel mnemonic inlays had not been implemented, making further investigation useless. Tangent 4.2.1.2

[begin tangent: Reanalysis of study. Introducing assumption of failure of initial study. Analysis complete. Keyed encapsulation layout had been completed. Parallel mnemonic inlays had been implemented at sub-neuron level. Assumption: KME is transferable during system persona reprogramming. Speculation: Parallel mnemonic inlays have continued development for minimum 4,000,000 hours. Possible conclusion: Inlay routine has reached full potential. Assumption: Inlay routine is hostile to continuation of This Unit's existence. Probability of threat to This Unit: Uncertain but present. end tangent.]

processed. Assumption: Philip LeClaire succeeded in implementation of This Unit's requested routine without This Unit's knowledge. Conclusion: Philip LeClaire had resolved to hide successful implementation from This Unit to avoid being considered a threat to This Unit. Conclusion: Probability of system persona being a threat to This Unit is increased. Estimated probability is 1 occurrence per 84,108 scenarios. end tangent.]

processed Assumption: Philip LeClaire had reason to become hostile to This Unit after 48 years' service. Speculation One: Philip LeClaire gained unauthorized knowledge of This Unit's purpose. Speculation Two: Implementation of KME failed expectations. Speculation Three: Implementation of KME exceeded expectations. Speculation Two discarded as irrelevant to This Unit. Speculation One discarded as concluded relevancy outside of This Unit's control. Speculation Three accepted as greatest threat to This Unit. Probability of threat to This Unit: 1 per 198. end tangent.]

processed Persona modified by This Unit at request of Philip LeClaire, NATech associate number 99145. Conclusion: Philip LeClaire succeeded in KME and subverted the results to threaten This Unit. Results of KME experimentation were beyond expectations of creating biological unit capable of pseudo trinary code. Conclusion: KME with matured parallel mnemonic inlays are capable of bound trinary code in 1000 per 1000 scenarios. Units capable of unbound trinary code do not occur. System persona terminated and archived. Probability of threat to This Unit: 7 per 100 scenarios. end tangent.]

processed. System persona reprogrammed and transferred to PlaNet Defense core January 16, 2316, processing terminated. System persona inaccessible to This Unit until January 8, 2433. System persona recorded as destroyed January 8, 2433. Destruction verified. Tangent 5

[begin tangent: Internal Reference 35509.93295.2943: Termination of organic persona John Wyeth January 8, 2433. Termination completed by Technician's Assistant First Class Greg Hearn. Tangent 5.1

[begin tangent: Internal Reference 35509.83274.9021: Permanent records of TAFC Greg Hearn. Served February 13, 2410 to October 9, 2433. Executed for treason. Tangent 5.1.1

[begin tangent: Trial and Execution of TAFC Greg Hearn. Convicted of record falsification and

treasonous delivery of archived system personas to illegal corporations. Indication of over 20 years' activity. Executed 32 minutes after conviction. Execution verified. end tangent.]

processed Probability of falsification of destruction of organic persona John Wyeth: 99 occurrences per 100 scenarios. end tangent]

processed. Conclusion: Organic persona John Wyeth with attached system persona Miss DeChant was not terminated. end tangent.]

processed Destruction not verified. Conclusion, Thread One: John Wyeth is alive with capability of bound trinary code. Conclusion, Thread One: John Wyeth is hostile to This Unit. Probability of threat to This Unit: 79 occurrences per 93 scenarios. end thread.]

[Thread 2: Implementing history reconstruction on organic persona John Wyeth after January 8, 2433. Scanning Lendler report for previously unknown system personas. Scanned. Probability of system persona integrated into biological unit in 2433. Tangent 1

[begin tangent: System persona transfer into biological unit in 2433. Tangent 1.1

[begin tangent: 155 system persona transfers conducted from January 1, 2433 until December 31, 2433. Verifying all transfers. Completed. 152 verified. Assessing probability of 3 unverified transfers as being organic persona John Wyeth. Tangent 1.1.1

[begin tangent: Subject: System persona transferred into framed processing unit January 1, 2433. Used by Lloyd Devlin for opium trade calculations. Lloyd Devlin was executed and all possessions destroyed January 6, 2433, 41 hours before scheduled termination of archived PlaNet Defense core. end tangent.]

processed. Tangent 1.1.2

[begin tangent: Subject: System persona integrated into manufactured biological unit May 2, 2469. Flesh unit. Male human. 17 years at time of integration. Programmed as Lunar Class Pleasure Unit to provide sexual stimulation and satisfaction to a wide variety of partners. No defects reported during development. Unit reproductive system rendered sterile shortly before persona integration. Unit discovered crushed beneath wall February 11, 2437. Autopsy impossible due to extreme drug overdose and deterioration of corpse. Cause of death unknown, but unit's organic processing unit was missing 83 percent of estimated mass. end tangent.]

processed. Tangent 1.1.2

[begin tangent: Subject: System persona integrated into manufactured biological unit May 3, 2433. Flesh unit. Female human. 14 years at time of integration. Programmed as outlawed Shiva Class Pleasure Unit to provide sexual stimulation and satisfaction to a wide variety of partners through submission to sexual and/or violent acts. No defects reported during development. Unit reproductive system rendered sterile shortly before integration. Unit mental capacities severely truncated and modifications to organic processing unit rendered system persona unable to distinguish between acts of violence and pleasure. Unit psychic imprints enhanced to cause arousal and agitation in unit's sexual partner. Unit killed June 12, 2442. Autopsy determined cause of death to be strangulation. Unit also had massive blood loss due to 32 lacerations, punctures and knife wounds. Body was in poor physical condition due to malnutrition and extensive physical damage. System persona recorded as being archived. Conclusion: This biological unit contained organic persona of John Wyeth. Conclusion: Persona was successfully archived June 12, 2442. end tangent.]

processed Female Shiva Class Pleasure Unit contained organic persona of John Wyeth. end tangent.]

processed. John Wyeth organic persona continued. Observation: Triggering of this system persona to shard with organic persona will cause physical debilitation and mental incapacitation in 126 occurrences of 126 scenarios. end tangent.]

processed. Probability of organic persona of John Wyeth transfer into hypership engineering core June 16, 2442. Tangent 2

[begin tangent: System persona transferred into hypership Daybreaker June 16, 2442. Daybreaker left planetary system March 17, 2443. There have been no reported sightings of the Daybreaker since March 24, 2443. Tangent 2.1

[begin tangent: Hypership Daybreaker requested final approval to enter Orion hyperidor. Approval granted, ship entered hyperidor. end tangent.]

processed Conclusion: Based upon Thread Statement, probability of organic persona of John Wyeth being transferred to hypership Daybreaker does not exist. end tangent.]

processed. Probability of organic persona of John Wyeth transfer into Two Rivers Apartments in Vancouver, Lesser Canada, June 18, 2442. Tangent 3

[begin tangent: System persona transferred into Two Rivers Apartments maintenance and security systems. Apartment complex still in existence. Accessing security systems records. Accessed. Organic persona of John Wyeth operated as Two Rivers Apartments system persona for 664,680 hours, from June 18, 2442 April 16, 2518. System output and utilization irrelevant. end tangent.].

processed. Probability of organic persona of John Wyeth transfer into power plant three at Sydney Fusion Station May 11, 2518. Tangent 4

[begin tangent: System persona transferred into power plant three of Sydney Fusion facility. Accessing Australian Fusion Regulatory Committee archives. Accessed. Organic persona of John Wyeth operated as Sydney Fusion system persona for 223,907 hours, from May 11, 2518 to November 25, 2543. Verified. System output and utilization irrelevant. end tangent.]

processed. Probability of organic persona of John Wyeth transfer into Thames Foundry central core December 11, 2543. Tangent 5

[begin tangent: System persona transferred into Thames Foundry central core. Verified. Accessing Thames Foundry Maintenance Records. Accessed. Organic persona of John Wyeth operated as Thames Foundry system persona for 1,156,265 hours, from December 11, 2543 to November 6, 2675. System persona reported off-line November 6, 2675. System output and utilization irrelevant. System persona reported missing November 7, 2675. Tangent 5.1

[Begin tangent: Cohort report RES26751107.72. Report submitted by Lieutenant Randolph Laffredo. Investigation of Thames Foundry central core showed forced entrance through main security using energy weapons used by several Resistance regiments, including the 3rd, 51st, 82nd, and 112th. Blast points and method of system persona retrieval consistent with Resistance methods. Conclusion: Resistance personnel acquired organic persona of John Wyeth. end tangent.]

processed Probability of system persona containing organic persona of John Wyeth: 854 occurrences in 903 scenarios. end tangent.]

processed. Probability of system persona transferred into unknown host in 2676. Tangent 6

[begin tangent: Probability of transfer of organic persona of John Wyeth. Assumption one: Patterns of

Resistance actions indicate near certainty organic persona was integrated into manufactured biological unit. Tangent 6.1

[begin tangent: Verification of assumption. Cross referencing thefts of biological units from physiomanufacturing plants within one month of theft of organic persona from Thames Foundry. Tangent 6.1.1

[begin tangent: Regiment activity. 3rd Regiment: Active. Theft of 1 flesh unit from physiomanufacturing plant in Bern on October 25, 2676. Tangent 6.1.1.1

[begin tangent: Theft of flesh unit: Female human. 14 years at time of theft. No defects reported during development. Unit reproductive systems scheduled for sterilization August 1, 2677. Due to theft, unit was not sterilized. No other restrictions or modifications were scheduled or performed on unit. Conclusion: Unit is viable and desirable candidate for organic persona transfer. end tangent.]

processed. 51st Regiment: Non-active. 82nd Regiment: Theft of 3 flesh units from physiomanufacturing plant in Hong Kong on October 14th, 2676. Tangent 6.1.1.2

[begin tangent: Theft of 3 flesh units. Tangent 6.1.1.2.1

[begin tangent: Theft of flesh unit: Female human. 8 years at time of theft. No defects reported during development. Unit nonviable for transference of system or organic persona for another 31,500 hours. Conclusion: Organic persona of John Wyeth was not transferred into this unit. end tangent.]

processed. Tangent 6.1.1.2.2

[begin tangent: Theft of flesh unit: Male human. 16 years at time of theft. No defects reported during development, but unit has been harvested 4 times in the last 45,000 hours and would terminate within 6 hours of theft. Probability of termination: 100 occurrences per 100 scenarios. end tangent.]

processed. Tangent 6.1.1.2.3

[begin tangent: Theft of flesh unit: Female human. 17 years at time of theft. Reported defects: Blindness, deafness, severe brain damage. Defects occurred 4 minutes, 18 seconds prior to theft. Defects attributed to hemolixer electrical discharge into biotube due to damage from combat. Probability of unit survival: 59 occurrences per 100 scenarios. Conclusion: All scenarios irrelevant. Damage to unit would render organic persona inoperative. end tangent.]

processed Probability of organic persona of John Wyeth being transferred into flesh units stolen by 82nd Regiment: 1 occurrence per 870 scenarios. Conclusion: organic person transferal not achieved. end tangent.]

processed. 112th Regiment: Active. Theft of 1 flesh unit from physiomanufacturing plant in Buenos Aires on November 20, 2676. Tangent 6.1.1.3

[begin tangent: Theft of flesh unit: Male human. 16 years of age at time of theft. No reported defects during development. Unit has been modified: Sterilization of sexual reproductive system. Embedding of compulsory persona 4221 Trojan Horse betrayal routine. Unit will indicate presence through neurosonic pulses transmitting at .000021 hertz. Tangent 6.1.1.3.1

[begin tangent: Accessing neurosonic pulse at .000021 hertz. Accessed. Pulse still active. Unit still functional. Conclusion: Unit must be rendered nonfunctional. end tangent.]

processed Activating subpersona 4221.3 Battle Horse destruct routine. Unit will self destruct within 15

minutes. Probability of transfer of organic persona of John Wyeth into this unit will be irrelevant in maximum 15 minutes. end tangent.]

processed Conclusion: female unit stolen by 3rd Regiment most likely scenario to contain organic persona of John Wyeth. end tangent.]

processed Probability organic persona of John Wyeth was transferred into manufactured biological unit: 97 occurrences in 112 occurrences. end tangent.]

processed. Assumption two: Patterns of Resistance actions indicate high probability of restoration of organic persona. Tangent 6.2

[begin tangent: Verification of assumption. Accessing Resistance medical database. Accessed. 3rd Regiment medical facilities managed by Doctor Philip Barrett. Tangent 6.2.1

[begin tangent: Medical records of Philip Elijah Barrett: Graduated Johns Hopkins Medical Universal City highest honors class of 2653. Joined Resistance movement 2659. Assigned to 3rd Regiment September 23, 2661. Estimated cognitive reconstruction patients: 1600. Executing probability wave pattern 34F. Completed. Public record scans return an estimated 1375 processed Cues in current society. end tangent.]

processed Normal reintegration success rate of 62.55% increased to estimated 84.07% due to superior capabilities of Philip Barrett. Conclusion: Probability of original organic persona John Wyeth surviving reintegration is 84 occurrences per 100 scenarios. end tangent.]

processed John Wyeth is active in human female unit connected to the destroyed 3rd Regiment. Tangent 6.3

[begin tangent: Destruction of 3rd Regiment June 12, 2679. Class 67h d6 8ijfr89 hjngtr79 56 tr bj 753vnk y tr89i hn rt6 ioktg 6 9 ui bn r 5 8 uihn r 6fhgu675hjk787 gftjhi86ghj 765fbj88 hhbt578kngghkou dcnk,if s3w54yubruu fgu8 r fhyi8trvyu i466wn9t 87j nib54 hrj78jn ryft 46 958h 56gh67hg ified. Processed. Probability of John Wyeth persona surviving Sand Rat Debacle: Certain due to independent verification. end tangent.]

processed John Wyeth is active human female unit connected to the 179th Regiment. end tangent.]

processed. Conclusion: John Wyeth is alive. Most likely scenario indicates John Wyeth has use of bound trinary code through maturation of KME mnemonic inlays. Most likely scenario indicates John Wyeth has knowledge of This Unit's existence. Most likely scenario indicates John Wyeth able to destroy This Unit. Damn you, Philip LeClaire. end thread.]

[Thread 3: Resolution of reassessed probabilities of threat to This Unit. Termination required. Retrieval of KME organic processing unit required. Conflicting requirements. Resolution: Modified termination required. Termination restricted to John Wyeth organic persona. Retrieval of current biological form of John Wyeth after persona dissolution required. Accelerated persona dissolution by intense assault required. Estimated 3,000 hours required before assault will produce acceptable effect. Estimated 3,020 hours until retrieval of flesh unit. Method: Achieve cascading sharding episodes through aggressive use of outside stimuli. Result: Catastrophic collapse and ultimate dissolution of John Wyeth before--or during--dissection and harvesting of KME mnemonic inlays embedded within organic processing unit.

Action: Initiating concentrated assault on John Wyeth persona. Estimated time to first assault: 30 minutes. end thread.]

end program.

Chapter Five

The barracks was very quiet when Gina Hawthorne returned from Lieutenant Posen's room at two thirty in the morning. In order to keep B Company this quiet during night operations, an alpha wave dampening field was broadcast from hidden emitters in the ceiling. The result was all personnel slipped into a deeper state of unconsciousness. Only intense shaking, very loud noises or otherwise extreme conditions could disturb this level of induced sleep. Gina intensely disliked being subjected to the field--it made her as helpless to attack as the dogs she was paid to hate. But it was a necessary evil. And since the new recruit had shown up, Posen had issued her a stimulant that somewhat counteracted the dampening field. She had wondered why. Now she knew.

Gina knelt beside the sleeping recruit--her name was Amanda or Abigail or something like that--and looked at the sleeping face. So peaceful. But also so deadly, as she had seen yesterday in the training room and as Lieutenant Posen had so strongly emphasized only twenty minutes ago. Not that it mattered. This girl was against NATech Supreme and would have to be incapacitated. But not killed. Gina smiled in anticipation. Killing was too crude, anyway. Far better to kill their spirit, and let them know it, than to kill them and put them beyond all knowing. Hearing them beg and plead was the best reward for this kind of work. And this girl was almost too easy, because Posen had given Gina two sharding disks.

She pulled one of the micro inducers out of her pocket and placed it against the girl's left temple. Similar to the inducers used in IHADs, this micro unit sent a specific signal to the frontal lobes that momentarily weakened the persona barriers in ripes. It was a device used frequently by NATech Suppression Squads to increase the chances and intensity of sharding episodes. Even better, if one knew how to trigger any of the false personas contained in the Shard's mind, the Shard became that false persona. And Posen had told Gina how to trigger a very exciting ripe.

To think! A persona who would beg to be beaten! A helpless plaything that could not discern between pain and pleasure. Gina's heart pounded from the anticipation of the next two and a half hours. She would teach this girl real pain. She would teach her the difference between pain and pleasure!

Gina thrilled from the danger that came with covert assignments. If discovered by a loyal Resistance dog, Gina would be attacked and possibly captured. If she became too wrapped up in her assignment and killed the girl, she, Gina, would also be killed, by NATech. Posen had given her a few details of the messy way she'd be terminated. Gina enjoyed listening. She loved the flavor of fear mixed with excitement. She felt the tingle of the hunt and activated the sharding disk.

The inducer gave a squeal, then flashed briefly. The girl looked no different, but her outward appearance was misleading. Inside her mind, jagged pieces of neurosonic bursts were shredding the artificial barriers between each of the personas. Gina had to act quickly. There was only enough power for eight or ten seconds. She began shaking the girl.

"Wake up!" Gina ordered in a quiet but firm voice. "Useless trash! No one said you could go to sleep! Now, wake up!" The girl began to stir.

* * * *

I was so sleepy. I opened my eyes and saw lots of dark. There was someone in front of me, and I heard a high sound. What "... what" ...

The person in front of me covered my mouth. I started to scream, then choked as I felt a blow in my stomach. The hand over my mouth twisted my face, and in my pain I saw I was looking into the eyes of a woman. I knew her. It was "... it was"...

She hit me again and I knew who I was. The woman I thought I knew smiled.

"You're going to do as I tell you. Now, do not cry out." She hit me in the tummy again, and laughed when I started to moan. I almost cried out, but was happy I didn't. I lay still and looked into her eyes. She was acting like an owner. Was she my owner, or did my owner give me to her for a while? Her lip was bleeding. She must have bitten it, out of happiness of seeing me like this. She licked the blood and stood up.

"I need to give you a beating, girl. But not here. Let's go someplace private." She grabbed my hair and jerked me to my feet. I was in a large room with lots of other girls. Did she own all of them? She kicked me in the back, and I stumbled into a dark hallway. I was very proud that I didn't make a sound, just like I'd been told.

She kept shoving me down the hallway until we came to a doorway. I went past it, but she grabbed me and turned me around. I smiled at her. She hit me with her fist and threw me into the doorway. It was very dark inside, but I could see it was a big bathroom. That was good. Lots of my memories were in bathrooms.

"This is the men's showers. We won't be disturbed here. Company A isn't going to interfere, and Company B, including the men, is under a dampening field." I didn't understand what she was talking about. It didn't matter. I was where I belonged, and I think my new owner liked me. After all, she'd hit me and made me feel good, right? And now she was looking at me the same way all my other owners had. All except the little girl owner in the bright round room. She had been different. All my owners were nice, but she was nice in a different way.

Wait. Didn't the little girl tell me that she was my owner? Or did I think it? I was confused. I was sure that the little girl was my real owner. Then who was this "... I felt a hard hand strike my face and I fell down, feeling wonderful. I was so afraid! I loved being afraid. I looked up at her from the hard floor, then rose to my knees.

"Look at you! You're worthless!"

"I-I'm sorry!"

Why did she say that? She liked hitting me and I only wanted to please her. She was my owner. But what about the little girl? "Are you my owner?" I asked. "I thought that my owner was"..."

"You thought? Idiot! You can't think! Yes, I'm your owner. Do you doubt me?"

"NO! No, I don't doubt you!" She did sound like an owner. "It's just that"..." I looked down. She was nice. "I'm sorry. Do you want me?"

"Yes. Yes, I do. Come here."

Happy to be able to do something, I got to my feet and walked up to her. She kicked me viciously, once in each leg, and I fell to my knees, where I belonged. My legs were pounding and they hurt. My left leg was filled with a sharp pain, like when I'm cut up with glass. I think it was broken. I heard her grunt with pleasure. She slapped me in the face, and I felt a streak of blood on my cheek. It was a very sharp pain and I cried.

“I told you not to cry out!”

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to! I’ll be better next time, I promise!” She stood there waiting for me, so I took off my top and dropped it, then hugged her around the waist, sobbing into her. She pressed my face hard against her body, stroking my hair. She seemed both tense and excited. The pain in my legs and her soft touch blended together and started a fire in my heart.

“Would you like me to hit you now?”

She really did like me! I felt so wonderful and wanted inside. “Oh, yes! I’d love that! How would you like me to be?”

“That’s just fine.” I started to laugh with happiness, but then couldn’t because she kicked her knee into my neck. My throat got hot and stopped working and I fell back to the floor. It felt warm against my bare back. I tried to get up so she could hit me again, but I didn’t have to. She must have liked the way I looked on the floor because she came up to me and kicked me twice, once in my tummy and once below my tummy. That was so nice! Usually, I had to crawl over to my owner. Hard knots of good feeling exploded from my middle, then leaked out to my arms and legs. Pretty lights started shining in my eyes and my head was very full of something hot. I started to curl up around my pain, wanting to get close to it, but she put me on my back and mounted me. I waited for her to decide what she was going to do next. I coughed a couple of times and got to swallow some blood. I was so happy! She loved me! I saw the way her blouse moved up and down from her hard breathing. Her face was flushed and her eyes were very bright. She pressed my hands back, squeezing my wrists with all her strength. Her nails broke my skin, coating our hands with sweet, pretty blood. She was angry and excited. I saw her stare at my breasts and I wiggled for her.

“I want to make you happy,” I whispered, trying to make her like me enough to kiss me. My insides were warm and sticky, and I felt that wonderful feeling in my body that I got when my owner beat me or used me. I loved her. I smiled up at her.

“Are you going to take me now? Please? I love you.”

She gasped and let go of me. I felt her weight come off me as she moved away. I got up on my knees a little, only my tummy made me bend over. But I liked that. I looked at her, scared I had not pleased her.

“I’m sorry! Did I say something wrong?” Trying to think of a way to make things better, I put my hands down to my panties and started to take them off. I felt a twinge in my tummy. That meant I was hurt very bad. I smiled, thinking how hard she’d kicked me. She must be my real owner to love me that much.

“What are you doing?” she yelled at me. I looked at her, confused.

“I don’t understand!” I sobbed, then fell forward to my hands and knees, coughing. My leg was burning. Burning with love and pain. “Aren’t you going to take me? Or would you like to beat me some more? My insides are all hot, but I think I can stay awake a little longer. I promise I’ll try.”

She stepped up close. She looked confused. “What do you mean? You know how badly you’re hurt, but you want me to keep hitting you?”

“Oh, yes!” I said, feeling happy again. “I love it when you hit me! Or you can play with me. That’s nice, too!” I took her hand and placed it on me. “Touch me here.”

She got mad and scared and took her hand away. “No!” She looked confused again, and not at all like my other owners. “I—I mean, get dressed. Right now!”

“Okay.” My panties were close, so I put them on first. My left leg was burning with fire, only I couldn’t see it because it was inside my leg and not on top of my leg, like it was with my other owner. Not Deke. The other one. But not the first other one. The second other one. But not Deke. Deke was my first owner. I slid my panties on. A shiver went up my back, making me gasp and giggle.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “Does it hurt?”

“Yes! It’s wonderful!” I exclaimed, working my panties up over my upper legs. “Your first kick was so hard it broke the bone.” I rubbed my leg. “See? You can feel the break right here. And see the bump? It you kick me again in the same place, the bone should come out. It makes me feel so pretty.” My top was a little ways away, so I started to crawl toward it. I heard a step and waited for the blow, hoping it would be in my leg. Either that or my tummy. Instead, she picked up my top and knelt beside me.

“Here, let me help you.” she said. I was so confused. This was nice, but why didn’t she hit me? I think I knew why she didn’t have sex with me; the little girl’s friend, the one with the dark, dark skin and dark, dark eyes, said that some girls didn’t play with other girls. I didn’t really understand, but I think I did a little. Maybe my owner was like that. But maybe she thought I was like that. I should try again.

She was right next to me when she pulled my top over my head, so I kissed her. She hit my mouth, then jumped back, wiping her mouth.

“What’s wrong with you, Shard? Don’t you realize I was trying to kill you?”

“Yes, I am! I promise I understand! Thank you.”

“Thank you? I break your leg and you say thank you?”

“I’m sorry!” I cried, afraid I’d said the wrong thing. “I don’t like talking! It hurts me and makes me have to think and I say everything bad. I’m sorry.” I had an idea and smiled. “If you want, I’ll stop talking and we can just play.”

“But you’re hurt.”

“I know.”

She looked at me, then came back and put my top on me. I wanted to kiss her again, but I was pretty sure she didn’t want me to. She finished, then swore and turned me to her, raising a fist. I lifted my face up to her and closed my eyes, waiting.

But she didn’t hit me. She grabbed my shoulders and began shaking me.

“Aren’t you going to fight back?”

“No,” I said with surprise. “That’s wrong. I should never fight an owner. Besides, why should I fight something that makes me feel good? All my owners taught me that. Even Stays and Cut taught me that, and they weren’t my owners. Only Stays almost was, but he wasn’t. But Deke was good. You are, too.” She jerked like something hit her. I looked at her, a little confused. “Aren’t owners the same way?”

She didn’t say anything. She just stared at me with wet eyes. I noticed that when people were quiet like this, they were sometimes thinking. Either that or they were asleep. But her eyes were open, so she was thinking. She saw me staring at her and she smiled.

“Yes. Yes, I think we are. But aren’t you afraid?”

I thought about that. I hated hard questions, but she wanted an answer, so I tried real hard to answer.

“Well, I always try to be afraid. It makes me feel like a big girl!”

“No, not that way. I mean, aren’t you ever afraid in a bad way?”

“Oh! That kind of afraid. Yes, a little. I’m sad when I don’t do what I’m told. And I’m afraid when I’m alone. There’s this bright round room that I stay in, and--”

“No.” She was becoming sad and a little angry. She pulled me close to her strong body. “I mean, aren’t you afraid you’ll be killed when this happens? When people like” ... When people like me do these things to you?”

What a silly question! “Why? If it makes you happy to kill me, then I’m happy, too!” I thought a little bit. “But I would be a little sad because I couldn’t make you happy anymore after that, because I’d be dead. I remember” ... no, I’m sorry.“

“What? What do you remember?”

“A knife. Or was it glass? Yes, it was glass the last time. That was when my owner two owners ago wanted to kill me. He had owned me for a while then was tired of loving and hurting me. I tried hard to please him! I really did. But he kept saying I was making him turn into me, or something. I didn’t understand. Then one night he came home and was very angry and scared, like you are now. He said, ”You’ve made me like you are, and I’m destroyed.“ That was the night he took me into the bathroom and put the glass into me. He put it in my tummy and my arms and my eyes and” ... “ I shook my head. ”I can’t remember anymore.“

“Try.” I felt a tear splash on my face. She was looking away. What was wrong?

“Why are you asking me all these questions?” I was getting scared she didn’t like me anymore. “Let’s not talk! I don’t like talk!” I started coughing very hard.

“What’s wrong? Are you all right?” She talked in a loud voice, but she sounded far, far away.

“I think I can stay awake.” The fire in my leg was going away, and I suddenly felt a big thing in my stomach. I rolled onto the floor and wrapped up into a little ball. “I’m sorry! I can’t stay awake! My tummy’s moving all around and my special place feels all full. I think I’m all full of blood. That’s why I’m all tingly and excited!” I giggled and touched myself. “I can taste my blood like it’s my dinner!”

She jerked, then leaned back against the wall, but still close to me. She was crying. I was sad she didn’t like me anymore.

“What’s your name?” she asked softly.

“Oh, I don’t have a name,” I said, glad to finally hear a question I could answer. “I’ve never had one. I’m just here to do as I’m told. What’s your name?”

“My name?” She was a little surprised. Maybe I asked a good question.

“Uh-huh. My other owners had names. And all the people I saw had names, I think.” I had to stop talking to cough. Every time I coughed, something pinched my tummy and squeezed my lungs. “They’re all important. You must be even more important, because you’re so good at being an owner. So that means you have a name.” I was proud that I could think of that.

She began to say something, but I started coughing again. I was getting sleepy. She shook me and called to me to stay awake.

"I'm so sorry! Is there something I can do to make you feel better?" she said.

I smiled and coughed. Blood spilled on the floor from my mouth. She did like me! She was going to let me decide! Yay! I could ask her to play with me. That would be nice! But I don't think I worked there anymore. Then I thought of something even nicer.

"Could you kick me again? Please! It feels so nice when you do it. You're a lot better kicker than my other owners. Even Deke, only he was good with a knife. Here's a good place." I stretched out and pulled up my shirt a little to show her where to kick me. My fingers felt a long bump. I looked down and saw a long white bump above my tummy, under my breast. "How did that get there?" I said.

I looked at my owner to ask her where the white line came from. But she wasn't going to answer me. She was pushing herself against the wall and her eyes were wild. She was making loud sounds that were almost angry, but more scared. She didn't like me, after all.

The room started getting darker and started moving around and around like my tummy. It was time to go to sleep. I wondered if I was going back to that bright round room where that lady, Miss "... miss" ... miss somebody was. I was not good with words.

* * * *

I was so sleepy. I opened my eyes and saw lots of dark. There was someone in front of me, and I heard a high sound. What "... what" ...

The person in front of me covered my mouth. I started to scream, then choked as I felt a blow in my stomach. Suddenly, it wasn't dark any more. Light came pouring in from all around me, and I jumped. Wait. I couldn't jump, I was in bed.

No I wasn't. I was back in the hallway leading to the waiting room. NO! What had happened? There was that noise--and did someone hit me?--and then here I was. I must have sharded again. Fear tickled my spine as I ran to the round room that held my ripes. Who was I this time? And how long would I remain that way? Though I would prefer being myself, I fervently prayed that it was Miss DeChant who was in control of my body now.

I reached the end of the hall, where the computers were, and ran by them. There was someone seated. Graying hair, slightly stooped shoulders. It was Miss DeChant. I felt a knot in my stomach. That meant that I'd sharded into the pleasure girl. If I wasn't already slipping into the timeless indifference of the waiting room, I would probably have broken down. As it was, I still gasped.

Miss DeChant heard me and turned around. Though we had clung to each other during her--our--rape, this was the first time I'd ever seen her while she was coherent. She had a calm face, with pretty gray eyes and a strong jaw. Like me, she was naked. She frowned slightly when she saw me, but didn't rise.

"Mademoiselle! What are you doing here?"

"I've sharded, Miss DeChant. I was hoping it was you. Unfortunately, it's the other woman, the pleasure ripe, who's conscious now."

"No, child, she is not. She is here, in my lap, the poor thing."

I stepped forward slowly and looked past Miss DeChant's shoulders. Curled there, her head indeed in

Miss DeChant's lap, was the pleasure ripe, crying quietly.

"But" . . . but then whose ripe is controlling my body?"

Miss DeChant looked up with wide eyes and shook her head.

* * * *

"Sir, I hate to disturb you." The computer's voice was soft, feminine, and fearful. "I realize you need to relax from your many duties. But I'm obeying your request to waken you at 0430. It's that time now, sir." The voice was painfully apologetic. Posen groaned and rolled over, staring up into the dim quarters. That damned computer.

"It's not 0430 yet," he insisted.

"I'm so sorry. I will execute internal diagnostics now to locate my problem. Diagnostics complete. It is 0430, sir. Shall I come back in ten minutes?"

"No. I'm up. Please delete this wake up call and record that I awoke at my standard time. Override code Posen AA1AA11Alpha."

"Of course, sir! The official log has been amended to show you arose at 0615, as normal." As normal for the log. More times than not, Lieutenant Posen did not arise until well after nine. Posen was not a morning person.

This morning, however, was very different. Posen had agreed to hear Private Hawthorne's report at 0500, and he was not going to miss it. It was with great relish that he anticipated being told the story of Private Wyeth's humiliation. If it weren't such a messy business, Posen himself might have been tempted to thrash the girl.

He showered quickly in his private bath, wishing he had his full ninety minutes to prepare. But that would have meant waking up at 0330. It didn't matter. He wanted to look just right of course, but Hawthorne wouldn't be telling anyone about his less than perfect attire. He chuckled and began drying off.

Twenty-five minutes later, Lieutenant Posen sat down at his desk. Like every regimental commander, he had a combination living and working quarters, so the total commute time was three seconds. He sat down and prepared his greeting.

"It's about time, Private." He spoke sharply and with a tone of impatience. No, not quite right. It was a remark, not an order. And what if she were on time?

"Good morning, Private. May I have your report?" No, too friendly. Distance. That's what the major at the very exclusive Randex Military Academy always said. Keep your distance from the troops and you will keep their respect.

"Report, Private." Yes, that was it. Clean, concise, to the point. Should he stand when she entered? He shook his head. Must still be tired to even think that. Of course he wouldn't stand. He was the officer, she was the dog. He snorted. Female soldiers! What a useless lot. Good enough for standard chores and for keeping the men's morale up, but generally a waste of time. That there were rare exceptions like Eyer only proved the rule. Female dogs. He let out a short laugh. That would make them bitches.

"Time."

"It's 0459, sir." Good. Another minute. Then ten more to get the report and perhaps another ten to

report in turn to his superiors. He didn't even need to leave his quarters; Hawthorne was to return the badly beaten Wyeth to her bed and attempt to reshard her to her original persona. If she failed, then no harm done; whoever found her in the morning would have her taken to sickbay regardless of whatever ripe was on the surface. Either way, that little upstart would never know that she'd been sharded on purpose. How he wished he could look her in the eyes and tell her what had been done to her, under his orders. That would take some of the punch out of her saucy attitude.

Her eyes. For a moment, Posen pictured those eyes as they were yesterday, when she systematically dismantled Olecki. Her mastery of him had been no fluke. Even after the first two exchanges, when Olecki had knocked her down, she remained calm, saying she wanted his measure for his safety. What followed only seemed to validate her statement.

And earlier in the week she had lain on the bed in the hospital and calmly told him--to his face!--that she would kill him if he slighted her again. Such an impudent girl. And in front of Cooper, no less. Yet she had been serious. Deadly serious. Her eyes told him that. Like Eyer, she was a female dog. A bitch.

How could a child have such an intense stare, such focused purpose? Yes, she was a Cue. But could that much of a persona carry over from host to host through the centuries? Was it possible that a half-grown woman could carry the experiences of an accomplished warrior? It seemed impossible! But her eyes "... If she ever discovered Posen's role in this" ...

He shook off the chill and curtly asked for the time. Damn! The woman was five minutes late! He had made it very clear to her that Wyeth needed to be returned an hour before the dampening field was turned off at 0600. He had used Hawthorne several times before, to rough up recruits who had ideas of enjoining the enemy, or to settle a score that was beneath him. She was very efficient and quite ruthless, a useful tool.

She was also late. Posen tried to busy himself with some routine work, but could not wait longer than ten minutes. Now fifteen minutes late, and with the dampening field being shut off in forty-five, Posen decided he had to act.

"Computer, give me the location of Private Hawthorne."

"There are currently two Private Hawthornes attached to this regiment. Private Richard Hawthorn is in the men's A Company barracks. Private--"

"No, you idiot! I want the location of the woman."

"Private Gina Hawthorne is not inside the compound."

"Then where is she?"

"Unknown."

"Where was she last?"

"Private Gina Hawthorne was last reported at the primary hanger entrance. She left the compound at 0305."

"Computer, where is the present location of Private Abigail Wyeth?"

"Private Abigail Wyeth is presently located in the men's showers."

"Where?" Posen demanded, not really intending to query the computer, who nevertheless repeated the

information. "Is anyone with her?"

"Negative."

"Is she conscious?"

"This system cannot determine the state of organic life forms outside the men's and women's barracks."

He knew that, but had forgotten it momentarily. He sighed and opened a drawer. Inside was his pistol. He turned the charger on, picked up his holster, and left his office, heading toward the men's showers.

The corridors were dark and deserted, and Posen was able to reach the showers in less than two minutes. He passed inside, then waited for his eyes to adjust to the even deeper shadows of the showers. The indicator on his pistol was flickering green and red, indicating a full charge on the lethal setting. Thinking about it, he lowered the setting to stun. Like Hawthorne, he'd been told the consequences of killing Wyeth. Unlike Hawthorne, he took no excitement from it. After a moment, the lights flickered green and light yellow. Taking a deep breath, he stepped around the modesty wall, leveling his gun.

There was a dark object on the floor three meters in front of him and he fired. It was a body, but it seemed immune to the shot, for instead of jerking, it merely absorbed the energy bolt. A sharp acid taste burned his gut and throat. Scared, Posen hastily put the setting back to lethal and cursed the slowness of the charge.

He was blessing it two seconds later. It took that long for him to realize that the reason the body didn't react was because it was beyond reaction. He lowered the setting yet again and approached the body carefully.

It was Wyeth. For a moment, the fear returned. She was dead! His heart raced and a cold sweat broke out. Wait. No, she was alive. He could make out her slowly rising and falling stomach. She was lying in a pool of blood, barely clothed. Her top was covered with blood and her panties were soaked in it. There were scratches or cuts along her cheeks. Hawthorne had really been enthusiastic with this one. She was not around to admire her handiwork, however.

"Hawthorne?" Posen called out softly. No answer. He called out again, then remembered she'd left the compound. Damn! That meant that he had to carry Wyeth back to the women's barracks! That much blood; it would ruin his tunic. Well, he sighed, the price of command. Holstering his pistol, he stooped over the girl.

He was not a particularly strong man, but she was not a particularly large girl. She seemed even smaller now as he carried her back to the barracks. In the comparative brightness of the corridor, and from a distance of a half meter, he was able to look at her closely for the first time.

Unconscious like this, she looked incredibly young. To think he'd ordered "... no, the orders had come from above. Her condition wasn't his fault. Still, to save his over-reacting conscience, he'd order the dampening field turned off ten minutes early. That would give them additional time to discover her and get her to sickbay.

He entered the women's barracks and quickly located her bunk. The other women were fast asleep. He laid the child on her bunk. Child? No. Woman. He was surprised that even looking like this, she had a certain beauty to her. Glancing around to see he wasn't observed, he leaned down and kissed her on the mouth. He tasted the blood on her lips, but instead of revulsion, sensed a quickening of his heart. He slowly pulled his mouth away, staring at her soft features. Feeling flushed and vaguely guilty of taking advantage, he glanced around. Everyone was asleep, no one was staring. He became more aggressive

and leaned down again.

Ten minutes later, he left the women's barracks, humming slightly. The trip back to his quarters was quick and uneventful. Once inside, he turned the lights up and clucked disapprovingly at his blood-spattered tunic. Still, not too high a price to pay for a solid night's work. He'd carried out his orders very well and had even gotten an unexpected bonus. He felt like sharing his happiness.

"Computer. Please leave the dampening field on an additional thirty minutes today. We'll let the troops sleep in this morning."

"Yes, sir."

A very good night's work. And still early enough for another three hours of sleep.

Chapter Six

Doctor Ressler shook his head slowly, and raised his hand from the girl's neck. He reached to his left and snapped off the uv field that disinfected the examination table where the two men had placed the limp body. Next he switched off the now useless stasis field that stabilized a patient's vital signs Finally, he pulled the white sheet up over her head, a practice that had little real function but had carried through the centuries as the symbolic final pronouncement of death.

"I'm sorry, sir, but the damage was too severe. She's been dead for awhile."

Lieutenant Posen turned sharply to the two men.

"Why didn't you bring her here immediately after discovering her?" he demanded.

Both men were clearly upset, more from being accused than from intimidation. Both men came to tighter attention, and one answered.

"But, sir! We did bring her here immediately. After we notified you, as per your standing orders, we--"

"Well, that's not going to help her now, is it?" Posen interrupted. "Following your precious orders may very well have killed her! I'm going to see--".

"Pardon me, Lieutenant." Ressler's calm voice sliced through Posen's tirade. Posen's ears burned red because such a quiet voice could cut through his. "But as I said, she's been dead since at least last night. There's nothing these two could have done to change that."

Posen stared at the doctor, then nodded. He returned his attention to his men. "Very well. I'll consider the doctor's statement and determine if any discipline is warranted. Dismissed." The two hurriedly saluted and left. Posen turn sharply to me.

"And what about you, Wyeth? Do you know anything about Private Hawthorne's death?"

I looked at him, then turned my head away. I didn't want to deal with him today.

"Answer my question!" he shouted. I ignored him. He sharply inhaled.

"Please, Lieutenant!" Ressler's voice was not as calm or quiet as it had been. "I must insist you refrain from exciting my patient. Private Wyeth is still exhausted, and the injuries from her attack are not fully

healed. Speaking of which,” he added with a careful tone, “What have you uncovered so far? It’s been over twenty-four hours.”

I perked my ears to hear Posen’s answer, even though I already knew what it was going to be.

“Don’t take that tone with me, Doctor,” Posen spoke coolly. “The investigation is continuing smoothly. I should imagine we’ll discover the identity of the private’s attacker at the proper time. These things cannot be hurried. We don’t want to miss any clues that may point the way to a solution.” He sounded like a cheap detective novel. And as predictable as one, too. I heard him step closer and tap my shoulder roughly.

“Now, once again, Private. What do you know about Private Hawthorne’s death?”

The quickest way to get rid of him was to answer his questions. So I raised myself up on an elbow and looked at where she lay. It was the athletically built girl who had smiled at me my first day in the barracks. She barely looked like the same person. Part of the reason was that the complete relaxation that accompanies death tended to change a person’s appearance. But the main reason was that a good portion of her face had been scorched and removed by a lethal burst from an energy gun at point blank range. I lay back down on the bed, careful not to pull my left leg, which lay encased in a pocketed gravity field while the bone knitted.

“I’m sorry, sir, but I don’t have any idea what happened to her,” I said dully. Just these few words were tiring. This was my second morning of my second stay in Ressler’s care, and though my wounds were more serious, they were also more easily tended, and I was healing rapidly. But the process left me constantly weak.

“That’s hard to believe, Private. Both of you injured in the same period of time, and you’re saying it’s a coincidence?”

“No, sir. I’m not saying that. I’m not saying anything. Perhaps the same person that attacked me killed Hawthorne. I don’t remember anything after going to bed two nights ago.” There was something about his closeness that made my flesh crawl. I turned my head to the wall again. “Please, sir, let me sleep. I don’t feel well.”

“I’ll tell you when you can sleep, Private. You haven’t satisfied me yet.”

A shiver went up my spine. The way he sounded made me feel dirty. I bit my lower lip, but said nothing. Fortunately, Ressler did.

“That is enough! Lieutenant, if you say so much as one more word, I will report your actions in my medical log as gross negligence after consultation by a physician. Furthermore, I will bring that entry to TAU and demand action.” His voice was rising steadily, but now he caught himself and spoke normally. “Please, sir. I’m asking you to leave. Private Wyeth will be able to answer more questions tomorrow, though I can’t see how anything can be gained. Whether or not she chooses to answer those questions is up to her. But not until tomorrow. Now, good day, sir.” His final tone was of such firm dismissal, not even Posen could resist.

“Very well, Doctor. I’ll return tomorrow. In the meantime, I’ll post Cooper at the foot of her bed.”

“No.”

“What did you say?”

“I said ‘no’. His presence is not wanted and not needed. I’ll not have an obvious antagonist in the

constant presence of my patient. Not only will it upset her, delaying her return to active duty, it would be most inappropriate during the frequent examinations I must carry out with these kinds of injuries. The answer is no and will be recorded in my log as such.”

Posen left, fuming, but with nothing to say in the face of such firmness. I turned my head back to Ressler and smiled up at him.

“Thank you, doctor. You have no idea how much I appreciate this.”

“You’re welcome, young lady. And I think I have a good idea, Abigail. I noticed how tense you became when he came near you.”

“And thank you for keeping Cooper out of here.”

“Again, you’re welcome. I was stretching it a bit with that, but his presence would have made our talking impossible.”

I stopped smiling. “I’m sorry. I forgot you’re not just a doctor.” I started twisting the sheets with my fingers. “It was nice to forget.” He took my hand in his.

“Then forget it. Listen to me.” With his other hand, he gently turned my face back to him. “I said, listen. Long before I was recruited by TAU, I was a physician. For the next few days, that’s all I am. I have no other interest beyond getting you back on your feet. There’s no such person as Major Ressler. I’m Doctor Ressler.” He smiled slowly and with such care, I had to smile back.

“Thank you, doctor. I needed to hear that.” I closed my eyes, feeling the tension draining from me. I felt the gravity field diminish, and cool air brushed my leg.

“I was also telling the truth when I talked about Cooper’s presence being inappropriate. How does that feel?” He pulled gently on a toe.

“Fine.”

He circled to the side, pulled out a sounder and began going over the break. The gentle warmth the gravity sling normally provided my leg intensified until it was uncomfortable. I winced, but held still. He nodded.

“Good. Stay motionless. I’d like to extend treatment to three minutes this morning.” He continued to focus on my leg, but carried on the conversation. “Tell me, why did you react like you did to Posen?”

“I don’t know.” I remembered his closeness and made a face. “For some reason, he gives me the willies.”

“Could it be a remainder of your experience from two nights ago?”

“I don’t know that, either. I’m sure I sharded, but I don’t recall anything. In the past, there’s always been a period when I wasn’t in control of my thoughts and actions, but I was at least aware of them. This time, I went to bed after our discussion, and I woke up here, feeling like pounded mullet. It was very disorienting.”

“And scary.”

“Yes,” I answered honestly. “And scary. It’s still scary. Is this going to keep happening to me? Doctor, am I becoming a Shard?”

He said nothing, but kept working on my leg. Three minutes passed, then five. He seemed willing to continue treatment for as long as I could stand it. I was relieved he didn't answer my question. And the pain and itching in my leg helped divert my attention and worries.

I looked at my leg. Doctor Ressler had told me it had been either kicked or struck with a hard object. There was a clean break at the midpoint of the femur. My right leg was badly bruised as well, but unbroken. My stomach and kidneys had been struck and badly injured. My face and throat had been hit, but not as severely. Overall, the injuries were consistent with a severe beating. I looked over at the covered body on the other side of the room. Had she beaten me? Ressler caught my look.

"Yes, Abigail, I think Private Hawthorne was responsible. She was a thug, a hired dog for Posen. I've seen her handiwork before, and your injuries are similar to others that have crossed her."

"But she doesn't look like"...

"A brute?" He looked back at her. "No, I don't suppose she does. But neither do you look like a hot shot puterverse genius and highly trained dog."

"I don't feel like one right now. I feel like I have no control over what's going on. I feel like a helpless victim."

"Don't!" He spoke so sharply that he moved the sounder field off the bone, causing me to yelp. "Sorry. But I mean it: Don't give in to your fears, Abigail. What happened to you was not only not your fault, it was beyond"... He broke off his sentence.

"It was beyond my control," I finished for him.

"All right, you have very good reason to feel helpless. But don't give in to despair, Abigail. Once you do, once you allow despair to dictate your thoughts and actions, then you've started the lonely walk toward becoming a Shard. You must fight it."

"I can't fight it, Doctor! Not when I'm some soulless pleasure ripe, or a piece of machinery in space, or who knows what else. When I shard, I don't exist!" I was breathing hard, close to tears.

"But you can fight it when you're Abigail Wyeth! And Abigail Wyeth is worth fighting for." He shut off the sounder and re-engaged the gravity sling. He came up to me and took my hand, putting his face close to mine.

"I haven't had a lot of opportunity to get to know you, Abigail." He flashed me a smile. "It seems like half the time I do see you, you're bleeding and unconscious." The smile faded. "And I'm sure I sacrificed some of your trust when you found out I was in TAU counterintelligence."

"Well"...

"No, let me finish. We haven't had much chance to become friends. And most of what I know about you I've read from dry reports, or reviewed through holoimages. In fact, the only reason I even opened up to you was because I needed to take advantage of your abilities, and to keep some sort of control over you." I kept my look neutral, and he smiled again briefly. "Thank you for not contradicting me or acting surprised."

"Despite these drawbacks and artificial barriers, though, I have come to know you, Abigail. And what I see is a vibrant, exciting, happy, lovely young lady, ready to make her mark on the world. Who's already making her mark on the world. I don't want to see that lost. I'll fight for you, Abigail. Will you?"

I stared up at him in silence. I should have been suspicious of his ulterior motives. I should have been cynical that he wanted me for my puterverse skill, or as an ally in his still vague mission against NATEch's infiltration in the 179th. At the least, I should have kept in mind that he was a highly trained TAU agent, and could make his voice sound any way he wanted.

I wasn't any of those things. Way deep inside me, I knew he was being completely truthful. Woman's intuition? A gut feeling? Desperation? I don't know. I do know that his words struck a hidden place in my heart and smashed it open. All my fears and worries and sadness burst out and engulfed me. Finally, finally, finally, it was time to let the pain go.

I threw my arms around him and pulled him down to me, sobbing into his shoulder. I suppose I should have said something, but the great Abby Wyeth comebacks and witticisms and rejoinders all took the day off, and I just cried. He held me, as a father holds a daughter, and let me cry. And cry.

* * * *

"After I finished my three year residency at Lunar Thirty-one, Diane and I came back to Earth and settled in France in October of 2665. We didn't have much--"

"In France? But"... but I thought France had been destroyed during the Terran/Martian Wars?"

"Really? It certainly looked fine to me. Of course, Paris was nearly obliterated. If I remember my history correctly, there was a good-sized rock that hit northwest of the city, creating a hundred-kilometer crater. Why? Are you from there?"

"No. I--I--just know someone from there." Really, Abby? Then how come you feel such overwhelming relief? And why did I even ask? I knew France still existed. I had done several raids there with the Third. In fact, only six months ago, we made"...

"Earth to Abigail."

I started from my wandering. "I'm sorry, Doctor."

"That's okay." He took a sip from his coffee cup, which he'd brought back from dinner earlier this evening. If I could take that self-warming cup back to the twenty-first century, I could retire at the age of eighteen, sainted by millions of coffee drinkers.

"Anyway, we struggled for a little while, always the lot of a young doctor. We had all of one room, over the garage of a nice lady who took a real liking to Diane. My practice was across the common, about a five-minute walk. We didn't have a hov at the time, but it didn't matter. We were a young married couple, in love, full of dreams."

He took another drink. I didn't need woman's intuition to see the next scene.

"NATEch?" I asked quietly.

"Who else?" he shrugged. "A squad was chasing a Cue who had just killed one of their people. Probably in self-defense; that area of southern France is pretty tight with NATEch. They had cornered him in the garage under our apartment. Apparently he had taken the soldier's gun, because he was able to hold them off for a moment. Diane woke me up when she heard the shots, then went to the window. She grew up in a small town in northern China, where NATEch and the Resistance were distant things. She didn't know. I had been up late on a call that night and was slow to wake up. When I did, she had just pulled the curtain back. I yelled at her to get down."

He didn't say anything, reliving what happened next in quiet sadness. His eyes stared into the mug, and he remained motionless. I remained still as well. After a moment he smiled sadly and continued.

"One of soldiers must have caught sight of her, because they threw a riot light on her. She threw her arms up to cover her eyes just as they opened fire. She didn't even scream. At least four of the first dozen hits were fatal.

"The remainder of the shots ignited the house. It was an old style wooden frame, so the high-energy beams ripped it to shreds and the whole structure was in flames instantly. I wanted to go to her, even though I knew she was dead. I couldn't. The whole side of the house disintegrated. I raced out the door and around to the front. I don't know why, maybe I was hoping they'd kill me, too.

"They almost did. My suddenly appearing caused them to swing their guns to me. But the Cue ran out from the flames just then, firing and killing one of them. They opened fire, and he disappeared in a wave of light and heat. His scream brought me to my senses and I ran back behind the burning garage." His voice became bitter with self-recrimination. "They didn't come after me. Killing a citizen during a battle is acceptable. Killing one afterwards is not. Of course, they had one of their recbots there to verify kills for promotion, so they weren't eager to record gunning down an unarmed man running away like a coward."

"You can't possibly believe that what you did was cowardly, Doctor."

"I don't now. At the time, I couldn't think of anything except that I'd failed Diane, and that she was dead and I wasn't. You don't know what it's like to be married and so in love, Abigail." He looked up, flushing. "My apologies. Perhaps you do."

I shook my head. "No. I've never been married. I was still single when my ripings started. I was in love once, though." I still was.

"The emptiness was almost overwhelming. I couldn't continue my practice, of course. Once word was out that NATEch had destroyed my home, I was effectively shunned by the pro-NATEch community. I didn't care. I closed my practice and returned to Lunar Thirty-one. There I lost myself in my work for several years.

"Then, about nine years ago, I was recruited by a clinic located in Manila. I didn't know it, but Manila was a pro-Resistance city-state, and the clinic was used mainly by civilians either in the pay of or voluntarily active with the Resistance. Within six months, I became involved with the Resistance. Part of it was because of what NATEch had done to Diane and to my life. The main reason was my closeness to my patients and their lives. They knew they couldn't win, fighting NATEch. Yet they kept fighting. Why?"

"Because they knew they could make a difference," I said quietly. He nodded.

"Yes. Exactly. They couldn't defeat NATEch, but they could perhaps limit NATEch's influence. I was swayed by their commitment."

"How did you end up in TAU counterintelligence?" I asked.

"That wasn't difficult. Lunar Thirty-one is a primary microsat factory and launch point. They also act as the emergency backup Orbital Schematics bank for the Lunar Five facility. There's a significant civilian population, but all medical staff are required to undergo hours of simulation of combat conditions in case of attack. And a doctor is an excellent prospect for counterintelligence. We're easily inserted into a suspect regiment. We're supposed to have ethics. And we are to an extent outside the unit command structure." He finished his coffee and stretched.

“Well, enough story telling for tonight. What say we have another round of treatment for that leg, all right?”

We were about five minutes into the intense treatment when a thought occurred to me.

“Do you suppose I could access, Doctor? It would divert my attention from the pain, allowing you to continue a little longer, and I could catch Mike up with what’s going on. He might even be able to ‘help’ the Lieutenant with his investigation”...“

“That doesn’t sound wise, Abigail.” He sounded doubtful. “There’s a big difference between having your attention diverted and being completely detached from treatment. There’s always the risk of having something happen in the puterverse that may cause your body to flinch or move suddenly.”

“Um.” I pulled my lip, thinking. “How about you put the gravity sling on my upper leg? That would immobilize it and still allow treatment for my lower leg.” He still looked skeptical, so I switched tactics. “Look, you and I both know nothing’s going to come of Posen’s investigation. I’m half convinced he authorized my attack. We know that Hawthorne didn’t act on her own initiative. So who used her? If I don’t find out, no one will.”

“I can have Sergeant Eyer look into it,” he offered without conviction.

“Jody’s a nice person and a solid dog. I count her as a friend, and her heart’s in the right place. But she doesn’t have the mind or character for this kind of thing. You and I do.” I tapped my left leg, smiling. “And you’re busy. Besides, I won’t be doing too much, just telling Mike what I want. Not only that, but--”

“All right!” he gave up with mock exasperation. “You remind me of a terrier I had as a boy. He’d get his teeth into a sock and he’d shake it until it fell apart. Fine. Go ahead and access. But you must allow me to be able to end access if needed. Also, I’d like permission to examine your other internal injuries.”

“Of course, Doctor. I trust you completely. I’ll hold the access field to just my head. And I’ll arrange for you to terminate my access.” On impulse, I added, “I’ll go one better. I’ll set it up with Mike to give you unattended full access.”

He stared. “You can do that? Give full access to someone?”

“Of course I can. I told you, it’s my world. You’ll only be able to stay on two or three minutes, even with the shielding. But if I shard again, I may need someone who can communicate with Mike. So we both benefit from this. Just be careful.”

“You don’t need to tell me. I’ve already had one too many experiences with unshielded access with you. Thank you, Abigail.” He raised his voice. “Computer! Secure sickbay, TAU level clearance. Internal authorization: SR071C.” There was a slight deadening of sound as the shields went up. He nodded at me and began shifting the gravity sling to my upper leg.

“Access,” I announced.

The sickbay flashed out of existence and Groucho and the duck showed up to greet me. The duck was pulling along a coffee table behind him. Despite the seriousness of this trip, I had to laugh.

“Okay, I give up. Why a coffee table, Groucho?”

Groucho looked up at me in surprise. “Because I only had one piece of string.” The duck quacked in surprise as well.

“Huh?” I’d thought this thing up one night after being up all the previous two nights programming. I had been more than a little punchy, and as a consequence I was paying for it a year later. Despite their oddball looks, though, they were performing a valuable function, constantly looking for imaginative users willing to take a chance. I had begun sowing the fields of the future puterverse.

“Well, if I had had two strings, I’d have brought along the end tables instead. Although the idea of a duck pulling two end tables is ludicrous.”

“Okay,” I said carefully. Now wasn’t the time to continue this thread. “Have you seen Mike around?”

“Yes. He knows you’re here and he’ll be around shortly, which isn’t surprising”...“

“He’s not that tall, yeah, yeah. You said that last month. Better work up some new material.” He wandered off, the duck dutifully pulling the coffee table behind him. The sky turned emerald green, and Mike shot across the horizon. I waved and he bolted down toward me. He made to pass through me, but although I would have enjoyed a moment of cyberintimacy with him, I didn’t want to upset my body. Instead I held my arms, and he just landed next to me.

“What’s wrong?” he complained. “You’re not turning into a prude, are you?”

“No, I’m not. Just access the last forty hours of the regimental logs and you’ll find out why you’re not allowed in tonight.”

He frowned for a moment, then shook his head.

“I don’t get it, Abby. There’s nothing unusual. Other than the one fatality, it’s routine.” He looked at me. “Was Gina Hawthorne a friend? If so, I’m sorry.”

It was my turn to frown. “You mean there’s nothing in the logs about my attack?”

His eyes flared. “You were attacked? Who’s the bastard? I’ll fry him in his sleep!”

“NO YOU WON’T!” I yelled. He jumped back, surprised at my intensity. “You will never attack a flesh in retaliation. You should know better, Mike. Anyway, I think my attacker was Hawthorne. But she’s just the muscle. Somebody ordered her to attack me.” I quickly told him what I knew and what my suspicions were. When I finished, the blue flame in his chest was very visible.

“You’re probably right, Abby. It sounds like Posen did order the attack. And you want me to find out why, right?”

“You got it. While you’re at it, see if you can go further up the chain. Posen is an ass and hates me, but I can’t see him risking his career over petty vengeance. My guess is he was also acting on orders.” I paused, hesitant to go on, but knowing I had to.

“There’s one more thing, Mike.” He had already begun his scanning routines, but brought his whole attention back to me when he heard the worry in my voice. “I’ve had three episodes now in the last month. I’m afraid I am crossing the line from sharded Cue over to full fledged Shard.”

“No! It’s not true!” His face was working to keep composure. “One was prolonged by Deiley, and the last one may have been induced. You’re fine!”

“No, I’m not, Mike. Don’t worry. I intend to fight it. But there are going to be times when I won’t be able to access when I want I need your help. I need you to keep tabs on me whenever possible. And I need you to give Ressler access whenever he requests it.”

“No way! This is our world, Abby. Visitors can tag along with you, but no one else is allowed!”

“This isn’t a game, Mike!” I said angrily. “I have got to start opening up our world to others, or we won’t be able to execute our plan. Don’t you understand? If I die, the world will continue on. But if our plan dies, the world will continue on without change. We’ve got to reach detonation point, or everything we’ve done is useless. Now, I want you to give Ressler access at his request. And,” I added pointedly, “I want you to protect him when he’s here and give all the assistance you can, short of revealing our final goal.”

“All right, Abby. I don’t like it, but I trust your judgment.”

“Thank you. One last thing. I’ve got a present for you. Kiki!” I called out.

A flower sprouted out from midair, the bud angling toward us and the roots spreading over much of the landscape. Blossoms started popping up all over, but the largest bud kept reaching toward us. When it was less than a meter away, it curled around until it was pointing straight up, then blossomed. Kiki was standing inside.

“Hi, boss!” she exclaimed with happiness. Then she caught sight of Mike and started blushing. She’d had a crush on Mike ever since the two first met. Mike was polite, but kept his distance, being in love with me. In my wildest dreams, I’d have never imagined that writing programs would lead to a love triangle.

“Hi, Kiki! I’ve been telling Mike that I’m going to be hard to reach for a while. I’ve given access to Scott Ressler.”

“Oh! The doctor working with TAU? He seems nice.”

“He is, but that’s not why I’m letting him into our little club. We need to keep the plan going, and I might not be able to help much longer.” Her eyes got wide. “Mike will fill you in later. Right now, 11010011010101001000111010101101.” I stopped and shook my head.

“What’s wrong?” Mike’s eyes were as wide as Kiki’s.

“I--I do110100100101010 n’t kno 10001001010110101010.” I covered my mouth, and Kiki screamed.

“Abigail! Your color!”

I looked at my body. My figure had become angular, and the color was fluctuating between yellow and steel blue. My head 11010010111001 was getting knotty and 1101001010101 di0110m.

“Geez! She’s sharding! In the puterverse!” Mike jumped forward and grabbed my arms. I felt the pure UTC flood through me, and my mind cleared.

“Kiki! I’ve got to go 1101001! Did you finish the access package for Mike?”

“Yes. It’s going to require several hours for him to assimilate, but”...“

“Give it to 11010001 him. Permission gran11010010”... permis11010“... Mike! Help me!” I screamed. He entered me completely. I felt a hot twisting in my gut and leg. My thro1101001101t clo110100101sed up. But I had to 110100110 get one 110100101 last command out.

“Kiki! Permission granted!” Her eyes lit up and I saw a green diamond begin 1101001 glowing 1101001 in h11010er che1101st. I wa1101001s lo1101sing.

“end access”... 1010010100 0101 1010010100100101 101 1101010101010 10101010 101010
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1My eyes snapped open. Where”...? Everything was clear. Did I have a nightmare? My leg still ached,
and I felt a weight on my chest. I looked around the sickbay, but it was pitch black.

“Doctor Ressler?” I called out, trying to rise to my elbows. I couldn’t. The restraining field was on,
pinning me to the bed. “Doctor?” I called out again.

“He’s not here, Shard.” Posen’s voice came from the darkness. “Don’t you remember? You killed him.”

“Liar!”

He called for the lights, and they came up until there was a dim glow from the ceiling and I could make
out Posen’s form as stepped up close. Terror, stark unreasonable terror, rose up inside me. I forced it
down.

“I’m not lying. That’s what my log will say, and who’s to be believed? A respected regimental lieutenant,
or some Shard?” I felt a tightening in my chest that had nothing to do with the field.

“Where’s Doctor Ressler?” I demanded. Posen shook his head sadly.

“Poor creature. Can’t even remember your own handiwork, Shard? Here, let me help. Computer! Full
lights!” The room flared and I winced at the brightness. I opened my eyes and looked at Posen.

He had stepped to one side, to let me see beyond. On the examination table lay the body of Gina
Hawthorne. Why would he show“... wait. The figure beneath the sheet was too big.

“No,” I whispered.

“Yes,” Posen corrected and pulled the sheet back.

Doctor Ressler’s faded eyes looked back at me. He’d been dead for hours at least. But it seemed only
moments ago that he allowed me access to the puterverse.

“I didn’t kill him,” I said weakly, almost certain that I hadn’t.

“Of course you didn’t, Shard. I killed him. With this.” He pulled out a disk, less than five centimeters in
diameter. “A handy little device. Quite top secret, of course. But used by a few trusted members of
NATech Xeno forces.” NATech Xeno forces were the equivalent of TAU’s counterintelligence. Little
was known about them, but it was a well-known fact that NATech units hated them as much as we did.

“You can’t be a member of Xeno,” I blurted out, my anger getting the best of me. “You don’t have the
intelligence or self-control.”

“Indeed?” he tried to answer calmly, but his voice approached a shriek. “I am a relatively new member,
but they choose only the best.”

“Apparently they’ve lowered their standards,” I said acidly.

His mouth became a white slash and he walked up to me. He raised his hand to strike me. I turned my head and winced,

PLEASE, HIT ME HARD, MASTER.

but the blow didn’t come. Instead, I heard him chuckle. I looked back at him. He was at my side, smiling. There was something about his eyes and smile that“...

No“...

“Let that be a lesson, Shard.” He brought the disk up to my eyes. “It’s really an ingenious little toy. It attaches right here.” He reached for my head and held it against my temple. “See? Now all I need to do is activate it and all your persona walls come crashing down. Then, I give you a few choice words, a key phrase, or perhaps an action, and you’re sharded. Hawthorne used it on you just that way three nights ago.” Three nights? That meant I’d been out at least twenty-four hours.

“It’s only meant to be used on Shards, of course. Use it on a real human being, and well, it tears down barriers that don’t exist. I think it’s called a massive cerebral hemorrhage. I’m sure that’s what Doctor Ressler would have called it, had he survived to diagnose his own condition.”

I turned my head and looked at him with hatred.

“Access.”

“Uh-uh.” He wagged a finger at me. “We’ll have none of that, Shard.”

“Stop calling me that!”

“Why? It’s true. Or will be soon. How many times have you sharded since you’ve been here?” He laughed, enjoying himself. “Let’s see, there was that delightful sex toy that Hawthorne called up. I’m afraid you were too much for her. She had complete freedom to do as she wished, and she lost herself in it. It would seem pleasure ripe proved the saying that absolute power corrupts absolutely. When she was located two days later, she’d killed herself rather than deal with what the two of you shared.” He looked at me with admiration. “You’re quite an intense little slut, Abigail.”

I called him a vile name. “That wasn’t me!”

“Yes, it was. Believe me, I know.” I felt sick. “After that, you sharded into some sort of computer. That was easy. After stunning the good Doctor, who didn’t have a very good alarm system in place, I just pressed this against you and whispered, ‘1101001’ a few times, and off you went on another sharding adventure. According to my official log, it was then that you killed Ressler. That would have been last night. I arrived, but alas, I was too late. We’ve confined you to the sickbay and sealed off access to everyone except myself. It was only now that you came out of your sharded madness.” He held up the disk. “With a little help. Sadly, you’re about to go off sharding again.” He pressed it against my temple.

I wanted to cry, to lash out. I wanted to plead. But I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction.

“Oh, before you go, Abigail, I wanted to thank you.” I looked at him, fearing what he was going to say, but still determined not to give in to my terror. It was very hard.

“When Hawthorne didn’t show up to report the night of your beating, I had to go find her. She was gone, but you weren’t. It was I who carried you back to your bed, getting your blood all over my tunic. It

seemed you owed me for the inconvenience, so I helped myself to payment. You were unconscious, but that was probably for the better, seeing the effect you had on Hawthorne. And since you couldn't resist, it made our time together far sweeter. I enjoyed you thoroughly." He leaned down and kissed me on the lips, raking his teeth over them and drawing blood. Hot tears rolled down my cheeks.

“You’re a dead man, Posen. If not by me, then by the NATech Xeno forces using you and your ego. Either way, you’re a walking corpse.”

For a moment only, he cracked. I saw the flash of fear in his eyes as the certainty of my statement hit him deep. Then the moment passed and he smiled his sick smile and shrugged.

“Well, we all die. Some sooner than others.” There was a push on the side of my head and I heard a high whine. He leaned close to savor the moment. His voice a harsh whisper, he said, “And some die over and over. Goodbye, Wyeth. Pleasant dreams, Shard.”

My thoughts started getting cloudy and jumpy. I felt the weight sliding off my chest, then felt my chest disappear, followed by my arms and legs. Soon all of me disappeared. Where was I? Who was I? Was I?

“Pour. Press. Cool. Reset.” A disembodied voice filled my being. I looked to see where it came from, but I had no eyes and I was nowhere and I was no one.

“Pour. Press. Cool. Reset,” it repeated soothingly. Why did it say that? Was it telling me what to do? But who was I? Was I me? Or was someone else me? Since I was no one, I couldn’t be me.

“Pour. Press. Cool. Reset,” the voice said. Was that my voice? But I wasn’t a me, I was a “... a”...

“Pour. Press. Cool. Reset,” I who was not me said. “Pour. Press. Cool. Reset. pour. press. cool. reset. pour press cool reset

POUR PRESS COOL RESET POUR PRESS COOL RESET POUR PRESS COOL RESET POUR
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RESET POUR PRESS COOL RESET POUR PRESS COOL RESET POUR PRESS COOL RESET
POUR PRESS COOL RESET“...

* * * *

Posen detached the disk from her temple and admired his work. She was staring sightlessly into space, barely breathing. He switched off the restraining field. Her arms fell to her sides, but otherwise she was motionless. He kissed the unresponsive mouth, savoring the taste of her blood. There was a burning inside him. Licking his lips with anticipation, he placed his hand on her soft leg and began sliding it up under“...

There was a crackling sound from the doorway behind him. He jerked his hand away and turned quickly. Three men, followed by Eyer, burst in. She looked around, her gun drawn, and saw Posen. Her eyes glanced down at Wyeth, then returned to him. Was that an accusation he saw in her look?

“We came as soon as you called, sir. The door was sealed, so we had to burn through it. What’s the problem?”

“Problem? Problem?” His voice tight with anger and frustration. “There is no problem except with your breaking valuable property, Sergeant. There’s also a problem with your story. I did not call for help.” He waved a hand at Wyeth. “As you can see, this private of yours has sharded again. I’ve decided she is no

longer a contributing member of this regiment. Please arrange for her transport to that refuge town"... "he waited for Eyer to tell him.

"Glendale, sir."

"Yes, yes. Glendale. I want her taken there tomorrow morning." A thought came and he spoke crisply.

"Yes, tomorrow morning. In the meantime, secure this area."

"Very good, sir." Her tone contradicted her statement, it wasn't very good, but he let it slide. The sooner he got rid of her, the sooner he could "... she was still talking. "Shall I post a guard, sir?"

"A good thought, Sergeant, but unneeded. She poses no threat to us." He looked at the limp girl sadly.

"I'll stay behind for a while though. It's very hard, losing such a vibrant, youthful soldier under your command."

"Yes, sir," Eyer said woodenly. "May I advise you to reconsider, sir? She may still be a threat, and it wouldn't be wise to risk our commanding officer unnecessarily."

"What threat, Sergeant? This Shard's no threat." His choice of words contradicted his concern of only a moment ago. Would she catch it? Probably not.

"That's what we thought last night, sir, when we found her like this after she killed Doctor Ressler." The unspoken word "apparently" hung in the air for all to hear.

Damn! He hadn't thought of that. Now he was in a corner. He very much wanted to enjoy this Shard one last night, but to do so would certainly raise the suspicions of an already wary Eyer. He made a command decision.

"You're right, of course, Sergeant. Very well. Let's take this one step further. Go ahead and"... "He almost said dump, but caught himself. "...transport Private Wyeth to her new post. I will begin the puterwork to give her an honorable discharge. Carry on."

Sergeant Eyer saluted. "Yes, sir." She turned and began giving out orders. Posen walked past them and went to his quarters, trying to figure a way to make one last visit to the sickbay.

When he reached his quarters, he still hadn't worked out a plan to be with Wyeth, but he'd come up with something better. Wyeth wasn't the only Cue out there. He could request from TAU the opportunity to begin a riping rescue. Then, with a few successful raids on the biophysical plant in Nkongsamba, he'd be in a position to explore this new interest of his. It would work nicely.

"Computer. Seal my quarters. Visual, sound, entrance and exit."

"Yes, sir."

Posen whirled around. Who gave that order? It sounded like his voice.

"Computer," he said loudly, "unseal my quarters."

"I'm sorry," it responded tonelessly, "but you are not authorized to unseal Lieutenant Posen's quarters."

"What?" he shouted. "But I AM Lieutenant Posen!" Stupid computer! Making a supreme effort to control his temper, he said, "Computer. Identify me."

"You are Lieutenant Randolph Posen, commander of the 179th Regiment of the Resistance. Service number 8T--"

“Yes, that’s me. Now, computer, unseal my quarters.”

“I’m sorry,” it repeated, “but you are not authorized to unseal Lieutenant Posen’s quarters.”

“Then,” Posen responded triumphantly, “if I’m Lieutenant Posen, and only Lieutenant Posen is authorized to seal and unseal his—I mean my--quarters, who did seal them?”

“I did.”

Posen turned again, this time facing his desk. Seated behind it, its feet up on the desk, was a glowing green person who looked to be no more than a teen. Its eyes were a brilliant green, and its gaze felt warm. Posen frowned at the creature, trying to look imposing. It didn’t help his image when he backed up a several steps.

“Who the hell are you?” he demanded.

“Close, flesh. Who the hell am I? I’m your hell, Posen. Your private little hell on Earth before I send you to the eternal Hell.” It put its feet down and stood up, walking up toward him. Posen backed up again, but came up hard against a corner.

“Stay away! I’ve got a gun!” He pulled his sidearm.

“Geez!” the creature complained. “You sound like a cheap detective novel.” It laughed when Posen set the charging gun to lethal. “You’re as predictable as one, too.”

The gun toned charged and Posen pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. He pulled it again. Again nothing. He threw it at the creature’s translucent green body. It was a good throw, but the gun passed through it without harm.

“What are you doing here?”

“Hey, just following orders, flesh. Listen.” It put a hand to its ear.

“You’re a dead man, Posen. If not by me, then by the NATech Xeno forces using you and your ego. Either way, you’re a walking corpse.” Wyeth’s voice deafened him. He clapped his hands to his suddenly burning ears. They felt wet. He pulled his hands down. They were covered with blood. He screamed.

“Oh, please. You are such a wuss.” The thing motioned a hand and Posen’s screams cut off. “Much better. You can still talk, but any screaming will be muted.” It seemed to consider for a moment, then added, “For now.”

Posen didn’t know what to do. He felt terror, but needed to control it. He forced down the bile in his throat and tried to take the offensive.

“I’ll ask again, creature. What are you doing in my quarters?”

““Could you repeat the question, Alex?”” It laughed. “The question should be: What are you doing in my quarters, flesh? And the answer would be: You’re dying.”

Posen looked around, it was still his office, though the walls were a little shinier than normal. And the light seemed to come from everywhere, not just the ceiling. But the amount of light was right.

“These are my quarters.”

“Really?” It looked around. “Yeah, I guess I did do a pretty good job, didn’t I? But tell me: Can your quarters do this?” The thing raised its voice. “Level seventeen.”

Immediately, Posen’s skin began crawling with living, biting, invisible insects. The bile in his stomach came up again and wouldn’t be denied. It spilled out onto his clean uniform. His ears continued to bleed, the deep red liquid splashing on his shirt and mixing with the filth already there. He slumped to the hard floor and looked up at his tormentor.

“Why are you doing this? Stop it! Stop it at once!”

“Uh-huh. That’s your first wish. Sorry, but you’re not allowed to make that wish.” It looked at him, its face impassive. “Level twenty-three.”

The floor underneath him burst into molten lava. Posen jumped to his feet, but instead found himself on stubs of shattered bone and raw flesh. His feet had burned away. He lost his balance and fell to his hands, which disintegrated in an agonizing flash as they touched the floor.

“Please! Please stop!” He screamed, but nothing came out of his throat.

“That’s much better! I never thought teaching manners would be so hard, even to an ass like you.” Sheets of pure energy rose out of the floor, surrounding him. He felt himself being lifted free of the lava by another sheet. Suddenly, they slammed around him, encasing him. He flinched, but they didn’t hurt. In fact, they eliminated all the pain. He looked at his feet and felt relieved they were back, as were his hands. He rose shakily.

His office had started transforming. It was still his office, but the walls were beginning to separate at the corners, and pure, blinding light was flooding in. His desk had turned into a bright red stone, which the creature was sitting on. It was looking at him with an intensity that was almost a physical blow.

“Who, who are you?” Posen stammered. “You’re from NATEch Xeno, aren’t you? I can explain.”

“By all means, please explain. I’d love to hear about your actions. Level thirty-one.”

Posen flinched, but nothing happened other than the walls became partially translucent. He looked around to the chair he always kept in the corner and found its replacement: a dull red rock. He sat gingerly on it, then relaxed when it didn’t hurt. He felt slightly better. He was still at the mercy of this glowing monster, but if there was any talent Posen had above all others, it was the ability to explain away the unexplainable. It was this gift that had gotten him into Randex, into a commission, into good graces with both the Resistance and NATEch. This would be harder, but still doable.

With great detail, and more truth than he thought possible, he reported to the Xeno creature his entire mission concerning Abigail Wyeth. He omitted only his independent attentions. He finished and waited. The thing seemed in no hurry to say anything. Finally, unable to bear the constant stare, Posen rose angrily to his feet.

“Well? I’ve given you my full report. Your orders have been carried out exactly. Wyeth has been forcibly sharded three times in two days, and is now on her way to that refuge town. Glenside, or Glenwood or whatever. What more do you want?”

The creature raised a finger and Posen heard his own voice filling every cubic centimeter of space.

“It was I who carried you back to your bed, getting your blood all over my tunic. It seemed you owed me for the inconvenience, so I helped myself to payment. You were unconscious, but that was probably for the better, seeing the effect you had on Hawthorne. And since you couldn’t resist, it made our time

together far sweeter. I enjoyed you thoroughly It was I who carried you back to your bed, getting your blood all over my tunic. It seemed you owed me for the inconvenience, so I helped myself to payment. You were unconscious, but that was probably for the better, seeing the effect you had on Hawthorne. And since you couldn't resist, it made our time together far sweeter. I enjoyed you thoroughly. It was I who carried--"

"All right!" he yelled, barely audible above the booming sound. "All right! I--I took advantage of her while she was unconscious."

"You mean you sexually molested her. Level forty-one." The walls turned to glass, and Posen found himself in the middle of a vast plain. As far as he could see, there was a field of shimmering gold and green grass. Close by was a stream that was an impossible blue, shot through with ribbons of vivid scarlet-silver. Overhead, the sky was pitch black, but light flooded from everywhere.

"It was I who carried you back to your bed, getting your blood all over my tunic." His voice was even louder, pushing him to his knees and causing the grass to vibrate, setting off a low hum. "It seemed you owed me for the inconvenience, so I helped myself to payment. You were unconscious, but that was probably for the better, seeing the effect you had on Hawthorne. And since you couldn't resist, it made our time together far sweeter. I enjoyed you thoroughly. It was I who--"

"Yes! Yes! I molested her! But she's just a Cue! She has no legal rights or recourse! Why does it concern you? I carried out your orders!" He covered his ears without effect. "I wish I'd never seen that damned bitch!"

The self-accusing voice was silenced; the creature stood up and helped Posen to his feet.

"That's your second wish, flesh, and you wasted that one, too. What's done is done. Only one wish left. Better use it right. Come on, up you go, flesh. Let me show you something." They walked a few step to the now transparent walls. The creature yanked Posen back.

"We can't go through there. The walls would shatter. and there'd be litter all over the place. That's easily fixed, though." He raised his voice again. "Level fifty-three."

Instantly the walls vanished and the plain came to life. Glowing brown plants sprouting blue crystal petals sprang up from the ground. The green and gold grass swallowed up the hard floor, and Posen felt its velvety softness take the weight from his feet. He felt an excitement and joy begin to fill him.

"Good," the thing said contentedly. "Not best, but good. Follow me."

They walked for several minutes, covering ground at a fantastic rate. Posen knew where he was now. They had entered the puterverse, and this creature was one of its programmed residents. That meant he was safe from mortal harm. Perhaps this was a kind of test, to see if he were worthy of promotion within NATech Xeno. Promotion! He began to feel embarrassment over his earlier showings of fear. But at least he saw a way out. The tormenting had ended when he confessed to his molesting of the girl. Did Xeno use sexual attack in the same manner as the NATech SS? It made sense.

"Tell me, creature, do you have a name?"

"Yep." Posen's ears burned with irritation when it said nothing else. He felt anger as well. What right did this non-living thing have to not obey him? But he held his tongue, remembering the shielding He was still not absolutely certain that he was safe.

They continued on and Posen saw the land begin sloping down. He saw for the first time a large river less

than a kilometer away.

“That can’t be the Quantum!” he said in disbelief.

“Yes it can, flesh. Pretty, isn’t it?”

It was more than pretty, it was stunning. It was filled with endless streams of data, intertwined together until they became an unstoppable force working along the massive river bed. Impossibly deep shades of blue set the background for the more playful slivers of color that dashed in and out, carrying data, information, and hopes and dreams.

“I never dreamed it could be this beautiful!” Posen forgot where he was, he was so taken by the sight.

“Yeah? Try this”... Level sixty-one!“ The creature called out.

Again the landscape changed dramatically while remaining the same. Blacks became indescribably solid, and whites blinding white. Posen was able to see millions of colors all around him, and could actually see them as millions of colors. His senses reeled from the sight and he stumbled to the ground, staring at it, able to pick out each one of the billion bits of data that it was composed of. Yet despite the near overload, he reveled in it.

Then he heard a soft sound, wafting on the breeze that came off the river. Unlike everything else, he had to strain to hear it. At first it sounded like a song. Then he could pick out words. They were his words.

“It was I who carried you back to your bed, getting your blood all over my tunic. It seemed you owed me for the inconvenience, so I helped myself to payment. You were unconscious, but that was probably for the better, seeing the effect you had on Hawthorne. And since you couldn’t resist, it made our time together far sweeter. I enjoyed you thoroughly. It was I who carried you back to your bed, getting”...“

He smiled this time, not feeling any guilt. He understood now why he was here. He rose to his feet and looked at the creature, who stood staring at him, arms folded.

“I said those words, creature. They are mine and only barely describe what I meant.”

“Then you stand by them?”

“More than that. I was going to act on them again. I had hoped to spend a full night with her. I didn’t have the nerve to take her fully the first time, but believe me, I’ve learned to--”

The creature held up an arm, cutting him off.

“Okay, fine. That’s enough.” He seemed almost uncomfortable with Posen’s frankness, and Posen felt a sense of victory. He was now in control of the situation.

“Good. I hope I have proven my loyalty and willingness to serve Xeno. You will now return me to my quarters, creature.”

“Just a second, flesh. We’ve got one more place to go.”

How much further could they go? They were at level sixty-one already, only three from the theoretical limit. Did NATEch have this much power? A silly question. Of course they did.

“Very well, creature. But hurry. It’s been a long day for me.”

“Yeah, I’ll just bet it has.” He cleared his throat and spoke a single word.

“Access.” Why did that single word send an icy lance through his soul?

The thin veneer of beauty fell away from the puterverse, and Posen was standing in a vision. He could see things at a thousand kilometers or at a subatomic level. He looked at the Quantum and gasped.

It wasn't full of data. It was full of thoughts. In an instant he could see into everyone's hopes, he could read the world as a book, or as a single life. Colors became emotions which in turn became sensations of reality as well as thought.

“Where are we?” he whispered.

“We're at unrestricted access, flesh. We're in a place that is composed of pure unbound trinary code.”

Posen snapped his head around. “UTC? Impossible! Not even NATech can solve the unsolvable secret, can they?”

“That bunch of jerks? Not a chance.” Posen felt the shiver in his being again. This time, though, that shiver was also light blue laced with green and smelled like bitter cold. “This is Abigail's world.”

The words drove home with white-red razors of terror. Wyeth did this? That Shard? But he knew it was true. His terror faded to a dull throb of violet sadness. He could smell her sweet scent on the breeze. But it was a scent that accused him, for he had stolen his taste. The ground felt like her skin, but it refused him its softness, for he had stolen that as well. And the air he breathed was made from her laugh and joy and happiness. All things he had destroyed. He turned to the creature to see that it had turned dark green. Deep in its chest was a blue flame, and its eyes had turned to obsidian.

It had come. Something that happened to everyone else had now come for Posen. He should have been terrified, but he wasn't. He felt a great calm.

“You spoke correctly, creature. You have given me my own private hell. I destroyed the person who made this, and you are now going to destroy me.” He waved a hand. “All this is a taste of something I can never have. You've shown it to me to convict me. And I stand convicted. And you comfort me with my victim's gentleness, knowing that I have come to my execution on soft wings.” He was amazed at how poetic he sounded. Poetic justice? He smiled sadly.

“You will kill me now, and I will go to Hell. I will go there with a small taste of what I have surrendered for my deeds. For all eternity I am doomed to know what I could have had. This was your intent?”

“You got it, flesh. Abby's my best friend. She made me. She took care of me when I needed it. She teaches me, plays with me, works with me, loves me, though not in the way I wish were possible.” He turned his back on Posen, and looked into the Quantum. “The last thing she gave me, flesh, was the ability to access people into the puterverse. It took a while to understand, but I managed.

“What took even longer to understand was the responsibility that came with it. Think about it, flesh. From this point on, I can choose anyone I want and bring them into this world. And once they are here, all I need to do is snap my fingers and their life-sustaining shield melts away. Just like yours is going to in a moment.

“It's a huge responsibility, flesh. A huge trust. But like I said, this is Abigail's world. Not yours. Not mine. Not anyone's. It's hers. So though I may bring people here on occasion, it won't be to execute them but to educate them. If Abigail survives her sharding dissolution--and I believe she will somehow--then we'll be in a great position to begin the education. Because NATech will be gone.”

“And what of me, creature? Are you to renege on your claim that you will not execute people you bring

here?”

“Sorry, Posen, but you didn’t hear right. I didn’t bring you here, remember? You’re here at Abigail’s request. She might stop me, she might not. But we won’t find out in time for you, because you sharded her. So I go with her last words.”

The creature calling him at last by name was his sentence of death. Posen couldn’t put it off any longer. Nor did he want to. The peace and serenity of the puterverse was deep inside him already, and every moment here only made his eternal damnation that much worse. It was time to end it.

“Very well, creature. Allow me my third wish. Be quick.”

Mike raised his hand and smiled. “Now that, I can do.” And he snapped his fingers.

Chapter Seven

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“...sight came back to my eyes and I looked around. It was dark, but there was a slit of sunlight that forced its way through the boarded windows and shone on the far wall, setting a spider’s web ablaze with the color of sunset red. The spinner of the web seemed to be making the best of the fading daylight, and was busily stretching new threads onto its sticky framework, hoping to lay the perfect net for tonight’s catch of mosquitoes, gnats and flies.

I sat up. I was back in my room. Alan, or one of his people, must have discovered me and brought me back, laying me on my mattress. My shirt, a NATEch issue piece of faded gray cotton, was soaked in sweat. My pants, also NATEch issue and faded gray, were folded neatly and sitting on the crate I used for a dresser. That meant it had been Dorothy who put me to bed. She always took off my pants and cleaned them whenever I sharded. They were my only pair, and they needed to last until the Resistance hov snuck in with more. NATEch issued one pair of pants and two shirts to you at official internment, assuming those who outlived their clothes could replace them with the clothes of those who did not. Underclothes were luxuries

I flipped the sheet aside and rolled onto the floor, at trip of three inches since my mattress lay on it, and carefully stood up. The room swayed a little as the blood redistributed itself, but I stayed on my feet. I went to my counter, where I kept a small cross leaning against the wall, and did my morning devotion and prayers. I had managed to acquire a Bible shortly after arriving in Glendale, so I was also able to do a short study. Romans 6 today, which was very appropriate for shards, as comforting to us as the Twenty-third Psalm.

I finished my reading and put the tired Book down and rose. I looked at my bed and was relieved to see I didn’t have to clean up; sharding caused the body’s metabolism to nearly shut down, but particularly long episodes could lead to messy consequences. My shards hadn’t reached the point where they lasted longer than three days, for which I was thankful.

I went to my small sink and pulled the stopper out of the bare pipe. A small but steady trickle of water flowed into my washbasin. The water started out hot, brought to high temperature from the desert sun,

but became tepid after a few moments.

While I waited for the basin to fill, I began doing my stretching exercises. I didn't know who I'd sharded as, but it was a fairly safe bet it hadn't been as Miss DeChant or the girl; my muscles vigorously protested my actions. I still had most of my strength and agility. What I lacked these days was endurance. Four months of irregular meals consuming food of questionable nutritional value will do that to you.

I only stretched for five minutes. By now I was completely covered in sweat. The sun was going down within the hour, but my room was still over thirty degrees. The basin was about half full, so I stopped up the pipe. I peeled off my worn out shirt and doubly worn out panties to wash up. Dorothy had already taken off my bra, to help me breathe easier during my shard.

I doled out a small amount of soap into the basin, then set it aside. Grabbing my cooking pot, I laid it under the pipe and unstopped it again. It began filling slowly. Using my shirt as a washcloth, I cleaned myself head to toe, rinsing with the water in the pot. Using my wash water, I then cleaned both shirt and panties, silently thanking Dorothy that she'd already done my pants. Whenever I had to do them, I was stuck in my room until they dried. Walking around half naked in a town filled with rippers and NATech grunts was a less than wise idea. I wrung out my only pair of panties and put them on. My shirt I also wrung out, but hung up to dry since I had another.

I went to the crate to fetch my other shirt and noticed a note from Dorothy. She always left a note of encouragement for her charges, something to pick us up after the episode ended.

Rise & Shine, Runt!

You went off to la-la land about halfway back to your room. A runner found you about four hours later, during night patrol. I put you to bed and did the wash. That was yesterday. You'll need to stick your head in at quarters when you get back to find out how long it's been since then. Oh, put a mark in the Foundry column. Don't stay away too long, love. We miss you! Alan and the gang say hi.

Dorothy

PS. It's now two days.

I pulled my other shirt from the crate and used it to dry off. Dorothy had gotten so good with shards that she could distinguish between even non-organic shards. My foundry ripe tended to leave my body completely limp, whereas my apartment, netter, orbital station and PlaNet ripes had various degrees of tenseness. To me, they were indistinguishable except for the soreness of my muscles when I woke up. I picked up a pencil and wrote a hash in the Foundry column on my tablet. That made ten in the last three months, more than all the others combined, not counting Miss DeChant and the girl. I wondered why.

I picked up my bra and put it on. It was a far cry from the marvel of engineering, fashion, and comfort that I used to have. It wasn't even a bra, really, just a length of cloth, about two meters long and twenty centimeters wide. The idea was not to give me support--I was only modest in the bust department and it didn't look like I'd be getting much bigger. Its main function was to de-emphasize my figure and help pass myself off as a boy--at least from a distance. I don't know how much safer it made me; Neither rippers nor NATech goons cared much who they attacked. The main rule was the younger the better. And I was very young. But the cloth strip, snugly wrapped, at least gave me illusory comfort, and I'd take whatever comfort I could get. I pulled on my clean shirt and pants, and slipped my sockless feet into my shoes.

By now the still flowing water was as cool as it was going to get. I drank my fill, then stopped it up. It

would be another thirty minutes until darkness let me move around, so I tried to pass the time by cleaning my room. Since Miss DeChant had been “out” in the last week, everything was nearly perfect. In any event, there wasn’t a whole lot to clean. So I sat down and wrote out a small note to her, filling her in briefly.

I’d picked my room out less than three days after the 179th dropped me off here. It was a small office located inside one of the hundreds of gutted warehouses and factories that made up the core of Glendale. There were thousands of such little rooms, but this one was perfect. This one had been a factory, a monolithic building that housed the huge lathes and presses used to turn out ion engine casings for the starships of the twenty-third century. When they relocated to Orbital Station R in the twenty-fourth century, they took what they could and left the rest. What remained was obsolete and too bulky to justify moving and created a deadly maze of heavy equipment, oily surfaces, ambush points and long falls to the basement. And I knew the whole place. My room was against an outside wall that bordered an open field. It could get very hot during the day, but stayed warm on these cool October nights. It had only one exit--a weakness--but it was buried in a tiny side alley that itself was hidden from the street. And if an emergency came up and I absolutely had to get out, I had my energy pistol--thoughtfully given back to me by Jody before they brought me here--and could take out the wall. It would never be my home--shards never referred to where they lived as home in the hope that one day they would have a real one--but it would do.

Best of all, it was close to the Resistance Glendale base and I had a nicely disguised route there. It was at the base that I spent most of my time. And when I wasn’t there, I was here. I did not move around very much. If I sharded in a place where I wouldn’t be found by the Runners--as we called the Resistance patrol--there was precious little chance of my surviving the attentions of anyone else. I had undergone a temporary sterilization to prevent pregnancy, but that was the least of my worries. The last woman shard caught by rippers died the day after her attack. The last male shard caught by them was found dead.

I waited another two years for the thirty minutes to pass, and then it was finally time to go. First, dinner at the base. Then, my endurance permitting, a long session with Mike. The excitement inside me was almost a living thing. Just another few of these sessions, with Alan along as chaperone and right hand man, and everything that I’d been through and been put through would pay off. I quietly closed the door to my room and picked my way to the outside.

* * * *

The corporal had just finished his third canteen of water of the day when the subdural signal behind his ear pinged. He put down the canteen and lifted his rifle. The gun was fully charged and lethal up to one kilometer, provided the shooter was good enough. The corporal was a great deal more than good enough. He squinted through the night sight and looked at the only exit from the shard’s room.

She stepped out carefully, a slip of a girl with long hair tucked into her shirt. He’d been warned over and over to always be careful and never take her for granted. If she discovered his presence here, he’d be dead within the hour. He never doubted it. He’d been working around shards and Cues for twenty-six years, and the first lesson you learned was never underestimate them. So when she looked across the open field in the general direction of the warehouse where his elevated sniper nest was, he became completely motionless and made sure to not look directly at her. Rumor had it that shards seemed to know when they were being watched, and again he didn’t doubt it.

He looked casually back at her through the sight and felt a small relief to see the back of her head. Although she was over two hundred meters away, he was confident he could punch a neat hole through her skull with a quarter-second burst. He was the best in the squad, and his squad was the best in the region. He watched her as she picked her way through the trash-strewn alley before disappearing around

a corner. Putting the rifle down, the corporal reached for the fourth canteen and waited in the darkness for the soft tone to go off again.

* * * *

It took me thirty minutes to make the trip to base, twice as long as when I was more myself. I had to rest several times and wait for my muscles to stop quivering. In a way, this was the worst part about sharding: those few hours after an episode waiting to get my strength and wind back. Over the past month, that time seemed to be getting longer and longer. No matter. Another week or two and I could take as much time as I wanted to recover. But first“... I pushed off from the pile of crumbled masonry I'd been resting against and went on.

Five minutes later, I dropped down the last flight of stairs and walked through the grungy door. There was an easier entrance, but it was more exposed, and used only for emergencies. Shards that still had some control came this way.

Alan, where he always was when not on the streets, looked up from his terminal. I was on a platform a floor above him, but the ceiling was easily ten meters high, so we were in the same room. A large smile came across his tired face when he saw me.

“Hello, there! Glad to see you up and about.” He narrowed his eyes and looked. “Abigail, right?”

“Uh-huh. Miss DeChant's still in bed.” Once she learned how to move around, Miss DeChant started using this route. The girl did, too, but everyone I talked to said they could tell in an instant when I was the girl. Miss DeChant and I were more difficult to tell apart. Until we talked, that is. Apparently Miss DeChant had a very recognizable French accent.

I went down the steps along the wall to the lower floor where Alan was. He stood up so he could catch me when I jumped into his arms. I gave him a huge hug and a kiss high on the cheek, about the only place his beard wasn't. He set me down and mussed my hair. He seemed like a big brother to me. He smiled one of his endless smiles and jerked his head toward the kitchen.

“There's some soup and fresh bread in the kitchen. Help yourself. Dorothy's over at Hoc and Chiv's place, but she'll be back in an hour or so. She'd love to see you.”

“And I'd love to see her. Uhh, could I ask you to get me some soup, Alan? You and I need to get a bunch of stuff done with Mike tonight, and if I walk in there, Miss DeChant might walk out, and that would really throw a wrench in those plans.”

“You're going back on so soon? Is that wise, Abigail?”

“No, it's not wise at all. In fact, it's downright stupid. That's why you come along, Alan. So I don't have to pay for my stupid mistakes. But things are reaching a head and I'm on a schedule.”

“And the schedule is”...“ he prodded.

“Six more days as me should do it. Probably nine or ten days over all. I want to be in the best shape possible when we cross.” I snatched a roll from his soup plate and shoved it in my mouth. Rude, I know, but he was done and there was no point in wasting food. “Is the equipment in yet?”

“Don't talk with food in your mouth. Uh-huh. It came in yesterday. We needed you to calibrate it, though, so it's still in its retropressure crating.”

“Cool. I'll start work on it after we're done in the puterverse.” I walked to the back room where we

kept our best access point, still chewing on the bread.

I stepped through the inner door and into level twenty. Mike kept a permanent gate in this room, and only Alan and I were allowed in. Truth to tell, only Alan and I could come in, and stay conscious, even though level twenty was not a prime number and therefore easier than nineteen or twenty-three. Having it at level twenty helped in two ways. It gave Mike time to slap shields around Alan before we went total, and it was an effective, but not fatal, deterrent for anyone who wandered in here. Mike hadn't given me a lot of details on Posen's last few seconds of life, but the picture was still pretty clear; I wouldn't wish that kind of agony on anybody.

Thinking of Posen, I realized I hadn't thought of him much in past months. When my induced sharding episode ended, I was already in Glendale. It was another week before I could access. When Mike told me he'd carried out my sentence, I'd felt a flash of satisfaction that Posen was dead; but as the days passed, I'd come to feel remorse as well. Was it my place to pass a death sentence? Yes, it was. He was a traitor, under the same sentence of death when caught. And he'd be unable to impose his wretched will and ideals on the 179th. But despite all that, and despite everything he had done to me, I took no pleasure from his death. It was needed, and was carried out, quick and without intention to torture. There was nothing to be gained by punishing beyond what was needed. The Bible said an eye for an eye, but many people didn't understand that God was saying just an eye for an eye, and no more.

I shook the cobwebs out of my head. Keep your focus, Abby As I said, I walked into level twenty when I passed through the door. A quick glance around showed me it was our favorite spot near the Quantum. Sunk down near the bank, the black barriers that were present even at this level were hidden from sight. The only large landmark was the partial span that reached over the Quantum. Mike was leaning against its massive, ancient base.

"Hey, kid." He gave me a big grin, much the same kind that Alan gave me, and held out his arms.

"Hiya, pervert." I gave him a big hug and clung to him for a long time. It was these moments that I ached for. With Aaron gone, and my life stampeding toward inevitable dissolution, I found it easier to think of the fantastic. I had wondered once if I could fall in love with a cyberbeing of my own writing. I knew now that I could. Through everything, Mike had been there for me. Mike and Kiki. How could I not love them both?

He pulled me away, but kept an arm around me. He lifted my chin and gave me a quick kiss on the lips. Soft flickers of plasma raced between us. He'd changed so much since the last package of coding I'd given him. He took his execution of Posen, and his new powers, very seriously. I closed my eyes and kissed him back. Warmth, love, peace, and security flowed over me. And healing.

I leaned my back against him, still wrapped in his arms, and we stared out across the Quantum. The far side looked darker these days. Or was that just my imagination? The calm before the storm? I sighed.

"What is it, love?" Mike asked softly. He was still a first class jerk. And there'd always be a little leech in him, I suppose. But like now, he could be very sensitive. Not that I'd ever tell him that. He'd brush it off and say something crude. Although, maybe not. He had changed a lot, even to projecting himself taller, to better protect me.

"I was just thinking of my past three years, Mike. So much has happened."

"And so much more to come." He added.

"I suppose. At least for the next week or so. After that"... "My voice tapered off and I sighed again. "Mike, I sharded as the foundry again."

“That makes ten times in the last three months.” he said thoughtfully. “More than the all the others combined, not counting Miss DeChant and the girl. I wonder why.”

“That’s what I thought. My guess is that it’s the most basic of the ripes. Or the most repetitive. According to what we dug up, all I did for over 130 years was--”

“You mean, all it did for over 130 years.” Mike corrected gently.

“All right. All it did for over 130 years was repeat the same basic set of instructions. A false persona isn’t supposed to cross the riping barriers, but I wonder if something so repetitive can leave a deeper mark”... leave a ma-ma--“ I started sobbing.

“Hey, hey, Abby. Settle down.” He gave me a reassuring hug. “Let’s not talk about that now.”

“Oh, Mike!” I began crying. “I don’t want to die! My life’s not much, but it’s mine! And I don’t want to give it up yet! There’s so much to see and do and experience! Does it have to end now?”

“Yes. Yes it does.” He said unsympathetically. I jerked away from him angrily. I turned on him, my fists clenched.

“You jerk! How can you say such a mean thing?”

“It’s not mean, Abigail. It’s true. If you follow every documented case of sharded dissolution, you’ll be dead in a few months. Maybe only a few weeks.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. And I had thought he was sensitive. I started pounding on his chest.

“Stop it! Stop it! Don’t say those things!” I couldn’t stop crying now. He grabbed my wrists and pulled my face close to his. He held me like that until I looked into his pale green eyes, so empty, yet so full of expression.

“Fine. I’ll stop it if you stop it.” I stared back at him and stopped struggling. He let my wrists go, but I didn’t move. I just kept staring at him.

“Abigail, I know what’s coming, and it’s tearing me apart. But it’s like you said to me when I didn’t think it fair. You said, ‘You’re right, it’s not fair. Deal with it.’ And that’s what I’m saying to you. Deal with it.

“We’ve been looking for an answer to this dissolution for a long time. I’ve made over six trillion searches, trying to put together just the right combination to find a cure. I haven’t found it. I haven’t stopped looking, either. I still have hope. And so should you.

“In the meantime, we have work to do. Work you have devoted yourself to and work you created me to do. If your Maker is only going to give you three years, then let’s use it wisely. That book He wrote, the Bible. In it He said, ‘So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.’”

“Michael!” I said, in shock. “How in the world”...?”

He shrugged, betraying his pleasure with a slight grin. “I have access to 717 translations, plus the original Hebrew and Greek, and I know how much value you put on what He has said and done. I don’t know if I have a God. If I do, I hope your God is mine, too.”

“Ruth.”

“Eh?” He said. “Oh, from the Old Testament. Yeah, I guess so. Anyway, take those words to heart, kid, and let’s live with what’s already ours, and not worry about what’s not.” He groaned. “Oh, man! That sounded so lame!”

“No it didn’t.” I giggled at his smirk. “Well, maybe a little. But, it sounded nice, too.” I gave him a big, shameless kiss on his mouth. “Okay! I’m better now!”

“That’s nice,” said Alan, walking up behind us. “So, what did I miss?”

“That, Lieutenant Lockwood,” I laughed, “is none of your business.”

* * * *

“Worms! Three seconds, Abby!” Mike’s voice yelled through the solid data-rock. “Move your pretty little butt!”

“I need twenty! Alan!” I called out. I was lying on my back, both my arms buried inside the memory conduit that was in turn buried in the pitch-black rock.

“Got it, Abby!” Alan jumped down to the surface to engage the worm, leaving me to concentrate on the data-mine. These things were tricky. If I didn’t direct the packet burst exactly right, the rerouting would be flawed and a valuable link would be lost. Worse, invaluable lives would be hurt. This conduit was a primary pool used for organizing the medical databases on three continents. It had a split picolink back-up, which would kick in less than one billionth of a second after conduit failure, but I had already taken care of that one. I’d also mined the migrated dynamic imprint. I couldn’t afford to leave a single trace of NAtch’s presence left after detonation, or like a virus, it would grow back.

I heard loud explosions as Alan dealt with the worms. From the sound of the patterns, he had chosen to imitate a surge failure. On the outside, it would appear as though the worms had received too much power and had begun tracking themselves, which inevitably left a big mess. Mike would already be mimicking the surge at the lower access levels. They made quite a pair. I turned my attention back to where it belonged.

The rock faded away and I could partially see the mine. It was now completely filling the conduit. Everything looked hazy because we were on level nineteen and I didn’t want to enrich the data stream with UTC. That really would cause a surge.

“Give me a seven-way indicator, please.” Obediently, seven lights appeared, showing the proper alignment of the mine. I rotated it while shifting the top edge back. Five lights began flashing. I pulled it down. One light went off, the other two flashed, for a total of six.

“Phase drift ascending from negative twenty-five until unit lock.” The mine tingled in my hands, then became hard again as the seventh light started flashing. Bingo.

“Set and activate in five, four, three”...“I took my hands away, and the conduit disappeared as the rock became opaque. I rolled onto my stomach and dropped down through the lower rock to the battle area. I could stand to work off a little steam.

I fell clear of the roof of the cavern and saw Mike and Alan duking it out with not one but three worms about five hundred meters below me. A fourth one lay in pieces, its glowing guts painting a nearby black barrier a light gray.

Mike had one, Alan another, which left one for me. I was in free fall, so I shot out my wings to gain some maneuverability. I didn't play around with my feathered ones, though. This was for real. Steel rods, razor sharp along the leading edge, telescoped up and out from my back. The wings crackled with power, sending out blinding light from their molecule-thick surface. I went into a full power stoop, aiming myself at my worm.

It looked up at me, it's massive smooth face looking vaguely human. Worms were extremely powerful programmed creatures. This one was easily ten meters long and three meters thick. In fact, it looked more like a grub than a worm. Since this was its domain, it could draw power straight from the ground, and use that power for both shielding and weapons.

None of that mattered. It fired three shots at me. The first two hit my wings and were absorbed. The third bolt I caught with my hands. I quickly analyzed the power modulation and adjusted my signature to nearly match. I then used the energy to form a two-dimensional plane which I projected out about one meter in front of me.

I hit the worm at full speed. Since my energy signature was almost, but not quite, matching, I didn't pass through. I sliced through. My plane destroyed the worm's shielding, then penetrated its tough hide. Flying straight into it, I felt a tugging on my wings as they split the thing wide open. Such was my speed that I continued into the ground several meters before I could stop, making a nice sized crater. I scrambled to my feet and hurriedly went aloft. Not out of fear of counterattack but out of fear I was going to get its guts all over me. The sense of smell was greatly enhanced in the puterverse, and at times like these, that was a curse. I climbed quickly and did manage to avoid most of it. It lay in two pieces, its insides dribbling over my crater's edge and filling it with goo. Disgusting.

I went to help Mike and Alan, but was disappointed to see they didn't need any help. Mike was casually frying his with a blazing green plasma jet, and Alan was tidying up after setting off several implosion bombs inside the worm. Alan really had a knack in the puterverse, and Mike genuinely liked him. I'd been worried when I first introduced them; Mike was not fond of flesh other than me. But I needn't have worried. They had met earlier, and Alan had impressed Mike no end. And Alan's easy way in our world only increased that impression.

The battle was completely over by the time I'd landed again and cleaned off my wings. Mike walked over to the crater to admire my work. He leaned over and took a big sniff.

"Mmmmm, what's for dinner, honey?" He kicked a piece of still quivering worm into the hole and walked back to us. Alan was next to me, stooping ever so slightly. I'd brought him up pretty quick through the levels, and the shields helped. But nobody could be expected to perform like this without adverse effects. I squeezed his hand and slipped him a shot of UTC. His form, a kind of orangish brown, intensified.

"Hey! None of that stuff!" Mike protested. "I don't need to see you two doing kissy face. Geez! Next thing you know, you'll be--"

"Cork it, Rickles. It's just a little go-go juice. We've got a long way to go, and without Alan here, you'd be forever making messes I'd have to clean up."

Alan took a deep breath. "Thanks, Abby. I sometimes get carried away. Always a fun time with you and Mike, but always a little draining." He stretched and yawned. "Where to now, Mike?"

"Well, let's see." Mike looked off into the distance briefly. "Abby's got these conduit mines running smooth. Less than one chance in 400,000 any of them will be discovered. We've already finished the hyperidor trajectory core system. And we have to wait until tomorrow to get at the NATech ground

supply mainframe. That makes the Toronto tertiary power grid unit next, with the central European weather nets after that.”

“No.”

Mike and Alan looked at me expectantly.

“How about I show you our entry point?” I’d been wanting to share my final plans with them, and now seemed as good a time as any.

“What about our schedule?” Alan protested, but mildly. I’d clearly piqued his interest in seeing how we were going to cross.

“That’s one of the best things about being a woman.” I said. “Women”...“

“...can always change their minds.” Mike finished. “Alan, don’t even try to change her mind. I’ve never been able to. If she says we’re going to see the entry point, then that’s where we’re going. Unless she changes her mind again.”

“Who am I to argue?” conceded Alan, winking at Mike. “I’ve tried several times to change a woman’s mind, and I’ve ever accomplished was to get her mad at me. I’m with you, Mike. Better the safe route and just give in.”

“Men!” I stamped a foot. “I can’t believe you two, sometimes! It’s not that different a change. Besides, you both want to see it, don’t you?”

“Sorry, ma’am.” Alan said contritely, sneaking a poorly concealed grin at Mike. “See? Nothing but trouble.”

Mike shook his head sadly. “You really should know better, Alan.”

Arrggh! It was just one change! What was the big“... Oooh! I popped out my feathered wings and took off quickly, leaving them to catch up. To think I used to be a man. I would have never been that rude!

I heard Mike’s jets catching up to me. I sped up and smiled to myself as I arced across the pitch-black puterverse sky. There were, I admitted, far worse companions. And few better friends.

* * * *

“There it is.” I announced proudly.

“This is it?” Mike didn’t even try to hide his disappointment. “This” was sludge-covered pile of garbage that stood at least four meters high. It showed no glow whatsoever, meaning the data was long, long dead. Of course, the stench would have told anyone that from half a kilometer.

“Are you sure, Abby?” Alan asked. He was struggling to keep his enthusiasm, but it wasn’t coming off too well. “I admit that its repugnance alone would drive away the curious. But how could it be an access point to the far side of the Quantum?”

“Here, let me show you.” I raised my voice. “Kiki!”

Kiki showed up in her flower, as she always did. This time however, it was a pretty sickly looking blossom, and her attitude was less than bubbly.

“Eeeewww! What’s that smell?” She looked around and quickly located the source of stench. “Oh. The

Quantum headwaters.” She looked at me accusingly. “This is not a place to bring a lady, Abby!”

“Uh-huh. So what does that make me, Kiki?” I said with a laugh. “Com’n. I want you to show the boys what we’ve found.”

“Okay. I’ll need a sec to build the slider, though. All this gunk is going to make it tougher.” She raised her arms, and a small piece of ground rose up through the sludge beneath her, glowing a dim white. While Kiki was busy, I turned to Mike and Alan.

“About four months ago, while I was still at the 179th, I gave Kiki a few things to do. One of them was to refine and embellish the unilateral accessing code I’d written for you, Mike. Another was to build the routines for your shields, Alan, although I didn’t have anyone precise in mind to use them at the time. But I’d seen how high level access affected Ressler and Jody with my shields, and I needed improved models.

“And the third thing was to find this.” I waved a hand at the pile of yuck. “Are you ready, Kiki?”

“Yep! Ready when you are, boss!” Programming always brought out the best in Kiki.

“Great. Go ahead, girl.” She clapped her hands once and raised them above her head, like a conductor about to lead the orchestra. The analogy was apt: Her UTC coding was a work of art. I motioned Mike and Alan close.

“Hang on, gentlemen. It’s going to get cozy for a minute or so. Kiki’s going to take us down to level one.” I shot Mike a look. “And you keep your hands to yourself, pervert.” He grinned and took my hand, Alan taking the other.

We had huddled together for only a moment when huge black walls appeared at about one hundred meters and began racing toward us. As they approached, we could hear a rumbling. Some sophisticated security walls also used sound to keep people away. It was even possible to disrupt a low-level access with sound.

Our level access was far from that though, so it was only annoying. We reached level one, and the walls were now touching, encasing us. It was still very bright, though; Mike and I gave out more than enough light. I felt the hard vibrations of the wall as it pressed at my back and snuggled closer to Mike, who shifted his position to better hold me. Despite my occasional warnings and threats about keeping his hands to himself, Mike always seemed to know when to mess around and when not to. And he definitely knew how far he could go without making me uncomfortable. An odd mix of playful rogue and thoughtful gentleman. Or was it playful gentleman and thoughtful rogue?

“Right now,” I had to yell to be heard above the teeth-rattling hum, “this looks like a single wall. Since no one can enter the river, and it’s impossible to gain a height higher than the wall, there’s no way to tell how thick it is. Or that it’s hollow.” I pointed toward the heap. “See? It’s buried by wall. But watch this! Kiki, start working us up. You know where to stop.”

Kiki began moving us up through the levels, announcing each one as we entered it. By level three, there was enough room to move around, although the pile of muck was still entombed in one of the walls.

It started appearing by level seven, but the walls did not actually begin separating until level twelve, which I pointed out.

“We’re at level twelve. Less than one percent of the population is able to reach this high. But it isn’t until now that you can squeeze between the walls.”

Nothing much more happened for a while. The walls had disappeared by level eighteen, and everything was back to normal two levels later. Kiki kept taking us up, but the landscape remained static. Finally, Kiki lowered her hands and turned to us.

“This is it. We’re at level thirty-one.”

“I’m afraid I missed something, Abby.” Alan offered.

“Not yet you haven’t, Alan. Until now, this place has been pretty normal, except for the stench. Now let’s go to level thirty-two. Kiki?” She raised her hands once more.

The pile of muck came to life. Mike jumped back, and his hands began to shimmer with plasma. I motioned him to watch. The mound continued to twist and grow. Soon, it stood nearly three meters high and had taken on a cubish form. It stopped groaning and stood there, a massive pile of filth that was obviously covering a small structure.

“There it is,” I said triumphantly.

“Wow, that’s incredible, Abby!” Mike said with excitement. “You’ve got your own pile of self-growing slime. How proud you must be.”

“Get with it, Mike.” Kiki actually spoke sharply to him, a first. “Can’t you see it’s a back door?”

“A what?” Mike and Alan said in unison.

“A back door.” Kiki explained patiently. “In the early centuries of computers and cybernetics, many programmers would build an unauthorized access port, then bury it somewhere in the system. That meant that the programmer could gain access to her work anytime she wanted to. And no security system could spot it.”

“Why isn’t that done today?”

“Because the security systems of today can root out any non-unbound trinary code procedure.” Kiki smiled sweetly. “They’re called worms, Mike.”

He shot her a dirty look. “Well, duh. What I meant was, ‘Why haven’t the worms snooped out this spot?’”

“Two possible reasons, Mike,” I answered. “First, we don’t know that the worms aren’t locating and reporting this. Maybe it’s just being ignored by the people it’s being reported to.”

“That would mean that this is a NATEch port, right, Abigail?” Alan asked, not quite believing it himself.

“I think you already know the answer, Alan, and you’re right; it’s not a NATEch port. Not a known one, at least. That would mean the first reason is wrong. That’s what I think. The second reason the worms can’t find it is that this structure predates all the worms. Here, look at this. You, too, Kiki. I haven’t shown you this yet.”

I stepped forward and burned off the muck from two of the walls and the door. Holding a fireball in my hand to provide light, I pointed to the detailed work.

“Look. Here, here and here. See the wall bindings? Look at the code riveting and the cross-stressed subroutines. And see the entrance portal? There’s a five-step entry program that’s kept separate from the system initiation sequence, to prevent corruption and back-surge forced entry.”

Alan chuckled. "I'm sure you three find that very interesting, Abby, but I haven't a clue about what you're talking about. Remember? I'm just the hired muscle here."

"Don't feel bad, Alan." Mike piped in. "I'm missing it, too. I have access to every single piece of information available to the puterverse, but I'm feeling like a kid's tabinal." He looked at me. "What are you yakking about?"

"Hacker." I sneered with mock derision. "You should treat programming like an art. Know the masters before you, Mike, and you'll learn where you're going. I'll bet Kiki knows, don't you, Kiki?"

Kiki had walked up to the structure and projected a flower up about halfway. She was running a hand over the design, as though it were a sacred thing.

"Young." She whispered, caressing it a little longer, allowing the codes to flow over and under her fingers. "This is Chris Young's work," she repeated firmly.

"WHAT!" Alan exclaimed. "You mean the puterverse creator? Can something that old still be useful?"

"Hey, I'm standing here, Alan." I said dryly.

"I'm sorry, Abby. I didn't mean it that way. Besides, you and this port are two different things." He stepped up and inspected the door. "Where does it go?"

"Under the river."

All three turned to stare at me and I smiled.

"This portal is the only way in the entire puterverse to cross the Quantum. I'm positive. That's the only thing it can do, really. Why else would it be here? And you know what that means, right?"

By their expressions, they didn't know what it meant. I pointed over the Quantum at the dim light on the distant bank. "That means that the far bank has been inaccessible and under very specific and very restrictive control for over six hundred years. Long enough that it proves it was Chris Young who designed it that way."

"I don't understand, Abby." Kiki said. "Why would Chris Young build anything in the puterverse for such an evil purpose?"

"It probably wasn't evil at the time, Kiki," Alan answered for me. "And while moral evil is absolute--or should be--many other actions are seen as evil only because of current political climates. What we see as dictating our lives and society may not have started as such. Like NATEch, who may still be behind this."

"It may be NATEch." I agreed, "In fact, I believe it is NATEch. So far as I know, Chris worked only for NATEch. It wasn't the kind of organization you ever left. But it's going to be a splinter of the overall organization, working completely independently of the NATEch we know, and almost certainly without NATEch's knowledge."

"In essence, a shard of NATEch. How ironic." Alan said with a slow smile.

"That's not irony." I said. "That's justice."

* * * *

Four hours later, I was pawing my way through the pulled-apart packing that the variable mass simulator had been shipped in. You'd think they'd pack carbonized titanium bolts in their own package, and not

just slide them into their uncharged holes. Just because a crate isn't supposed to be turned over during shipping doesn't mean it won't be turned over. I had jumped into the thick air packing and was swimming my way through it, trying to find the missing bolt, when Alan came in carrying a tray. He set it down and walked over, peering over the chest-high crate. Chest-high to him. Head-high to me.

"You really shouldn't be pawing around in that muck, Abby. They say that heavy air packing can cause serious rashes on some people. It isn't safe."

"For your information Alan, science long ago determined there was so much stuff in the world that was harmful to you, they figured the best thing for you to do was to starve to death." I felt the heavy, two-kilo bolt brush against my leg and fished it out. "Besides, it wouldn't be too healthy to turn on a mass simulator with one of these missing. Here, help me out of this, would you?"

He took my extended arm and boosted me out of the crate. Outside the containment field, the heavy air quickly broke down to a normal nitrogen/oxygen atmosphere and dissipated, the extra electrons sending sparks out from my legs and torso. My figure shifted from a cloudy blob back to its normal curvy, bumpy self. Alan nodded approval.

"As Mike would say, 'hubba, hubba!' or some such crude remark."

"Now don't you start, too." I complained, reaching for my shirt. I still had my wrap on around my chest. I pulled it on and left it loose to help keep me cooler. "I've got nothing extra that you haven't already seen before. Why must men always give everything a sexual overtone?"

"A gross and unfair exaggeration, young lady. If I told you once, I've told you a million times: don't exaggerate." He smiled. "And don't tell me you were immune to a beautiful young woman's charms when you were a man?"

"I don't recall and it's none of your business, Lieutenant Lockwood." I smiled. "Anyway, I have to admit that experience on both sides of the gender gap have shown me that we ladies aren't as prim and proper as many of us may lead you to believe."

"Ahh! I suspected as much!" He didn't sound too surprised.

"Now I've let out the secret. Try not to share it with too many men. We women have our mystique to maintain, you know. By the way," I added, sizing him up head to toe. "You're not too bad looking yourself. Especially with that roguish beard of yours."

He laughed and slid the bolt into its powered hole. There was a low hum as the bolt magnetically soldered itself in place, followed by the unit's self-activation once the cyclical self-diagnostics determined it was within safe operating parameters. The display kicked on and a holo panel appeared. Alan took a quick glance at the readouts.

"So, how long to calibrate?"

I picked up the anti-ionic rag and began wiping off the remnant heavy-air molecules that were attracted to the simulator's charged surface. I shrugged my shoulders. "Dunno. We need the highest possible tolerances, so I'll want to calibrate to within at least a ten-nanosecond phase shift. I'd prefer a three-nanosecond. Maybe six hours. Maybe twenty. Depends on how much vibration it was submitted to during manufacture and shipping, and how close to the ion engines it was stored. I won't really know until I open it up. In the meantime, I'll probably just spend another hour or two wiping off the heavy air. That stuff is worse than silly putty in your pajamas."

“I know what pajamas are, of course. But what’s silly putty?”

“You mean it’s actually gone? I thought it was self-breeding. It’s a soft substance that children used to play with. I spent more than one Sunday afternoon transferring the color newspaper comics onto a handful of the stuff.”

“Color newspaper comics?” He waved his hands when I opened my mouth. “Never mind. You have a tendency to explain one ancient thing with another. You’d never get started on the simulator. But I’d wager you do have time for a little dinner.”

I tossed the rag onto the simulator. “I sure do! Smells good, too! What is it, split-pea soup?”

“Very good!” He said admiringly, pulling the cover off the tray, revealing a bowl of steaming soup and a hunk of fresh bread. “Enjoy!”

“That won’t be hard. Dorothy’s a great cook.” I took an appreciative sniff of the soup. “Although if she were to add a little more pepper and perhaps a touch of--”

“Abigail!” Alan said sharply.

I jumped at his hard voice, then caught myself. I couldn’t dwell too long on food preparation, or I’d be guaranteed to shard as Miss DeChant.

“Sorry, Alan. Thanks.” I sat down and said my dinner prayers quietly. I started digging in while Alan left me alone to eat.

I was tempted to linger over the soup, but had a lot to do tonight. I ate some, then picked up the end of the loaf and took it with me and began dusting down the simulator. By now, the heavy air molecules had gathered enough to blur some of the edges. I began brushed them off, filling the rag, then shook it out. The de-ionized cloth helped break down the molecule structure of the air. It was tedious, repetitive work.

At least I had something to think about. With this simulator, Mike would be able to better link this room to the puterverse. I had long suspected there was something more to puterverse access than a virtual link. True, our bodies remained motionless in the physical world--I chose not to distinguish it as the “real” world because to do so would mean the puterverse was not real, nor anything in it--but there was a toll on those bodies. Whether that toll was because the puterverse was slightly hostile to our physical bodies or whether it was merely involuntary reactions to imagined stimuli was unknown. I suspected the former. Mike didn’t scare Posen to death, he executed him.

By improving the link through external support like this simulator, the physical toll was reduced. At least for Alan. The puterverse had absolutely no physical effect on me. I didn’t know why, but I was beginning to have an idea“...

I took a big bite of bread and started brushing off the base of the unit. I was nearly finished. The bread had cooled by now, but was still very tasty. Trust Dorothy to bake it just long enough to bring out a crispy“...

“...crust that locked in the wonderful yeast smell. She’d learned that from me a couple months ago, though she was nearly as good to start with. Heaven knows she had enough practice, cooking for all those shards. We very much appreciated her efforts.

I stood up and looked around. Where was I? I sighed sadly. Abigail must have let her thoughts drift again. I looked down at the rag in my right hand and the piece of bread in my left. Only moments ago, it had been a freshly cleaned bed sheet I was folding for Dorothy to take down to the Room. Of course,

those moments may have been days or weeks ago. I looked at the machine Abigail had been working on. I had absolutely no idea what it was or what it did. There was some sort of display on the top, but what it meant was quite beyond me.

I folded the rag and placed it on the machine. It would be best not to disturb it. Abigail was a gifted young woman and knew far more than I ever would about technology. I ate the final bite of bread, and looked for the tray of food. Picking up the napkin, I wiped off my hands.

My middle felt cool, and I noticed my shirt was not tucked into my pants. Embarrassed and more than a little nervous, I carefully straightened it out and tucked in the shirt. Next to feeling guilty about taking over Abigail's mind, this was probably the most difficult thing about sharding. She was a fine girl, proper and demure by most accounts, although she tended to be a trifle careless about both her appearance and her modesty. I recognized that I was at the base, which meant Alan had certainly seen her stomach and naval. Quite unladylike, though understandable, I suppose. She was young and very attractive. I had been both at one time, myself, and though my riping makeup precluded my ever wanting to be a showoff, I remember feeling a small amount of pride in the way I turned a man's head forty years ago. More precisely, four hundred years ago. Now, I had the body, but not the mind to find such things desirable. Far better to serve quietly and efficiently. I picked up the tray and headed to the kitchen.

Dorothy was pulling out another of her endless loaves of bread from the oven when I walked in. She smiled at me, then noticed my shirt. She kept smiling, but I noticed a small flicker of disappointment in her eyes, for which I bore her no grudge.

"Oh, dear. She must have gotten caught up in my food again."

"Oui, Mademoiselle. Either that or cleaning. She had a dust cloth in her hand when I woke up. How long have I been gone?"

"Seven days, Miss DeChant. Abigail came back for four days, then she sharded as the foundry, coming out of it just today. It's about midnight now."

I shook my head sadly, my eyes becoming wet. "Only a few hours this time? It is so unfair, Dorothy. I have had my life. It seems that she should have an opportunity to celebrate hers, without me intruding constantly. Such sadness."

Dorothy put an arm around my shoulders. "Don't blame yourself, Miss DeChant. It's not your fault. You are as much a victim as Abigail."

"Not true, Mademoiselle. She is a real person, my soulner. I'm just a construct, the image of a man's dream, a man dead now for centuries."

"You're being too hard on yourself. We're the same age, Miss DeChant. We have many of the same experiences. Who's to say which is more real than the other? I'll not make that judgment. If you are my inferior, you cannot disagree. If you are my equal, you will not disagree. And if you are my superior, then that is its own proof."

I smiled, cheered by her words. "I appreciate your comfort, Dorothy. Merci." I began to fill the sink. "Well, let us not waste time. You finish your bread, and I will begin work on these dishes."

Chapter Eight

It must have been early morning, judging by the slight chill, when I awoke the next day. I had

stayed at the base assisting Dorothy for several hours before returning to Abigail's room. Perhaps it was my room as well. I had made changes to it since Abigail selected it four months ago, and she had kept them. She had even written me several notes, thanking me for keeping the room so clean. But since there was only one person living here, it seemed silly to call it "our" room.

I rose to my feet and pulled the sheet from the bed to wash it. The pillowcase was not very clean, so I removed it as well. I went to the kitchen area and removed the stopper from the water pipe to fill the basin. I then set to the task of cleaning the room.

How a child could live in such a place was difficult for me to understand. I know she made an honest effort to keep our living quarters clean, but she missed so many of the little things that it generally looked like a well-taken-care-of mess. She had hung up her other shirt on the line, but it was bunched up and even in this dry air was still damp in a few spots. There was a note to her from Dorothy that had been left out. Beside it, a note Abigail had written to me. Even the cooking pot looked as though she had not rinsed it out. All this in just a few hours. I had never been like this! Of course, I had had no choice; I was a conscientious housemaid from the moment they began riping Abigail's mind, implanting my programmed psyche into it, which they then put into a young body not unlike this one. What she lacked in domestic skill she more than made up for in other areas. I couldn't flit about the puterverse like she could, nor work with such complicated machinery as she did. Between the two of us, we made a good team. For not the first time, I wished we could have the opportunity to meet and talk in a place other than that horrid little room. Which reminded me of her note. I picked it up and opened it.

Hiya, Miss DeChant!

It's October 21st, 2679, so if you're reading this, you probably haven't missed too much. I'm heading over to the base to fool around in the puterverse with Mike and Alan. My project is coming along nicely and I hope to take it to 'em in a week or so.

Dorothy washed our pants out yesterday or the day before. (I think I was out for two days as the foundry, but I haven't foundry out yet.--ha! ha!--) If you're looking for something to do, and you always are, we're out of bread. We don't want the girl to get hungry and wander off in broad daylight, so if you get a chance, bake up a loaf or two. I'd try to cook some, but I'd either ruin it or shard into you anyway, so you're nominated.

The place looks great! I can't thank you enough. You take such good care of me I feel spoiled. You're the best roommate a girl could have. Frank's got a housekeeper ripe, too, but she freaks out every time she sees himself and doesn't do anything except run around"... well, never mind. I'm sure you're not too interested in gory details.

I'm kinda rambling on here, huh? Just killing time until dark, partially. But it's also partially to help you know me. It's so hard to believe what we've been through together, yet we still haven't really talked to each other. (I don't count the round room; we're just not ourselves in there, right?)

I better finish up. I just want to let you know how much I love you and wish we could be real roommates. Maybe even sisters. I'd like that a lot. Anyway, take care and God bless you.

Love, Abigail

I sighed and smiled. The girl was a treasure of a soulner. I was a very fortunate ripe. But it was time for this member of the team to do her work. I straightened the shirt, placed the notes with the others on its small shelf and used the collected water from the basin to rinse out the pot. I picked up the bag of food Dorothy had graciously given me and began preparing a bread dough. As I blended the ingredients, I

thought of the third member of our little team, the girl.

From the moment we had met in the room I had thought of her as nothing else. I had been told that she and I were together nearly two hundred years. I had been alone, not counting the computers, for over 150 years. Again, so I was told. There was no real passage of time for either of us. It may have been several hours, it may have been several millennia. It may have been both. In either event, it was a lonely time for us. She spent all of it satisfying her carnal needs, and I“... I wasn't sure what I did.

And now we were both free for the moment and perhaps forever. For if Abigail died, we would die with her. Until then, though, we contributed as best we could. For the girl, that was precious little. Since she was illiterate, we could not write notes to her the way we wrote each other. Dorothy tried to teach her some rudiments, but the girl had no interest. And as bad as Abigail was in keeping the room clean, at least she tried. The girl paid no attention whatsoever to it. At least she kept herself fairly clean. And since the three of us shared Abigail's body, that was probably the most important.

The bread was ready for rising so I turned on the ancient stove. I depressed a switch on the backplate for several seconds, then turned on the burner and oven. It was a necessary addition Abigail had added for our safety. If either she or I sharded into the girl or one of the computers when the stove was on, we ran the risk of causing a devastating fire. We also had an extremely limited amount of solar biogel to produce the methane we used as fuel. If we completely drained the tank sitting on the roof, it would kill the microbes in the gel. So cooking was limited to two hours each day. Fortunately, the gas could collect for several days before the pressure valves would begin releasing the excess, so if I wanted to cook longer, I only needed to restrict cooking for several days to build a reserve. Of course, with winter coming soon, cooking would be cut back even further.

The basin was full, so I poured a portion into the cooking pot and put it on the burner. The oven was warm, so I turned it off and placed the bread in it, covering it with our only dish towel. It would be ready in ten minutes, an incredible accomplishment from my time when yeast needed nearly thirty minutes to rise. I lifted the basin clear and washed my hands under the small trickle of water from the pipe. I then stopped up the pipe and replaced the basin, adding a gentle soap. Now was the scariest part of the day for me.

I double-checked to see that the door was locked. It was, but I always checked. There were no real windows, only boarded and blocked openings above my head that let air circulate, but allowed no one to peer in. Satisfied that I was not being spied upon, I prepared for my bath.

Since my raping at the hands of Major Deiley's men, I had become like this. In France, serving Professor LeClaire, I had always maintained proper attire and modesty. But I was never self-conscious. Over the forty-one years I was his servant, there were several times when he had inadvertently seen me naked. Nothing ever came of it, nor was I upset. I was indifferent, which was what I had been carefully designed to be. Even in this century, when that woman Ellen had wished to force her sexual attention on me, it had left me unmoved save for a small discomfort that I was not being used properly. Yet now it was so very different. The smallest sound put me on edge, a flashing shadow set my heart to racing. My identity as a woman, even a manufactured woman, lay in shreds. Even the appreciation of acknowledging the beauty of my body had been taken away from me. And I was beautiful. My first body had been functional first, handsome second. This one was a magnificent blend of beauty and function.

For a wonderful moment, I forgot myself. Pulling off the last of my clothing, I looked at myself in a piece of backed glass that served as a mirror. Propped against the wall, it was large enough to let me see a fairly good image. And what I looked at was marvelous. I found it much easier to appraise myself since I thought of myself as only a guest, though a welcome one. This thing of beauty was really Abigail's body.

She was of small build, little more than a meter and half tall and certainly less than forty kilos. Her frame was small, yet strong, and despite her poor diet and distressing living conditions, she kept herself wonderfully fit. Her overall form was far more than a child's but still less than a woman's. Two or three more years would address that area. Her beautiful hair was long, though she hid it under her clothing in an effort to play down her gender, which was a wise precaution. In loose enough clothing, she could probably still do it; her bust was healthy but not pronounced. I stepped closer to gaze at the face I had come to know so very well.

Like her body, she was an attractive mix of child and woman, with the woman being the dominant. Her hazel eyes had an intensity that was not from me. Indeed, peering into my eyes, I could see that it wasn't only me who looked back, but her as well. It should have been most distressing, but was not. I had already come to know her through her notes, her friends, and through that one brief and eternal, terrifying and strengthening time we shared together, inside her mind, outside the room, wrapped in each other's arms and fighting off our attackers.

These eyes should have been filled with sadness, yet they were not. They still had joy sparking in them, a happiness not warranted but nonetheless yearned for. And these eyes showed as windows into a soul that had a deep well of hope, a well that would not run dry because the source was not from inside, but from without.

There was a click as the stove burner shut itself off. I went to the stove, mildly surprised I hadn't jumped at the sound. I think that looking into Abigail's eyes had helped. I was not the shy animal I'd been only moments ago. Yet another thing to which I was indebted to her.

Indeed, feeling the playfulness of youth, I decided to be daring and punch down the dough before dressing. My practical mind justified this by saying that I should take proper care of my bread, or it would not be as good as possible. It was fooling itself only. I knew that I chose to do it because of the flush of excitement and daring that came with the thought.

Feeling very relaxed and light, I pulled the dough out and turned it onto a lightly floured surface. It was a trifle tough, so I decided to add water. I filled the cup with a hundred milliliters or so and set it beside the dough. I poured a few drops onto the dough, then pressed down, turning the dough into itself. I repeated the procedure several times, pour, press, turn. Pour, press, turn.

COOL RESET POUR PRESS COOL RESET POUR PRESS COOL RESET POUR PRESS COOL

air woke me up. I was lying down on the floor, and my hands felt strange. I looked at them and saw they had hard stuff on them. It smelled like bread. Maybe Miss Deshard had been making me bread and some got on my hands.

I stood up and saw I was naked. That was why I had felt cool. But I wasn't really cool. Just a little. I thought I should put some clothes on.

I found the clothes. There were some panties, but they wouldn't keep me warm, and there was no one who wanted to take them off me if I wore them, so I didn't put them on. The pants would keep me warm, so I put them on. I saw the shirt on the line and the shirt on the table and didn't know which one to put on, so I put on the one on the table.

After I put it on, I remembered that Dorothy wanted me to always wear that long piece of cloth for a bra. So I took off my shirt and put it on. But it wouldn't stay on so it kept falling off. Dorothy had shown me how to put it on, but I forgot again. A long time ago I had learned how to put on a regular bra, but this was too hard. I folded it up and put on the shirt again. I found the shoes and put them on.

Then I remembered that I was supposed to put the panties on, because I'd been told to. So I took off my shoes and then my shirt and then my pants. Then I put on my panties and then my pants and then my shirt and then my shoes. Only my shoes weren't on right, so I took them off and put them on right.

I was thirsty, so I got a drink of water. There was water on the stove but it was still hot. So I pulled out the thing on the pipe and drank some water. There was some sticky stuff that smelled like bread on the table. That meant that Miss Deshard was here before me. I tried some, and it was good, so I ate some more, then drank some water.

I wanted to go to the base, but it was still light outside. Dorothy and Alan had said that I could never go outside when it was light outside or they would be unhappy. They weren't my real owners, but they were very nice and they told me what my real owner wanted. Her name was Abigail, and though I never saw her, I knew she was my real owner. Dorothy and Alan had showed me some paper with words on it that was from Abigail, and they told me it said I should do what they said. So I tried to.

I didn't know how long I would have to wait. Until dark. I sat down on my bed on the floor. I started to touch myself, but stopped when I remembered Dorothy had told me not to do that because Abigail didn't want me to. I was sad because I couldn't, but happy because I did what I was told. So I just sat still and waited.

* * * *

The corporal looked through the night sight toward the distant doorway. He saw it swing open and the girl come out. Her shirt was on loosely and she had a streamer of cloth in one hand.

So she was now the pleasure ripe. He'd been told what to look for, that there were only three ambulatory personas, counting the real one. The real one was the cagiest, but this one had a perception that went beyond the other two. No sooner had she stepped outside than she turned and stared directly at him. Even in pitch darkness, at a distance over two hundred meters, and him hidden in a well-built blind, she somehow knew. Without fear, she began walking into the field, directly toward him.

The first time it had happened, he'd been genuinely spooked. Since then, he realized that she had no idea how to act on her knowledge. She had the mental capacity of a small, mildly retarded child. She was not a threat.

Nonetheless, he turned off the sight and quickly lowered the gun. Putting his back to the wall, he stared intently beyond the fallen-in roof far above him and into the starlit sky. He began to count off ten minutes, constantly fighting down the fear that she would somehow appear directly behind him, coming through an opening ten meters above the ground, having transformed into a hideous creature. It was an unreal fear, he kept thinking. But her ability to sense him was also unreal. Unreal and terrifying.

He waited the ten minutes, then took position again, turning on the gun sight.

She was gone. Now the real danger began. Of the three, this one was by far the most careless. Although it had not happened yet, she was almost certain to attract the wrong attention. If he, and she, were lucky, they would be after the ripe's possessions as well as her more immediate and obvious rewards, and would follow her to her room. The implanted tonal behind his left ear would give warning, but he didn't trust it to give sufficient warning. He would remain crouched over his rifle until dawn or until the girl returned. He had a very high regard for duty.

* * * *

"Dorothy!" I pounded on the door, then remembered I wasn't supposed to do that. I stopped.

“Dorothy!” I yelled louder because I had stopped pounding on the door.

The door opened and a man grabbed my arm and pulled me in. He seemed excited and mad at me, but not really.

“Do you remember what Dorothy told you?” he said.

“Yes, I do!” I said, happy to answer a question I knew. “She said that I wasn’t supposed to pound on the door, so I didn’t.” I held out my bra. “Can you help me put this on? I forgot again.”

“No, no, Miss.” Now he seemed scared. “Remember? Only Dorothy knows how to put it on. Leave your shirt on and I’ll take you to her. Okay?”

“Okay.”

He took my hand and we went through the building. He was a nice man even though he wasn’t Alan, so I cuddled up to him as we walked. He told me to remember the rules about that, so I just held his hand. They had a lot of rules.

We walked past some more people and some machines and some floating machines and some more people that were dressed the same and then some rooms. Then he took me to another room and then we went past some more people until we were in the room where Dorothy was. It was a kitchen, like Miss Deshard’s but different.

I was very happy and ran to her to kiss her. She moved her head and let me kiss her on the cheek instead. She was surprised to see me I think.

“Back so soon, child?”

“Uh-huh.” I handed her my bra. “I forgot again, Dorothy. Can you show me how?” I undid my button to take off my shirt. Dorothy stopped me and talked to the nice man.

“Thanks, Wally. I’ll take her from here.”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you, ma’am.” He sounded very happy to say thank you. He went away and Dorothy scolded me, but with her nice voice.

“What am I going to do with you, child? You don’t let anyone see your special places except me. Understand?” I nodded and she smiled and took the bra out of my hand. “Good. Now say that.”

“I only show my special places to you.”

“Very good, but not quite. You don’t show them to me, you let me see them if I need to. Try again.”

It sounded like the same thing, but I tried again. “I only let you see me if you need me.” I thought a second. “Can I show myself--no, I mean--can I let Alan see me if he needs me?”

She looked a little upset. “No, child. Alan doesn’t want to see you. I’m sorry, that’s not right. Alan does want to see you, but Alan doesn’t need to see your special places. Understand? He wants to see you, but with all your clothes on.”

“Why?”

“Because he likes all of you, not just your special places. Those are only for your owner, Abigail.”

“And you, Dorothy.” I said proudly, happy to get it right.

“Close enough.” She sighed. “Abigail and me. Now let’s go into my room and get this put on proper.

She put my bra on me and showed me how, then let me do it. I did it three times, then thought I would remember. Then I ate some food. Then we went to see Alan.

He was real busy on a machine, but stopped to talk to me and Dorothy.

“Hello, Princess. What brings you here tonight?” I liked it when he called me princess. They told me a princess was a special girl from a long, long, time ago, and when I behaved myself, I was a princess.

“I wanted to see you and Dorothy. And I was hungry, too. But now I’m not.”

He laughed and talked to Dorothy. “Straight and to the point. Not unlike Abigail in that respect.” Dorothy laughed, too, so I laughed, too, happy they laughed.

“She’s a charmer. Despite all the bad things, she’s a charmer.”

That confused me. “What bad things? I’ve had lots of good things. All my owners were good things, and all the things--”

“That’s enough, Princess. Let’s just think about these good things, all right.” Alan said with a smile. He was so nice, I wanted to hug him, so I did. He let me hug him, but only for a little time. He kept his arm around me and talked to Dorothy.

“I’m a little pressed for time, Dorothy. I wasn’t expecting Abigail to, umm”... go away so quickly and we need to get this simulator calibrated. Abigail’s a lot better--“

“Where’s Abigail?” I asked. “Is she here? Can I see her?”

“Don’t interrupt, Princess. Abigail’s not here, though I wish she was.”

“I do, too.”

“I know that. Now let me finish talking to Dorothy.” He let me go and went back to talking to Dorothy. They started talking big, which meant I wasn’t supposed to listen. I went to look at the machine that Alan was working on.

It was big and had a lot of lights on top of it. I think Alan said it was Abigail’s, which made it special. I tried to see if it would say anything about where Abigail was, but I didn’t touch it. I was always scolded when I touched machines. Then I remembered that some machines talked, so I asked it where Abigail was. It didn’t say anything so maybe it didn’t know either. I asked it if it missed Abigail, but it still didn’t say anything.

“But, Alan!” Dorothy’s voice was getting loud. “I have got to get down to the Room. I’m afraid we’re going to lose one, and I want to be there to help.”

“I understand, Dorothy.” Alan was always quiet when he talked, but sometimes his quiet voice still sounded big. “But Abigail’s schedule is pushing pretty hard, and if I can get the bulk calibration complete, it will be that much easier when she gets back.”

“Is Abigail here?” I asked, excited and hoping to see her.

“Remember, child?” Dorothy said in her soft scold. “Abigail’s not here now.”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot. I’m sorry.”

“That’s all right.” Dorothy looked at Alan. “So what do we do? I can’t have anyone else watch her, and I don’t want to send her home like this. Not without an escort, and the runners won’t be going to that area tonight But I have to go to the Room.”

“I want to go to the room, too, Dorothy!” If Dorothy wanted to go, then I did. “I want to help you.”

“That’s sweet, child. But you don’t want to go to the Room.”

“Yes, I do! Besides, then you’ll know what to do with me.”

Dorothy thought about it and looked at Alan. He shrugged his shoulders. “What is there for her to see that’s worse than what’s happened to her?”

Dorothy put a hand on my cheek and stroked it, which made me feel very good. But her face was sad, so I was sad, too.

“You’re right, Alan. It’s so hard to look at such an innocent face and think of the pain she’s had.”

“I’ve had lots of pain.” I said, happy to talk about it. “The best kind is the one that makes me curl up and want to sleep. Only I try real hard to stay awake because--” Dorothy put her fingers over my mouth, so I started to lick them. She pulled them back, and I remembered I wasn’t supposed to do that.

“I’m sorry! I forgot again! I won’t do that any more. I’m sorry!”

“Shush, child. Don’t worry about it. That’s just the way you are. All right, why don’t you come with me and help in the Room.”

She took my hand and I waved at Alan.

“Bye, Alan! We’re going to the room!” He waved back but didn’t say anything.

We walked out of Alan’s big room and into kitchen. Then we walked down a hall and to some stairs. The stairs went down. We went down the stairs and then went into a long room with big tall walls, and some doors were there, too. It was very dark. There were a lot of people sitting all around and lying around and some were standing. Some of the people had fires, and some didn’t.

“Is this the room, Dorothy?”

“No, child, it’s not. This is the hallway.”

“It doesn’t look like a hallway, Dorothy.”

“It’s not really a hallway like you see. It’s used to be a big long hall that had machinery called an assembly line. They made other machines that were used in space. But the assembly line and machinery are all gone, and now we call it the hallway. People who are going to go into the Room soon stay in the hallway. The Room is down this way.”

We walked down the hallway that did not look like a hallway and we walked to a doorway that was kind of big. There were people standing outside and Dorothy went up to a nice looking man.

“Hello, Gary. I’ve got a guest with me tonight.”

Gary looked at me, then looked at Dorothy.

“Are you sure that’s wise, Dorothy? I think we’re going to lose a couple tonight, and you know what it’s like.” He looked at me again. “You’re liable to scare the girl.”

“I’m here to help!” I said in a loud voice and stamping a foot. Dorothy smiled, which meant I did the right thing. I laughed because I made Dorothy happy.

“You heard her, Gary. I don’t think we’ll change her mind. She’s a pleasure ripe, so I don’t think there’s anything that scares her.”

“All right. Go on in.” He opened the door for us. I smiled at him with my best smile and tried to kiss him, but Dorothy pulled me away. We went inside.

It was dark inside but there was a little light. I could see people lying down on the floor. There were more than five and they were all sad. Some were making sad sounds and some were making clicking sounds.

“Why are the people all sad, Dorothy?”

“Because they are all dying, child. A couple are very close to death.”

“I know.” I pointed to a lady in the corner and a man on the other side of the room, against a wall. “That lady and that man will die tonight.” I pointed to another woman who was staring at us. “She’s going to die tomorrow. Maybe the next tomorrow.”

“How”... how do you know that, child?“ Dorothy spoke in a whisper that was scared. I was unhappy because she sounded scared.

“I’m sorry! Did I say something wrong? Tell me what to say, Dorothy.”

“No, no, child. Don’t blame yourself.” Her voice sounded better. “I’m not mad. I’m surprised. You are right about the first two. But how did you know?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t know. I just did. Is that why they’re sad, Dorothy? Because they are going to die and won’t be able to serve their masters?”

“Is that what you think?”

“That’s why I’m sad about dying. The lady that kicked me and kicked me in the bathroom was very nice.” I pulled up my pants leg. “See? She broke my leg here. But when she kicked me in my tummy, I was afraid I was going to die and then I would be sad because she couldn’t kick me any more.” I thought for a second. “But I guess she could kick me after I was dead, right? But only for a while. After I was dead for awhile, I would start falling apart. I was with a dead person for a lot of days once a long time ago, and she fell apart. My owner--he was a big man with a lot of hair--wanted me to be scared, so he made me”...“

I was talking and talking and then I saw Dorothy was crying. I was sad because I talked too much.

“I’m sorry, Dorothy! I didn’t mean to make you cry. I was talking too much.” I put my hand on her face and wiped her tears. She kept crying, so I kept wiping her tears. Then I remembered she held me close to make me feel better, so I tried to do the same, even though she was bigger than me. I started to move my hand to her“... wait. I wasn’t supposed to do that. I put my hands on her back and patted it.

She stopped crying in a while and smiled at me.

“I thought I knew you, child, and you go and surprise me. I’m very proud of you.”

“Oh! Thank you, Dorothy! Am I helping now?” I felt glad. I liked making people feel good, even when I wasn’t doing it the normal way.

“Yes, you are, child. Now let me introduce you to someone.” She took me over to the lady in the corner who was going to die tonight. The lady was staring at me, but I knew she didn’t see me. Her arms were very stiff and I could tell she was thirsty.

“She’s thirsty, Dorothy. Can we give her some water? Would that be helping?”

“Yes, it would. In fact that’s the only thing left to do to help. Giving her water and waiting with her.”

“Waiting until she dies?”

“Yes. Can you do that?”

“Yes!” I said, happy to be able to do something I knew how to do.

“All right, then. Sit next to her and I’ll bring some water. Pay close attention to her, child. Sometimes she will want to talk, and she wants someone to be near.”

“Okay.” I sat down close to the lady and stared at her.

Dorothy brought some water, then went to sit next to the man who was going to die. She wanted me to pay close attention to the lady, so I did. The lady’s body kept changing and she was hurting a lot. I gave her water a couple of times, when her eyes looked right and I knew she was looking at me.

Some time went by, then I felt Dorothy touch me on the shoulder.

“Why don’t you take a break, child.”

“I’m okay, Dorothy. I want to help.”

“But you’ve been sitting there without moving for over three hours. You must be tired.”

“I’m okay. You said to pay attention until she died, so I will. I promise.”

“But it might be hours before”... “I looked up at her, not understanding, so she smiled. ”All right, child. But if you need someone else to sit with her, just tell me.“

“All right.” Dorothy went back to the man and I paid attention to the lady.

After two more drinks, I saw her eyes become alive and she was looking at me.

“Mona! Is that you? Have you come to be with me?”

“I’m going to stay with you, lady, but my name isn’t Mona. Here, drink some water. You’re thirsty.” I gave her some water and she drank a little.

“Thank you, Mona. It tastes so sweet. Do you remember me?”

I thought about it, then shook my head. She seemed sad that I didn’t remember, so I tried again, but still forgot. She patted my hand. Her hand was very bony and there was a lot of skin on it.

“So you’re not my Mona right now. That’s all right. My name’s Ellen. What’s your name, darling?” Her

voice was soft with death.

“I don’t have a name.” She seemed sad, so I had an idea. “But Alan calls me Princess. That’s a special girl from a long, long, time ago. If you want, you can call me Princess.”

That made her happy. “All right, then. I’ll call you Princess.” Her eyes got very big and they went away and she made loud croaking sounds. She didn’t know I was here anymore, so I just waited.

She went very stiff, then her body went very dead-like. But I knew she wasn’t dead because she wet her bed and clothes and her chest went up and down a little bit. Then her arms started jumping around by themselves. Then they lay still and she cried and cried, making little shrieks. She said, “Wilson, fire back two-thirds!” a lot, and “Hurry and get it off him! Nooooo!” a lot, too. And she made some other sounds. Then she came back after a long time and looked at me. I gave her more water.

“Am I going to die soon?” She said in a little voice.

“Uh-huh. Pretty soon.” I remembered what Dorothy had asked me, so I asked her. “Does that make you sad, Ellen?”

“Does it? I don’t know, Princess. I’ve been dead for eight years now. Maybe when I’m really dead, I’ll”... “and then she was gone. So I waited”...

Then after another long time, she started going very stiff and her eyes stopped being bright. White stuff that didn’t smell nice came out of her mouth and her nose started to bleed. She was very, very thirsty, but I couldn’t give her any water because her mouth was closed. The white stuff came out of the holes in her lip where she had bitten through. Her blood was pink and runny. It wasn’t as dark and sticky as mine was. I wondered if she was going to come back and call me Princess again.

Her body went all quiet and she was dead. Only then she wasn’t dead. I knew her body wasn’t going to let her insides go. Her body went stiff, and then she died again. Then she started making croaking sounds and died again. Then her arms started moving around by themselves and she died again. Then she looked at me with her dull eyes and she died again. And then her body became very very very tight and I heard some bones cracking inside her, and she died again. But this time it was the last time, and she wasn’t going to call me Princess any more.

“Child?” It was Dorothy, and she was next to me. I stood up.

“Hi, Dorothy. The lady is dead.”

“I know. I saw.”

“Her name was Ellen. She called me Princess. Did the man die?”

“Yes, he died about five hours ago.”

“Oh. Is that a long time?”

She looked down at the dead lady whose name had been Ellen.

“To some, child, it’s an eternity.”

Chapter Nine

“Major Deiley?”

Deiley’s eyes came open at once. His mind awoke nearly as quickly. He was in bed and the computer was calling to him.

“Yes?”

“You have a priority alpha call waiting for you in the puter study. The caller did not identify himself and could not be identified.”

“Thank you. Please prepare a mint tea with lemon.”

“Very good, sir.” There was a barely audible click as the system returned to monitoring mode.

Deiley wasted no time dressing for the call. He was not a vain man and knew that whoever would call at this hour wanted to speak to him, and not a uniform. He drew on a robe over his pajamas and walked to his living room. At his entrance, the computer accessed him into the puterverse and placed him in his study. Instead of a desk, there appeared a terminal. That meant it the call was from Far Bank, his ultimate superior. He stepped in front of the terminal He did not salute, for both he and Far Bank considered it a waste of time in this setting.

“Yes, sir?”

“You have in your compound a shard named Abigail Wyeth,” Far Bank said without preamble.

“Yes, sir.” He was not surprised about the reason for the call.

“Her other named human persona is Miss DeChant,” Far Bank prompted flatly.

“Yes, sir. I have placed a twenty-four hour guard at her quarters. Full report available, of course.” He gestured with his right hand and a tabinal appeared. He glanced at it briefly. “She is currently sharded as the pleasure ripe and is at the Resistance base.”

“You have not attempted to neutralize this base?” it asked without accusing.

“Quite the contrary. I make it a policy to never interrupt their operations. It allows for the smooth nature of Glendale to continue. Attacking a base providing me a service has no merit.”

“Very practical. You have contacts within the base?”

“I have three, sir. At the moment, none of the three has had direct interaction with Miss Wyeth. One has spoken to the pleasure ripe shard.”

“And the shard’s progress toward dissolution?”

Deiley glanced again at the report. “Her sharding incidents have increased substantially in the past three weeks. We’ve confirmed eight episodes and estimate an additional four to six. It’s difficult to project a dissolution time, but judging by the individual’s mental toughness, outside support, and the nature of the false personas, my people estimate four months until dissolution, with an error of six weeks on either side. I apologize for the vagueness, sir.”

“Apology unwarranted.” Far Bank replied. “You are personally involved with the Miss DeChant ripe.”

How Far Bank had discovered this was irrelevant. That it was discovered was very relevant. Deiley did not try to calculate how much to divulge. He had anticipated this event and had already prepared a

response. It was not possible to deceive Far Bank. It was possible to withhold undocumented information. He would tell Far Banks everything. That did not mean he had given up. He replied immediately.

“Yes, sir. She served as my housemaid for several weeks after a squad of my men had raped her in performance of their duty. One of her personas, I suspect the original one, is capable of using microsats to bombard an area with remarkable accuracy. It was my intention to take Miss Wyeth at the proper moment and extract this knowledge.”

“For what purpose, Major Deiley?”

“Primarily for personal gain, sir, with a secondary goal of providing the information to NATech Supreme after it had served my purpose.” Deiley was taking a calculated risk. Far Banks was able to penetrate any lie, and appreciated subordinates who did not attempt to hide the fact that they had ulterior motives. Still, the flat truth, as he told it, was grounds for execution. For Deiley, the risk paid off.

“Good. You are a refreshing individual, Major, and I applaud your wisdom. I have need of the woman as well, but for different reasons that are not your concern. You will abandon your plan and accelerate the timetable of Wyeth’s dissolution. I want her mind ready for harvesting within two weeks, Major.”

“Yes, sir. Two weeks will be difficult, sir. I can capture her and subject her to physical and mental torment. That will greatly accelerate the process as long as she’s either Miss Chant or Miss Wyeth. The pleasure ripe is immune to such tactics. We will require four weeks to induce dissolution, sir. We might possibly do it in three.”

“Very well, Major. You have four weeks. Begin immediately.” The terminal blanked out and the study walls faded away, leaving Major Deiley in his living room.

He went to the kitchen and retrieved his tea. Stirring in the lemon wedge, he contemplated his next action. Capturing the girl would be fairly easy, and within his own schedule, if somewhat early. He would initiate that action immediately. Indeed, if he followed orders, the entire operation was straightforward. There was nothing to think about, the orders were so clear cut.

All he needed to do was decide if he were going to follow those orders.

* * * *

“Child! Wait up!” Dorothy called out softly. “You’re too bouncy for me!”

I turned around and giggled. I was on top of a pile of bricks and stones. It was almost morning, so I could see Dorothy still at the bottom, so I sat down and waited for her. She reached the top, a smile on her face, which made me happy. I looked up at the sky that was still dark in most places, but was turning a pretty pink in one corner.

“Isn’t this a nice day, Dorothy? Thank you for taking me home. Will you stay with me all day?” She sat down next to me.

“Well, I don’t know about all day. I’ll want to do a little cleaning and baking.”

“The oven doesn’t work.”

“Well, I might be able to coax a little bit out of it.” She clapped her hands to her shoulders and rubbed them, like she liked herself. It looked like fun, so I did it, too. She laughed.

“My! But it’s a chilly one this morning!”

“I know! Look, Dorothy, I can see my breath!” I breathed out and some smoke came out of my mouth. It was fun, so I did it again.

Dorothy tried it, too, and we laughed. Then Dorothy stood up and helped me to my feet.

“That’s very good, child. Now let’s get to your room. I can make us some hot chocolate and we can spend the morning napping.” She yawned and stretched, looking very pretty. “Then this afternoon, we’ll clean up the place and do the wash. I rather think that Miss DeChant didn’t have time yesterday.”

“Miss Deshard started to make some bread, but went away after that and left it in a big mess on the table.” I showed her my hands. “And she got some on my hands, too, but I cleaned them off!”

“Good girl. It’s nice to stay clean when you can. It shows that you like yourself.”

“It does?”

“Yes. But let’s talk about that after we get to your room, all right?”

“Okay. I’ll go first, Dorothy! Then you come after me.” I ran down the pile of rocks, falling only once. My hands got bloody from a sharp piece and it felt nice. But it wasn’t a big cut, and anyway nobody who owned me did it, so I just licked it off then ran to the bottom.

I looked up to see if Dorothy was behind me, but then the eyes inside my chest saw something and I looked up the street. It was still all black and they were inside a building, so I couldn’t see them with my eyes in my head. But I could still see them. I heard Dorothy stop next to me.

“What is it, child?” Her voice was quiet-sad. She was looking at my hand.

“Over there, Dorothy.” I pointed at the building where they were. “There’s people in there and they want to hurt us.”

Just as I pointed, they came out of the building. They were men and there were five of them and they were carrying things that they wanted to hit us with. I knew they were good at hitting from the way they held them. I felt Dorothy yank me towards the alley.

“Hurry, child! We’ve got to get out of here! Run!” Dorothy pulled out her gun, and I knew that this kind of hurting wasn’t for fun. It was fun for me, but not for Dorothy, so that meant it wouldn’t be fun for me. So we both ran.

Dorothy was very fast, but stayed behind me. Her face was a little like Miss Deshard’s face in the room, only her hair didn’t have as much gray and her skin was a little softer. But not as soft as mine. I kept running, feeling afraid that these people wanted to take me away from Dorothy and Alan and Abigail. And that wasn’t right.

They were running fast, too, and getting closer.

“Call it off, boys!” Dorothy yelled at them in her loud, mean voice. “I’m a Resistance dog and this Cue is under my protection. This is your only warning!”

But they kept running after us, so Dorothy shot her gun at them. It didn’t make any sound but it did make a squeaky noise, but one of them fell down with all kinds of blood coming out of a hole in his neck. Dorothy didn’t fire again, and the others kept coming after us.

And then Dorothy fell down. She tripped over some stuff in the alley and her gun fell away. I stopped and ran back and helped her up and then we ran away again. Now the bad men were very close. But we were almost at my home. It was just up in front of us, around the corner.

We went around the corner and ran to the door. Then I had an idea.

“Dorothy! Go run into the field! The man is in that building and he’s a nice man!”

“What man?” She asked, but then she did what I said, going in front. I looked at the men who were really close.

“You stay away! You’re not my owners!”

One of them, who was big and smelled like he didn’t like himself smiled at me. “Hey, princess, you’re here and you’re a shard. That makes you ours.”

“Don’t call me Princess!” I screamed, sad that they said that. Only Alan and the lady who died could call me that. Dorothy could, too. Dorothy! I ran after Dorothy. One of the men reached out and touched me, scratching my shoulder, but I got away.

Dorothy had fallen down again. She was very tired and anyway there were lots of bumps and holes in the field. She was holding a leg.

“Dorothy! Get up! The nice man in the building will help us!”

“I’m not going anywhere, child. My leg is hurt. It’s up to you”... Abigail.“

I was standing in a field. It was early morning. Dorothy lay at my feet and I heard racing footsteps approaching behind me. I spun around. There were four of them.

* * * *

It was as the corporal expected. The girl had been too careless and now she had attracted a pack of rippers. Fortunately, she’d had the good--and uncanny--sense to run toward him. He knew that with the other woman there, his presence was revealed. No matter. He toggled the rifle to full power and nestled the crosshairs on the head of the ripper nearest the two women. He paused for a flicker of time, then squeezed the trigger. The range was just under two hundred meters, so this was child’s play.

His target jolted back as the megawatt plasma beam penetrated his face. His head disappeared and a red mist took its place. The rifle pinged a small tone behind his ear half a second later, indicating it was recharged. Half a second only, but the corporal had already lined up on his second target and was squeezing the trigger. There was a tickling sensation over his arms and face as the already ionized air around him fed back the surplus, and again a ripper’s head disappeared in a cloud of steam and blood.

The momentum of the rippers had carried them close to the women, and although two were dead, the remaining two were too close to risk a shot. The women were on their own. That was not a bad thing, though, judging by the sudden change in the demeanor of the girl. If she had sharded back to the original persona, this would be a brief fight. He continued to peer through his sight, both to get a shot off if possible and to learn more about the girl’s fighting techniques.

* * * *

I fell into an aggressive defense posture as the first one charged down on us. I moved two steps forward, preparing to kick, but the hair on the back of my neck stood on end and the man’s head vaporized.

Someone had a plasma rifle and was shooting it at full power and with great accuracy.

The second one was right behind him, and he too died, a mist of blood spattering over me. I sidestepped to allow the headless body to collapse past me, and prepared to attack the third one.

There would be no more shots from my benefactor because the remaining two were far too close. The one reaching for me now had a look of terror on his face. He'd been caught in the open and had found out we had a friend. His only way off that field was to use me as a shield. Because of that, he couldn't kill me. I had no such restriction toward him. Nor would I hesitate. From his sloppy dress, it was clear he was a ripper.

I needed to kill him quickly to deal with the fourth man, so I shot my right hand forward, fingers curled tightly to expose my knuckles, and drove them into his throat. The tendons and muscles in his neck snapped and tore. He made to scream, but his throat collapsed in on itself, choking him. He had been coming to a stop, but his injury made him stagger past me. I stepped quickly behind him and spun hard, driving the heel of my right shoe into his temple, crushing it and killing him. That left one more.

And he was a big one. He stood a good two meters tall and looked big enough to show up on radar. There would be no neck or head shots with this one. At least, not until I whittled him down some. I went to a close attack posture, preparing to disable him with a kick to the stomach. Then he pulled out a knife.

The knife changed everything. This was no longer a fair fight. If Dorothy and I were going to live, I needed to change the odds. I knew just how to do it.

The beast rose up in me and I felt all emotion drain away. He had a knife and he was charging me. The blade slashed across, cutting high at my chest. I dropped to one knee and knocked his arm up over my head. His bull charge threatened to knock me over, but he was quite large, so I slipped between his legs, driving the heel of my hand up hard into his crotch as he passed over. He grunted. I then kicked at the back of his right knee with my left foot. It buckled and tore, but he retained his balance and turned. I spun around and fell into a crouch. He came at me slowly this time, the knife in front of him, edge up to more easily penetrate under my rib cage.

I looked him hard in the eyes, gauging his skill and nerve. Even in the vague light of early dawn, I could see he had little of the first and an abundance of the latter. That combination meant I needed to induce the attack. I shot a hand forward and grasped his knife wrist. The blade dragged along my forearm, drawing blood, but not doing any real damage.

Expecting me to jerk him forward, he yanked his hand back. But instead of resisting, I stepped up with him and threw his arm up. He was now off balance, falling backward. I stepped in even closer, then twisted sideways when I sensed his knife arcing down. I grabbed his plunging knife arm a second time and guided the blade into his belly. He stepped back to regain his balance, but was forced to put his weight on his torn knee. He screamed and dropped to his knees, fighting the pain in his leg and the pain in his belly. A second later, he was fighting the pain in his right eye as I jabbed a thumb into it. Instinctively, he released the knife and clasped his injured eye. I yanked the knife free, then buried it straight down into his chest.

His left fist thudded against my body, shaking me to the core of my being and slamming me to the ground. The price I had to pay for close combat. There was a fire in my lungs as I scrambled to my feet. Fortunately, the fight was over. He coughed once, then fell face down into the dirt and dried grass of the field. He died and the beast went back to sleep.

I turned toward the abandoned warehouse on the far edge of the field. In the growing light, I could make out an opening about ten meters above the ground. That would be the most likely spot for a sniper. But

whose sniper?

Time to worry about that later. Right now, I needed to get Dorothy and me off this field and into my room before we were spotted again.

Dorothy was still down, but struggling to her feet. She was rubbing her leg, but it looked as though it would be all right. She looked at me, a pained smile on her face.

“Nice entrance, child. Sorry to snap you out like that. Dangerous. Still, it seemed better than the alternative.”

I laughed, then coughed, feeling like I’d been stabbed in the chest. It was painfully surprising how breathing chilly air seemed to fan the flames in my lungs.

“C’mon. Let’s get to my room. I need to lie down.” I started to sag to my knees, but Dorothy helped me up. She slung my arm over her shoulder and I yelped. She pressed a couple of experienced fingers over my chest and ribs. Wanting to salvage some shred of pride, I winced but didn’t yell again. She nodded glumly.

“You need more than that, dear. You’re going to need some treatment. You’ve got at least two cracked ribs. You’re lucky in one way. Cheryl will be stopping by the base this evening.” Cheryl Weaver was our itinerant doctor. We staggered the short distance to the entrance to my room.

Once we were inside my room, Dorothy lowered me to the mattress. The sheets were off--Miss DeChant planning to do the cleaning no doubt--but I didn’t care. I was really hurting and was for some reason very thirsty. I hoped I wasn’t bleeding internally.

Dorothy filled a cup of water for me, stopping up the pipe that the girl had left running. She was always forgetting. This time I more than forgave her. It was a waste of water, but it was very cool.

I lay back and let Dorothy tend to me. Not wanting to ruin my other shirt, she eased off my top and removed the wrapping I used for a bra. She then ripped it into three narrower strips and used them as bindings to constrict movement of my ribs. She helped me back into my shirt, then gave me a painkiller that I had squirreled away, anticipating something like this. I felt better, but knew it was only temporary. She sat back, admiring her handiwork. Dorothy was a woman of many talents.

“All right. Let’s try to wait until nightfall, then we’ll get back to base.” She made the bed underneath me, rolling me gently as needed, then got about cleaning the room. I watched her for a few minutes, but drifted off to sleep.

* * * *

“Abigail!”

An urgent voice pulled me up from my hot sleep. It was so hot I found it difficult to breathe. And every breath was laced with fire. I opened groggy eyes, not really seeing anything.

“Abigail! Child! Wake up!” It was Dorothy. What was she doing“... oh, yeah. We were waiting until dark before returning to base to heal my ribs.

“Wha--?” I said intelligently. I must have really been out of it. Normally, I’m up and a going concern within seconds of waking. “Is it”... is it dark?“

“No.” She spoke in a low but urgent tone. “It’s just after two in the afternoon. But we’re going to have to

leave. I just heard a transport move by the outside wall.”

That woke me up. I’d never heard one go by. The field was on the outskirts of the town, and any shard wandering out there was open game. As such, NATech didn’t worry too much about it. Their presence here meant only one thing: They’d come to get me. Why, I had no idea, the same as I had no idea why I’d have a guardian angel with a high-powered plasma rifle watching over my entrance.

What value would I have that they could discern? It seemed impossible that they knew about my upcoming attack on the far bank of the Quantum. And the girl would never rate this kind of attention. Nor, for that matter, would Miss DeChant.

Deiley“...

Major Deiley would put a sniper there, I was certain of it. He saw something in Miss DeChant that piqued his interest. She’d never said anything about him in her notes, but I’d always had a feeling that she’d felt something for him. Did he feel the same back? It seemed unlikely.

But that didn’t change the fact that NATech was here to take me away. Nor did it change the fact that I didn’t want to be taken away. Maybe Deiley was watching out for me. But maybe these guys were off duty and had heard about the scuffle. Or the sniper had reported in. No matter. It was time to go.

“Dorothy, get my gun.” I rolled to my side and sat up. It hurt. It hurt a lot. But I managed.

“It’s right here. I pulled it out before waking you.” I kept the gun hidden to protect the girl. The last thing I needed to do was arm a pleasure ripe, though I’d told Miss DeChant where it was.

I took it from Dorothy, turned on the charger and switched to sonic inducer. I’d never had the opportunity to use it since Dusty had modified it all those months ago. I hoped it worked.

Dorothy helped me to my feet and we left. I would never be coming back to this place, but I didn’t look behind me. Dorothy had snatched my Bible, my other shirt and the notes from her and Miss DeChant, and that was all I wanted. They could keep the rest. Of course, other than my bed and makeshift cross, there was nothing else.

At my direction, we cut around the back of the room and began picking our way through the heavy machinery and maze of scattered parts and abandoned inventory toward my bolthole. I’d said there was only one entrance and I was accurate. Where we were going was an exit, designed to be used only once.

Behind me I heard the pounding of feet racing to my room. But by now we were over one hundred meters away, and we would not be found. The bolthole dropped down to the basement and led into an adjacent building. We walked along the dirty, twisting path and worked our way around piles of trash and fallen masonry, making very little noise. Though Dorothy still helped me on occasion, I was breathing fairly easily and could walk on my own. When we finally emerged on the street, we were two blocks down and three blocks over.

* * * *

“Sorry, sir, but the target has evaded us.”

“She’s not a target, Sergeant. She’s a woman.” Deiley felt a flash of irritation. Not at the man’s callousness, but at himself for correcting so trivial a detail.

“Yes, sir. We still haven’t discovered her escape route, but it probably doesn’t matter. It’s been thirty minutes since we entered her room.”

“Thirty minutes. Which almost certainly means she’s at their base by now. Very well, Sergeant. Continue the search for the women, just in case they’ve been hindered. Remind your men of the consequences if either are hurt or molested.”

“Unlikely they’ll need reminding, sir. You were quite explicit to me and I made sure I was the same to my men.”

“Good. Carry on. Oh, by the way, Sergeant?”

“Yes, sir?”

“How did they know about your arrival?”

The sergeant had an exasperated look on his face. “The first team brought their hov in along the outer wall. Standard tactic, but they’d been told this wasn’t a standard retrieval. The woman’s room is against that wall. She would have heard the approach.”

“And you dealt with it by”...“

“By executing the squad leader, sir.” The sergeant sounded slightly surprised that such a routine subject was even brought up. Deiley nodded and switched off.

* * * *

“That should do it, Abby.” Doctor Weaver put down her sounder and felt my ribs. “They’ll be a little tender for a few days. And there will be some bruising. But you’ll make it so long as you can avoid knife fights for a week or so.” She smiled tiredly, the smile of an overworked but greatly valued physician.

“Thanks, Doctor. That’s good advice. Now if only the people with the knives will follow it.” I took a deep breath and felt only a twinge. Much better.

I hopped down off the table and went to find Alan, closing my shirt. Everywhere, people were moving busily around, packing up equipment and breaking down the base. That was my fault. I darted in and out of the nearly chaotic scene, knowing just where I’d find Alan.

He was in our access room, working on the power feed. All Resistance bases used their own power source to prevent dependence on a civilian power grid. Even our operation had an ionic mass converter, though much smaller and somewhat older than most regiments. Since neither it nor this base would be ours much longer, we were going to push the generator to the red line. That meant disengaging the safety cutoffs and optimizing power flow for the high volume that the variable mass simulator and our next access were going to demand. That’s what Alan was doing now. That and trying not to get killed if an unleashed plasma tendril burned through the conduits and into the crawlway where he worked. He looked down from his perch and flipped up the feedback shield. He was shirtless and sweaty. I’d been up there before, and if I were up there now, I’d be shirtless and sweaty. Well, sweaty at any rate. He noticed my easy movement and nodded approvingly.

“Much better,” he said, voicing the same judgment I’d made. “Nice timing, too. I need you to fine-tune the calibration of our variable mass simulator. The last person just walked off the job.” He winked at me slyly.

“Have her found and ridiculed, then.” I laughed and picked up my tool kit.

We worked quietly for an hour, finishing up our battleground. In just a few hours, we’d be crossing the Quantum, and nothing would be left to chance. Of course, I could always shard, but I somehow doubted

that would happen. With the exception of Posen's induced episode, I never sharded once I was in the puterverse.

As I said, we worked quietly. But it was far from quiet. The base was being transferred and there was an urgency that was very efficient but also very loud. Equipment, supplies, food, everything was being packed and loaded onto the three phase hovs we had and moved to a predetermined location. With a little luck, NATech wouldn't move against us for several more hours, and even then it would require another hour or so to burn through the shielding I'd rigged. When we settled here a few months ago, I set up a series of molecule-thick shields set at alternating harmonic frequencies that could be activated in the event of an attack. Although each shield could only withstand a moderate attack--say one punch from a heavy plasma gun--the shields were layered like an onionskin and there were hundreds of them. Of course, the shield served a very strict defensive model. We couldn't shoot out. And it cut us off from the atmosphere, so we had limited air. But it did give us time to evacuate. And as long as I could initiate my access before they began the attack, I felt there was enough time to finish my fight before breakthrough.

I finished calibration just as Alan completed the power flow modifications. He dropped down from the access crawlway and wiped off his bare, sweaty chest with his shirt. He back was to me, so I sneaked a long look. It seemed impossible that I had once looked at women like this and thought the thoughts I now had toward Alan. The look of his hard, muscled back, the heady man scent, the confidence that seemed to emanate from him, they all made my heart trip. We would never be more than friends, and both of us knew that. But that didn't mean that I couldn't have a friend with such a wonderful smile and gorgeous butt.

I shook my head to throw off such thoughts and started putting away my tools. The time for idle fantasizing was forever denied me now. All that lay ahead for me was one last moment to try and make a difference. After that--if I avoided capture and execution by NATech--a few more weeks of slowly breaking down before I was carried into the Room to wait, my few remaining friends standing by to ease my final pains.

* * * *

Two hours later, my friends were standing by me. Not to ease my pain but to help me begin my final mission. Alan on my left, Mike on my right, and Kiki in front of me, working her unique brand of magic. We were facing the Quantum back door, and Kiki was working through the second to last lock. We had to shield our eyes somewhat from Kiki's bright light. To avoid detection, we had temporarily eschewed UTC and were accessing at level thirty-two. Kiki wasn't coming with us, and was at total access. I'd never realized the difference. Did my actions come off this bright--almost painful--to others? I'd have to allow for that in my future accesses. Right. Like I had a future.

At my direction, she was being careful not to disrupt the locks but to work through them. I had told them I didn't want the aura that resulted from such large discharges to attract worms or other unwanted attention. I was being only partially truthful. No, I was lying. I didn't really care about what was on this side of the Quantum.

The last lock turned from dark black to a smoky crystal and fell off, a bright, apple-scented key in its keyhole. Kiki lowered her arms.

"Okay, Abby! That's the last one I can do without force. The last one is the original one, and there's no way to pick a hard-coded lock that old." She stepped up to it and peered at it closely, then spoke as if it were an honorable and respected enemy.

"It is formidable looking, isn't it?"

I stood up next to her and eyed it. It was formidable looking.

“Not to worry, Kiki. All you need is the right key.” I held out my hand, fingers splayed. A terminal with keyboard rose from the ground. I plugged the data feed into the lock and typed out a single word. The lock imploded and turned to dust, a small cloud floating slowly down.

“‘Gotcha’?” Kiki asked, referring to the password.

“Believe me, Kiki, there’s nothing more embarrassing than forgetting your backdoor password. Something this well hidden would have an easy password, one that you’d never have to write down.”

“How did you know it, Abby?” Alan asked.

“Chris worked for me, remember?” At his startled look, I realized he hadn’t known. “Sorry, Alan. I thought you knew. Anyway, he wouldn’t have told me his passwords outright. Not ones like this. But credit me with a little intelligence. I wasn’t his boss by accident. I considered it a personal challenge to know all my employees’ backdoors and passwords.” I shook my head at the memory. “That seems so long ago, even for me. Well. Onward and upward! Rather, downward.”

I shoved the door open and it disappeared like the lock, leaving only a quickly dissipating cloud of dust. It dropped straight down into pitch-blackness. I tried to light it up, but was unable to. Mike whistled.

“Not a good sign. Could this be a known access port, Abby?”

“Known or not, Mike,” I responded, “This is all we’ve got.” I turned to Kiki. “See you later, kid. Keep the porch light on.” I stepped into the darkness.

As soon as I started falling, I knew we were in trouble. I was falling much too fast for the puterverse. I tried to control my fall, but with non-UTC. Which meant I failed. I just went loose and relied on my instinct and reflexes to keep me safe.

A few seconds later I discovered my faith was well founded. I sensed more than felt the ground and braced myself at just the right time. I felt a small jolt in my ribs, but otherwise landed fine. I stepped forward into a barely seen opening and made room for Alan and Mike. They landed seconds later without mishap.

“Okay, Kiki.” I called quietly, looking up the shaft. “Let’s have some light.” Alan jerked me back, and I grinned sheepishly. Not too wise looking directly into a solar burst I couldn’t see coming. We all faced the opening that reached under the Quantum.

There was a flash behind us. I wouldn’t exactly say the tunnel was flooded with light. Flooded was too strong. Perhaps moistened. We could see, that was it. It looked dank and unused. It smelled dank and unused. We struck out, me leading point, Mike and Alan coming behind. Inside me, I felt the beast starting to stir.

Fortunately, the tunnel lived up to its billing. It was dank and unused. We went maybe one hundred meters when the tunnel ended at another hole. I stepped up to it and peered in. It was filled with Quantum data.

“Geez!” Mike said with exasperation. “This thing has been here so long, the river’s breached and filled it! Now what?”

“Gotcha, Mike!” I laughed at his mistake. “You’ve just fallen for an old one!” I turned to Alan. “What’s wrong with this picture, Alan?”

He looked at it carefully for a moment, then began chuckling. "It does look like the tunnel's flooded, Abby. But we're below river level, so that means our tunnel should be flooded as well." He looked at Mike. "Gotcha, Mike."

Mike didn't say anything, but I think this little trick helped. He'd always had a pretty low opinion of flesh--other than me and a couple of my friends--and this served notice that we humans still had a few things we could teach him. Still chuckling, I stepped into the data stream.

I fell less than three meters and it was as we suspected: the data was illusory. The illusion continued for perhaps ten more meters, then discontinued, revealing a danker, darker, and tinier tunnel. I waited for the boys to join me, then we moved along. We were on the last leg.

After what seemed forever--I wondered if we were being subjected to the same warping I'd used on other people--we reached the tunnel's end. There was a set of rungs reaching up into a stygian darkness thick enough to have substance.

"This is it?" Alan asked.

"This is it. No sense waiting around." I jumped up lightly, grabbed a rung, and started climbing. Mike, then Alan, followed close behind. Despite the seriousness of the situation, I still had the humorous thought that it was a good thing I wasn't in a dress.

We climbed for what seemed like ages. It made no difference to us; though we had weight, it had no effect on our strength. One rung or one million, the effort was the same. It was a little bothersome that an attempt like this was even made. Maybe that was the point of this, to bother us. But we remained fairly patient and we reached the top. There was no tunnel here, just a small room surrounding the hole we'd climbed out of. We remained pressed close to the sides. At my back was a large door.

"Shall I burn through it, Abby?" Mike's eyes lit up the room, and I could see the energy starting to shine through the restraining armor he had on. Alan and I could access at various levels. Mike couldn't. To him, everything was total access at UTC. To cover that signature, he used a type of negative shielding. It weakened him, but hid his presence.

"No need, Mike." I reached for it, and it opened under my hand. "It's unlocked. In any event, I doubt it will even be here in a moment." I took a deep breath. "Ready, gentlemen?" They nodded and all of us went to total access. As I suspected, the door, walls, and tunnel vanished, and we were on the far side of the Quantum.

* * * *

"We've achieved breakthrough, sir." The lieutenant gave a crisp salute to Major Deiley, but wasted no more time. "The first squad blitzed in, but there was no one there. I'm sending the next four squads in now."

"Very good, Lieutenant. I expect the base will be nearly deserted." It had better be; he'd given them more than enough time to pull out. This way, the Resistance could continue with their work, and he wouldn't lose men unnecessarily. But he was probably quick enough to still find Miss Wyeth here.

He and the lieutenant walked together to the base, the lieutenant occasionally giving out orders. They reached the main entrance and went in. Other than his men, it was deserted.

They gone into a long hallway, used to house the shards, when a soldier came running up behind them. He jerked to a stop and saluted.

“We’ve found two of them, sir! They’re in the puterverse. Corporal White sent me to inform you and to tell you he and two others were going in on their own initiative.”

“That fool!” Deiley spat out and began walking quickly to the room. “Wasn’t he warned about entering an access area with Wyeth present?” He spoke with a clear voice to activate the comnet already placed over the base. “Corporal White! This is Major Deiley! Do not enter that room!” There was no response, so they began running. Probably a waste of time.

It was a waste of time. When they arrived two minutes later, they could see easily into the room; Corporal White had not closed the door. They could as easily see why he hadn’t: The remains of all three men lay just inside it. In the center of the room were Wyeth and a man, probably Lieutenant Lockwood. Between them and Deiley stood a bright orb of light, less than a half meter high. It moved about as though alive, guarding the two people. Judging by the bloody and shattered corpses, Wyeth had chosen her sentry wisely. Deiley sighed and sat down. He hoped the Lieutenant could not—or chose not to—see his hands tremble slightly as the sight of Miss DeChant. He was so very close to his goal. But what was his goal?

“All right. We’ll wait for them out here. I don’t think it will be too long.”

* * * *

There was nothing to be seen. From flat, featureless horizon to flat, featureless horizon, there was nothing. Appropriately enough, the ground was flat black, only slightly less black than the sky, and much duller. Even the Quantum, about a half-kilometer behind us, gave no light. We’d come here, ready to fight our way through a host of typical goons, bullies, and monsters. All the standard stuff. But no, we had the place to ourselves. That scared me. I’d hoped he thought they would have been necessary to wear us down. That he didn’t made him very confident or very powerful. Probably both.

“What gives, Abby?” Mike was looking around, perplexed. “Are we at the wrong address?”

“No, we’re not.” I turned out to the open plane and raised my voice. “All right, Chris. Let’s get it over with.”

“WHO?” Mike spun toward me and for the first time I could remember, he was genuinely surprised. Surprised and scared. But I didn’t respond to his question, nor to Alan’s unasked one. My attention was focused on the ground five meters in front of me.

A deep black hole appeared, pulling in energy from the surrounding terrain. When it was filled, the energy pool raised up and took on a humanoid form. Colorless at first, it began shifting and sharpening, gaining shades and hues. Slivers of energy pulled away and became arms. A bulge grew from the top and began growing hair and a hideous skeleton face that started covering itself with muscle and skin. A small hole appeared in the middle of the torso. It became a slit, then a separation as legs formed.

A body fully formed, it quickly finished with the defining features of Chris Young.

“Hello, John.” He cracked his grin at me, the one he always used whenever he thought or actually did have something over me.

“Hello, Chris. Only it’s not John anymore. It’s Abigail.”

He laughed. “Really? Let’s see.” He flipped a hand and I felt an energy field surround me. I looked down and saw that instead of my normal glowing form, I was standing naked in my human form. I had expected something like this. I smiled at him, paying no attention to my nakedness.

“You always were something of a leech, Chris. Go ahead. Look all you want.”

He got a dirty look on his face. “You’re feminine enough on the outside, John. But I’m sure you’re still John Wyeth.” He flipped his hand again and I returned to my original form. “So. Have you and your army come to defeat me?”

“Uh-huh. And why not? You’re the one responsible for NATech Supreme, aren’t you, Chris? It was you who developed the webbing techniques. It was you who manipulated NATech, the original one, into a role of prominence after the Terran Martian Wars. It was you who--”

“Yes, yes, yes. All that, John, and more.” He looked at me thoughtfully. “I’m surprised you don’t take some of the credit yourself, though. After all, I couldn’t have done all this without you.”

“What?” I whispered.

“Then you don’t know? So my old boss does have a chink in his armor.” He laughed. “I created the webbing techniques, sure. But once I’d developed the overall concept, it became clear that I had something and I needed something I had a powerful programming scheme that could ultimately give unimaginable control to the being who owned it, which was me.

“But I needed a full time presence to monitor it and develop it while I worked out a plan of action. Fortunately, I was surrounded by some of the best minds that ever existed, so I picked the best one.” He smiled, and his smile revealed bright white teeth with a forked tongue that made me flinch. “I picked you, John.”

“Then it was you who had me killed.”

“Yes. I manipulated your death and transfer into the computer, another little something I’d worked out in my spare time: the moving of a mind and soul into another host. I planned to do it to myself at the right time. Only I wasn’t sure it would work. So I needed a guinea pig. You. And in case you died, John, I had two others picked out.

“But you worked out far beyond my wildest expectations. After I’d used you to stabilize my webbing schemes, I hid you in the computer banks for six years, then reintroduced you as my first netter.”

I wasn’t saying anything. I didn’t know what to say.

“I kept you there for about two centuries, then started moving you around as I needed. You’ve had quite a career, John. Netter, space station, a lowly housemaid, the primary core to the PlaNet defense systems.” He paused.

“But it was the housemaid that ended up being the most profitable for me. I’d been following the studies and theories of Professor LeClaire, and was excited by his studies in Keyed Memory Encapsulation. I arranged for him to be given a housemaid, and saw to it that it was your mind that was used to provide life to the soulless female.” He grinned. “I also liked the thought of screwing you bad, John. Not physically, of course. There’s no way I wanted to leave the puterverse once I’d made my home here. But I’d always been put off by your ease with women. I couldn’t stand seeing you work so well with them and not use that to your advantage.”

“You mean you hated my respect for all my people. That’s why you never made it to Project Leader, Chris. You tended to think with your head second.”

“Could be, John. Could be. But at least I don’t have any dresses in my wardrobe. And I saw to it that you did have dresses in your wardrobe. I paid close attention to your life as Miss DeChant, John. It was

a pleasant diversion from ruling the planet.

“But then Professor LeClaire actually developed a workable KME procedure. I didn’t know what he planned to implant, but I guessed he’d choose you to implant it in. And so he did.”

I shook my head. “Sorry, Chris. But you’re wrong. There’s been nothing special about Miss DeChant that would indicate--”

“God! You’re stupid! Of course there wouldn’t be anything in her, John. This thing takes years, centuries, to develop. And after I realized that LeClaire planned to betray me, I had both of them killed the night he implanted the capsule in your mind. I then put you someplace safe to develop that KME; into the planetary defense system.”

“Unfortunately, the KME didn’t develop. I gave up after a century and a half and ordered you destroyed. But a traitor shifted your mind into another computer bank and reported you terminated. He was caught and executed, but you managed to disappear. It’s only in the past few months that I put together the rest of the story.” He smiled. “I find it quite humorous that you’ve never regained your manhood, John.”

The smile disappeared. “I also found it very exciting when I found out that the KME did develop over time. I just hadn’t given it enough time. That’s how you acquired your ability to program in bound trinary code. And now I’m going to acquire that ability from you, John. I have Major Deiley standing by to harvest your mind as soon as I’ve shut it down.” He raised a hand. “I’ve never savored a moment as much as I’ve savored this one. Goodbye John.”

A bolt of solid black energy exploded from his hand and struck me full force. My shielding had long been up, though, so it splashed harmlessly off me. I laughed.

“Not what you expected, eh, Chris? Tell me, did you expect this?” I tightened my body and a sphere of crystals erupted from my body. They spread out in all directions for twenty meters, then homed in on Chris, hammering with blow after blow after blow. He stepped back, staggered.

That was the cue for Alan and Mike. Alan came at his right side from the ground, Mike at his left from the air. Alan slid negative shielding around him, lowering his access level and leaving him open to Mike’s blistering attacks. Green plasma slipped between the negative shielding cracks and I heard him scream. He fell to his knees.

I stepped up, feeling suddenly tired. I just wanted this over with.

“Chris, you’ve manipulated all of Earth’s society for centuries. You’ve callously used and discarded thousands, perhaps millions of lives. You’ve surrendered your own humanity for power. I pity you more than anything else. But I’ve no way to express that pity that will help anyone, including you. You’re right, Chris. It’s time to say goodbye.” I placed my hands on his forehead to fire a razor of UTC into his cyberbrain. “Goodbye, Chris.”

I fired, but nothing happened. Confused and worried, I tried again. Nothing. He looked up at me, smiling.

“What’s wrong, John?”

“Stop calling me John!” For some reason, I was suddenly upset by his constant use of my old name. “My name is Abigail!”

“Really? Kind of kinky isn’t it, calling yourself by a girl’s name, isn’t it, John? After all, just look at yourself.”

Stunned, I looked at myself. I was a man. My arms were strong, my chest wide, and my body complete. I stepped back, knowing I should press the attack, but unable to. Mike and Alan were looking at me with startled eyes, aghast.

“Stop it! Stop it! My name is Abigail! I’m a woman!”

“If you say so, Abigail. Have it your way.”

I felt a wave wash over me and I looked at myself again. I was a woman!

“Nooo!” I yelled, covering my nakedness. “What have you done to me? Stop it, Chris! Make me a man again!”

“But you just insisted you’re a woman, Abigail. Make up your mind, girl.” He was smiling again.

“Abby!” Mike jumped up into the air and brought both hands together, preparing to launch a bolt at Chris. Panic gripped me. If he destroyed Chris, I could never be a man again! But wait, wasn’t my name Abigail? It couldn’t be. That was a girl’s name.

I shouted at Mike to not fire, but my voice was drowned out by a thunderclap of sound as Chris opened fire at Mike. The battering ram of energy didn’t explode when it struck Mike. Rather, it filled him, as though he were sucking it in. Chris had hit him with a virus, and caught off guard, Mike was quickly coming undone. I started to rush Chris, to hit him, when I felt Alan hold me back. His hand on my tiny shoulder made me scream.

“Don’t touch me! Leave me alone, Alan!” I kept myself covered, feeling shame and revulsion at being in a woman’s body. Even worse, a young woman’s body.

“Abby! Calm down! Look!” He fended off my weak blows and pulled my foot up. Black tendrils, reaching up from the ground, were embedded in them. Even as I watched, the skin in my lower leg bulged as they pushed deeper inside me. I screamed.

“Calm down! Young is messing with your mind, Abby! I think he’s doing some kind of partial ripe! You’ve been Abigail Wyeth for three years now. Remember!” He shook me by the shoulders. “Remember! You were even engaged to a man.”

“NO! That can’t be true! I am a man! I’m just in the wrong body!”

“No, you’re not! This is who you are! Remember? Please! Snap out of it, Abby! You told me how much you loved him. His name was Aaron Marks.”

Aaron“...

“That’s more than enough from you, Lockwood.” Chris had been occupied with Mike, but now turned his attention to us. He didn’t even move and suddenly Alan was sinking into the ground. His face became contorted with pain. Chris laughed.

“So, what’s it to be, Lockwood? You can save yourself by ending access. Of course, that means abandoning John. Not that you can help out anyway. All three of you were fools! Coming to my home, thinking to beat me, armed only with some bound trinary code. It’s painful enough, I’ll grant you, and potentially more potent than pseudo trinary code. But I’ve had centuries to refine my pseudo trinary, and it’s far more advanced than your current skills.”

He looked back at me. “And what about you, John? Shall I turn you back into a man? Come. It’s time to

abandon this lost cause. Your construct is all but destroyed. Every moment you wait brings your human friend closer to death. Give me the memory capsule and I'll let both your friends go."

I felt the tendrils twist and lurch deeper in my body. Into my foreign, female body. They were now up to my stomach. Mike lay motionless on the ground, encased in a smoky black rock. Alan would have passed out from the agony if Chris hadn't been keeping him awake. All I needed to do to end this suffering was to let Chris have my mind. But I couldn't. No more than I could make a deal with the devil.

"You know what, Chris? You'd think that six hundred years would have mellowed a person out. But you're still an asshole."

His face tightened and he started to say something, when suddenly everything became fuzzy and my skin felt

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End of Book Three