

Shards: Book Four

Peter Prellwitz

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A Double Dragon eBook

Published by

Double Dragon Publishing, Inc.

PO Box 54016

1-5762 Highway 7 East

Markham, Ontario L3P 7Y4 Canada

www.double-dragon-ebooks.com

www.double-dragon-publishing.com

ISBN: 1-55404-310-7

A DDP First Edition December 9, 2005

Book Layout and

Cover Art by Deron Douglas

SHARDS

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Chapter One

“Sir?” The lieutenant called from the nearby doorway. “The puterverse access has terminated. It’s safe to enter.”

Major Deiley rose to his feet and walked to the small room. The field was indeed down, and the dancing light that protected the two people inside was gone. He stepped over the gory remains of his three men and went first to the girl.

Her foray into the puterverse had clearly not gone well. She was staring sightlessly into space, having sharded again. He motioned to the lieutenant to see to Lockwood, who was conscious but not a threat. Picking the girl up carefully, he marveled again at how small she was. He carried her out to the room and laid her on a cot that stood against the wall. He then accessed at the nearest terminal, not bothering to punch in a destination. The screen glowed a dim black in response.

“Sir. One moment, please.” He waved his arm to indicate he wished privacy. The room was cleared within seconds. He turned back to the terminal.

“Yes, sir. I have the girl now.”

“Very good, Major.” Far Bank’s voice seemed strained. It could have been the two-dimensional access, though his next comment indicated otherwise. “I can appreciate now your earlier appraisal of his will power and spirit.”

“His’ will power, sir?” Deiley raised an eyebrow.

“No, Major. *Her* will power and spirit. What is your next course of action?”

Here it was. Deiley had been painstakingly laying out the answer to this question for weeks. He hoped he’d thought it through sufficiently. He’d not get a second opportunity.

“I will be taking her to the base infirmary, sir, and begin accelerating her dissolution. By keeping her under constant guard, we’ll be able to pinpoint the best moment to perform mental shutdown procedures prior to harvesting.”

“Good. And you still anticipate three to four weeks until harvest?”

“Yes, sir. I could accelerate even further if I could maintain a single ripe, but that is far too...”

“I don’t understand, Major. All data indicates that it was multiple episodes that eventually broke down the implanted barriers of riping and caused dissolution.”

“Not quite, sir. It seems that multiple sharding is actually a defense mechanism of the brain, an attempt to shift the sharding evenly, holding the mind’s structure together longer by distributing the weight of constant episodes.”

“Go on.”

“By keeping a Shard in a single persona, the weight is brought to bear on a single barrier. When it collapses, the others are destroyed sympathetically. The difficulty is that it’s nearly impossible to maintain a single persona at this advanced stage of sharding.”

“So? Which ripe would you suggest, Major?” Deiley hoped for some indication that Far Bank was either suspicious or not, but there was no clue. There never was.

“Irrelevant, sir. As I said, it’s too difficult to maintain an environment that would encourage a Shard to

remain in a single ripe.” He paused briefly, then continued slowly, “Although I could set up a display and holoproject a simple program into her retina. Force her to think she’s in an industrial setting. That would probably keep her in a machine state for the remainder of her life. It would also have the advantage of suppressing her human personas, both real and manufactured.” He looked back down at the terminal. “Yes, that should increase the chances of making the three-week schedule, sir. I’ll have a holoprogram begun immediately.”

“No, Major. Your plan has merit, but conflicts with my wishes.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Carry through with forcing a single ripe, but implement the Miss DeChant persona. That one interests me the most. I believe you have an interest as well, yes?”

“She was... convenient, sir.”

“I don’t doubt, Major.” Far Bank chuckled, and both his chuckle and his voice indicated he did not fully understand how Miss DeChant was convenient. In that revealing moment, Deiley realized that Far Bank was vulnerable, that he had flaws. In that same moment, Deiley lost much of his respect of Far Bank. Even the most powerful could be misguided and swayed by temptation. Was he, Deiley, a victim of this same potent temptation?

“Sir?” Deiley inquired at Far Bank’s chuckle.

“Nothing, Major. A private joke.” Far Bank’s voice reasserted its cold efficiency. “You will take the... girl... to your quarters and force the Miss DeChant ripe to the surface. Please maintain that ripe until dissolution is inevitable. Maintain normal report procedures.” The screen died. There was no opportunity to protest or debate.

Deiley took a deep breath and released his hands, which he had clasped firmly behind his back. He’d gambled and won. Far Bank was interested in obtaining the KME located in the Miss DeChant shard, and sounded both alarmed and intrigued by Deiley’s suggestion of using a single, machinery ripe. Such an action might accelerate the dissolution, shortening the time available to gain whatever knowledge was in the KME. It might also, Far Bank undoubtedly thought, lock the girl into the machinery ripe at dissolution and keep him from harvesting the memory capsule. If Far Bank thought that, it was a mistake. The Shard’s mind at dissolution was a blending of all the ripes with the original persona. Nothing was locked out or lost. It was the overload of information and synaptic activity that ultimately caused death. Few people knew that, and Deiley was in the habit of keeping information to himself.

So it came about that Far Bank chose Miss DeChant and maintained control by bringing up Deiley’s involvement with her. It only helped Deiley further that Far Bank misunderstood the involvement. He did wonder, though, what the private joke was. Did it have something to do with the earlier slip, referring to Miss DeChant as a he? Was the original persona male? It fit the facts, as did a dozen other theories. But it seemed unlikely. He’d never heard of the Resistance making that type of error. Not that it mattered. Male, female, or machine, one persona carried the information needed to wield microsats as missiles. It was the information that interested him, not the personal details. Still, he was glad he had come to know the gentle soul of Miss DeChant.

He went to the cot where the girl lay. He knelt beside her and squeezed her hand reassuringly. She was still gazing sightlessly into a realm of oblivion and darkness and cold. He shook his head irritably. What gibberish. He laid the girl’s hand down gently and called for Lieutenant Gratz to have the girl taken to his hov. He knew the man would see to it personally and, like Deiley, keep the information to himself. There was nothing more valuable in the military than a capable lieutenant.

* * * *

“Lieutenant Eyer, ma’am?”

Jody looked up from her tabinal full of cyberwork and sighed gratefully. She was ready to use any excuse take a break from the painfully boring, day-to-day chores of running a regiment, and the excited expression on Private Jameson’s face said this was going to be a real excuse to stop.

“Yes, Kelly? What can I do for you?”

The impossibly young woman stepped in and saluted, crisp, sharp--her accuracy could be pinpointed to a millimeter. Jody smiled, but saluted back.

“Don’t do that, Kelly. It’s scary. I might think you’re trying to impress me.”

She looked startled at the whimsical accusation, but relaxed some at Jody’s disarming smile.

“Sorry, ma’am. I... I...”

“Don’t be sorry, Kelly. I’m just grouchy after ordering five tons of supplies that are going to come in a kilo at a time. Now, you have some news from our Research crowd?” Kelly was one of four rookies assigned to research. They actually did little more than run errands at this point in their training, but they were being exposed to the skills and work habits of efficient veterans, which was what Jody wanted.

“Yes, ma’am!” She paused, then blushed when she realized that Jody was waiting. She tripped over herself several times in telling the news, spilling it out like a bubbling spring.

Jody listened quietly. When Kelly finished her report, she forced herself to stand up slowly. Inside, she wanted to jump up on her desk and dance a jig. A jig. An old expression she’d picked up from Abigail.

“Thank you for your report, Private. Convey my thanks and compliments to the research department and tell them I’d like to have the primary access room in about an hour. Dismissed.”

Kelly saluted and bounced out, fortunately not looking back to see Jody smiling after her. Had she been that young once?

She tried to go back to the order forms, but what little enthusiasm she’d had was whisked out the door with the exuberant private. She snapped off the tabinal.

“Computer? Is the primary access room vacant?”

“It sure is, Lieutenant! You want me to reserve it for you?”

“Yes, please. Oh, and would you please remove the level tethers? I’ve got to climb the ladder tonight.”

“Are you sure, ma’am? The last time you tried to climb the ladder...”

“Yeah, yeah. I ended up in the infirmary for a couple days. Sorry, but it’s gotta be done.” Jody mulled around for a phrase she’d picked up. “Big doodoo’s tonight.”

The computer laughed. “Umm, I think that’s ‘big doin’s’, ma’am’.” Jody had the worst time with the ancient phrases, but had acquired a taste for them, partly because of Abigail, partly because her unit was getting--um--revved up (yes, that was the phrase) to start rescuing operations. After years of inactivity, the 179th was to be a going concern again.

“Oops. Thanks for the correction.”

“S’okay. The room is reserved and the tethers are detached. Shall I contact TAU for you, ma’am?”

“Thanks. Just find out when I can talk to them. Tell them we’ve got an answer on our inquiries, and while it’s not at all what we expected, it’s very good news.”

The computer went on with its business, and Jody took a slow stroll of the compound. Things had changed quite a bit since she’d been promoted and given the 179th Regiment to repair and reactivate. Though it was never said in so many words, the sudden and extremely gory passing of Lieutenant Posen had been a godsend to the unit. In the four months she’d been in command, it had gone from a paranoid bunch of untrained people bullied by an undisciplined A Company, into a cohesive regiment, still green, but with an attitude. It was amazing, both in the amount of the turnaround, and in the relative ease and quickness that it had happened. Jody would take some of the credit--why not? she took the blame for her mistakes--but the whole thing had started because of the wisdom of TAU.

After the scraps of rendered flesh, shattered bones and burst organs had been identified as Posen, TAU had broken tradition and given a field commission to Jody. Normally, Sergeant Olecki, being in charge of A Company, would have been in command. But while TAU was far away, they had known what was going on through Ressler. And Ressler had been very straightforward in his observations and findings. They seized the fact that Olecki was still laid up from his attack on Abigail and gave temporary command to her. Then, before Olecki recovered enough to relieve her, TAU found some critical need for his unique abilities and transferred him. To the upper Volga. The extreme upper Volga. Jody’s opinion of TAU, unformed until then, soared.

Once promoted and in permanent command, she quickly dismantled A Company, sending the majority of its personnel to suddenly available locations throughout the Resistance military. Then, eschewing the normal organization of a regiment, Jody kept B Company as B Company, and began recruiting a C Company. In the place of A Company she brought some of the better researchers, trainers and veteran combat personnel she had made contact with during her service with the Thirty-fifth. These she kept in a loose platoon, assigning them as needed to either company or to perform independently.

It was one of the independent assignments that put the spring in her step today. Spring? She wanted to race to the access room now and attempt to contact Mike right away. But she couldn’t. Not until she informed TAU of Research’s discovery and was granted permission. Permission that was certain to be given.

The assignment had been fairly straightforward: Examine every possible aspect of Abigail Wyeth. TAU had given her their information, which was plenty. Breaking their own rules, they had kept a record of both Corporal Lendler’s research and Corporal Geher’s IHAD on Abigail from almost three years ago. Jody had been stunned, both by the quantity and the content. Until she’d met Abigail, she’d not had any personal contact with a Cue. And Abigail turned out to be the grandmother of all Cues. Grandfather, rather. Jody remembered the redness of her face when she realized the young woman she’d gotten so chummy with was really a man. Scratch that. Had once been a man. Abigail’s change from one gender to the other was just as real as Jody’s promotion from sergeant to lieutenant. Probably more permanent, too.

Armed with this fantastic starting point, Jody had instructed her team to continue digging and digging and digging. Nothing was to be considered too trivial. No tangent was to be overlooked.

Jody’s goal was simple. Find out why NAtch was so interested in her. She knew now that Posen had been in the pay of NAtch. A traitor. She also knew that he was acting under orders to force Abigail to

shard. Why? Because there was no clear-cut reason to be found didn't mean there wasn't one. Jody was determined to find it.

She strolled through the mess and was greeted by smiles and salutes. The morale of the regiment was very high. Although they were still green troops, and were not battle tested, she was confident that they would have the mettle to withstand their first trial by fire, and morale would remain high. She snorted at her choice of words. Better lay off the military reading for a while and curl up with a good romance. Life was too short and hard to be taken so seriously.

She debated eating a small lunch, but decided against it. Climbing the ladder, as she called ascending levels she wasn't really ready for, left her exhausted, achy, and sick to her stomach. Maybe skipping a meal would ease that last one. She gave a few words of encouragement to a couple of new recruits slaving over their studies during lunch, and stopped by the laundry.

She always made a point of stopping by the laundry. The dirtiest, most thankless job in the regiment, it seemed to attract the seedier dogs. She had read about Abigail's disastrous turn on this duty, and Private Jackson's cruel mistreatment of her, and would not allow anything even remotely similar to happen here.

She spent a few minutes talking to the three on the detail, helping to load a few bundles, and departed. Taking a last look around the mess, she made for the hallway that led to the access room.

"Lieutenant!"

Jody turned and saw Sergeant Moss working his way through the mess crowd. She smiled and waited for him. She and Leonard had served together in the Thirty-fifth; he was the first one she pried free when given the 179th. His no-nonsense but evenhanded way with his dogs, especially the recruits, kept a high esprit de corps.

"Hi, Len. I was just heading over to the access room." Jody continued to walk, and Len fell into step beside her. "I think I may have a job for you."

"Really? How big and when?"

"I don't know, yet. Probably not too big, a platoon at most. As for when, I'd guess in three or four days. It's going to be a quick setup and extraction. In Australia."

Len had a mildly surprised look on his face.

"An extraction? Who's the target?"

"I can't say until I get TAU permission. But pick out your platoon and begin a Plan R extraction. I want to make it look like the guy was killed. Set it up so no body can be recovered."

He whistled. "I've got good people, but they're still untested. It'll be hard, Jody."

"I'm sure it will be, Len."

Len cracked a grin and waved, heading back to the mess area. He'd have an initial layout ready to modify within two hours, and a final plan set no more than three hours after she gave him the details. She reached the access room and entered. All she had to do now was convince TAU she knew what she was talking about.

"Access, Lieutenant Eyer."

* * * *

Deiley carried the two cups of hot tea, one with lemon, the other an herbal, into the tidy little room. He placed them on the table beside the bed. Looking around, he made certain everything was as it should be. He had been painstakingly setting it up for weeks, but still he checked.

The closet door was open, displaying several modest dresses. The dresser was properly stocked, and the mirror well polished. The floors were bare wood, with a rag rug covering the middle. The small bathroom attached to the room was immaculate and extremely private. Everything was set.

So why was he hesitating? He looked down on the bed, where Miss DeChant lay, still sharded as a machinery ripe of one sort or another. Her delicate face seemed to catch the harsh Arizona light coming through the window and soften it. She lay on top of the covers, still dressed in her NAtch issued pants and shirt. He had debated changing her, and decided against it. She would know what clothes she owned, and changing her would cause her discomfort, knowing it was he who had done it. That would be detrimental to maintaining the Miss DeChant persona until dissolution. He would have her clean up and dress herself after waking.

And that was the source of his hesitation. He pulled out of a pocket the sharding disk he needed to use. Although he understood the need of using it, he found it slightly distasteful. He reminded himself that not only had he been ordered to shard the girl into Miss DeChant, it was to his personal benefit that he do it. Reluctantly, he pressed it against the girl's left temple and activated it.

"Miss DeChant?" Nothing. "Miss DeChant! Please, I have some errands for you to run for me. Miss DeChant!"

* * * *

COOL POUR PRESS

the dough down firmly and... and...

I was lying on a bed in a dim room. I... I... What had happened? These episodes were becoming most distressful. I'd been making the bread only a moment ago. I raised my hands and looked at them. They should have been dough-encrusted, but were fairly clean. So that meant I'd...

"Ah! Miss DeChant. You're awake. Excellent. I've brought you a cup of herbal tea. I hope you find it hot enough."

I turned my head slowly, as in a dream. Major Deiley was standing beside my bed--at least, I assumed it was my bed--and looking down intently at me. He was putting something away in his pocket. I sat up and swung my feet to the floor, feeling unsteady. A shot of fear grabbed me when I remembered I had been nude, but felt relief when I noticed I was dressed in my normal clothing. Still in a daze, I ran a slow hand down my shirt. Major Deiley stirred and placed a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"Don't worry, Miss DeChant. I've made certain no one misused you. I debated changing you myself, but felt it inappropriate."

"*Merci*, Major Deiley. I am grateful. Where am I? What is the date? What has happened?"

"Today is Friday, October 24th." He smiled briefly. "And it's still 2679. My men interrupted Resistance operations at their main base." I looked up, suddenly afraid. He shook his head slightly. "Don't worry, we made sure the base was evacuated prior to takeover. Lieutenant Lockwood and I find it to our mutual benefit to maintain status quo. But you were behind, as your soulner, when we entered. She was

unconscious, so I took personal charge of you. You are now in your room in my quarters. It is my wish that you return to service.”

“*Oui, m’sieur*. But my condition...”

“Is becoming more unstable. Yes, I understand. I believe I’ve stabilized it for the moment. Please, Miss DeChant. I’m asking you to remain.”

I shook my head. “No, Major. That’s not right. Abigail is the soulner, and deserves to be the aware one. I’ve lived my life. Now she...”

“I’m sorry, but that’s not the way it’s going to work, Miss DeChant. You know that she had designs against NATEch, yes?” I looked at him, fearful of his next words. I nodded. “The reason your soulner was unconscious was because she’d had made her attack against my superior in the puterverse. She lost. Badly.”

“No! You’re saying she... she...”

“No, I’m not saying she died. My experience has been that when the soulner dies, every ripe dies as well. I’m sure she’s fine.” He paused. “As long as she stays where she is. You understand that should Abigail Wyeth reappear, I will be obligated to execute her.”

I stared at him. “But then you would be executing me, Major!”

“That’s correct.”

I felt a heavy weight come upon me. What should I do? It was my duty to care for Abigail. But did I do that if it meant keeping her in that horrid round room? Wasn’t it also my duty to surrender myself to my soulner? But to do that meant her death. I did not doubt for a moment that Major Deiley would do as he said. He was a hard man.

His hand, still on my shoulder, squeezed me reassuringly.

“I’m sorry, Miss DeChant, but for the time being, it’s to your soulner’s benefit that you remain the dominant persona.” He released me and walked to the door.

“I’ll be having my lieutenant over for dinner for debriefing at six-thirty. It’s two o’clock now. I believe he has a preference for pork.”

“*Oui*, Major. I’ll see to it.” I stood up and began taking stock of my room. After a moment I noticed the major was still in my doorway. He smiled slightly.

“I’m glad you’re back, Miss DeChant.” He closed the door with a quiet hand.

* * * *

“Access, Jody Eyer. Level...” Here she paused to take a deep breath. “Level eight limited nine.”

The primary access room flickered dark, lingered between realities for an instant, then projected Jody into the puterverse.

The landscape became pockmarked with walls and access doors and terminal stands. In the middle distance stood a ubiquitous black barrier. Jody flexed her muscles experimentally. It was a rare thing for her to access this high twice in the same day. She felt a slight ache in her joints, and there was a faint twinge in her side, but otherwise she was fine. Not wanting to spend too much time here, she struck out

immediately for the Quantum, the puterverse's most known feature, besides the walls.

As she moved along, she thought back to the events that had brought her here. It seemed incredible that a mere four months ago her scouting party had discovered the badly injured girl beside the wrecked NATech hov, her body armor riddled and her lifeblood soaking the Sahara sands. Jody had never admitted it to anyone, but her first thought when she saw Abigail was the same as Posen's--that she was one of the girls from nearby Alexandria.

It became clear almost immediately that Abigail was far more than that. Abigail was not just a dog; she was one of the best. When she later said she was the anchor for the Third's top triteam--considered by both sides to be the deadliest triteam on either side--Jody hadn't doubted her for a moment. It was because of her faith in Abigail's word that Jody first started suspecting Lieutenant Posen's motives. Of course, because of her work with Doctor Ressler, she already knew of the dirty goings on in her regiment.

And she was certain that Posen had his own agenda attached to those orders. She'd seen the look in his eyes that night she broke into the infirmary, had seen his hand sliding out from under Abigail's hospital gown. Her stomach turned at the thought. Had she caught him in the act, she would have gunned him down without compunction. She had known that Abigail hadn't killed Ressler, as Posen claimed. But for some reason she never guessed it was Posen himself who was the killer. Some reason? She smiled ruefully. The reason was that this detective and intrigue stuff just wasn't her style.

What she was about to do was her style, though, and she was eager to get started. Earlier in the morning, Jody reported to TAU what her team had discovered. There was no difficulty in agreeing on a plan of action. There was, however, considerable difficulty securing permission to have her people perform the operation. The 179th was essentially a new unit, untested and still understaffed. It took at times heated arguing that she was the only one who could do the extraction in time. On the strength of her preparation, research in the field, and her close tie to Abigail, TAU reluctantly agreed.

And then they changed their minds when she insisted that no one could guarantee success better than Abigail's counterpart, Mike. She met him once, and hadn't particularly enjoyed the encounter. There was no doubt, however, of Mike's capabilities. She was going to need an inside man for this to look completely like an accidental death, and Mike was the man. TAU argued again, but both they and she knew there was no other real choice. Permission was granted, her level access was raised to unrestricted, and here she was, about to "go up the ladder". How high she had to go, or was physically able to go, she didn't know. She felt it would have to be fairly high, though, and had placed Moss in charge of the extraction. Tonight's trip wouldn't kill her, but it could very easily put her in the infirmary for an extended stay.

Jody reached the Quantum and a dead-end. She had absolutely no idea how to contact Mike. She had come here only because it was along the Quantum that she had last been with him. She called for a platform and rose up on it, soaring about twenty meters into the air. She looked around quickly, not knowing what she was looking for. There were at least a hundred other people currently accessing within sight of her, but none of them would be Mike. Nor could she ask them.

Going back down, Jody called up a requester terminal. A requester could scan all levels the user had access to in an effort to locate another user. The cubish cloud floated there, a single flashing question mark hovering in the mist.

"Mike," Jody said tentatively. "All access levels."

"You will need to provide further information to reduce the scope of the search," it responded pleasantly.

“I don’t have any further... wait. Restrict scan to level ten and higher.”

“Scanning, please wait. Scanning, please wait. Scanning, plea... There are currently 4,879 users with level ten access or higher who will respond to ‘Mike’. Three hundred and forty-four are currently on-verse.”

“How long is the longest access of those 344?”

“Mike Jacobs has been on-verse for two hours and nineteen minutes.”

“I see. Thank you. End search.”

“You are welcome. Happy netting.” The requester dissipated into the puterverse electron atmosphere.

Well, that didn’t work, she thought glumly. She didn’t really expect it to, but still felt heavy disappointment and an impending sense of failure. Only one thing left to do.

“Computer. Access Jody Eyer. Level fifteen.”

“Warning! Accessing higher than level twelve can cause severe physical trauma, including but not limited to: internal bleeding, muscle strains, whole body fatigue, and in rare instances, permanent debilitation.”

“I understand. Remove future warnings and access.”

The puterverse suddenly brightened and cooled. Every single user who had been populating level eight disappeared, leaving her alone. The obsidian barriers retreated to the far horizon. All around her, red doors flashed green. The Quantum River, a deep blue with traces of gold and silver, started to glow, and the surface began roiling, showing high activity. The air became invigorating and crisp. These were the good things.

The slight fatigue Jody had been feeling turned razor sharp and began slicing open her leg and arm muscles. She slumped to her knees, then struggled back to her feet. Calling for a platform, she again went up into the air, but could only manage ten meters. Going to her hands and knees to conserve energy, she looked out over the horizon. Nothing.

“Mike!” she shouted, trying not to cry from the pain it brought. Her shout carried a great distance, but came back empty.

“Mike! This is Jody Eyer! I need your help!” Still nothing. He wasn’t going to be here anyway.

“Access, Jody Eyer... Level... level twenty.”

Pain became a living thing inside her, forcing her to cry out and slump to the ground. The platform, held in place by her will, shattered into thousands of bright pieces, and Jody fell ten meters, again crying out again as she slammed into the ice cold surface, frozen to the hardness of iron. Using all her willpower, she struggled to her feet, trying to see past the agonizing cold that stabbed at her toes and ankles like a hundred stilettos. Through pain-filled eyes, Jody looked around.

The Quantum was now a brilliant blue, and smelled of the freshest mountain air. The slivers of gold that traveled upstream were brilliant ropes, dotted with colorful diamonds of data. Of the black barriers, she could see only a dim smudge on the horizon. It was stunning. It was also empty.

“Mike!” Jody shouted again, choking off the cry almost immediately. There was something in her lungs, eating at the lining and filling them with acid. The agony was so great, she didn’t have the willpower to

shout a second time. Jody was in serious trouble.

She'd imagined this would be a difficult journey, but nothing as bad as this. Nor as short. The last time she'd climbed the ladder, she'd only gone up to level thirteen. It had been very difficult, but she managed to stay for a couple hours. Now, at level twenty, Jody doubted she had even a couple of minutes. It wasn't going to work. The pain was too great. She *had* to terminate access. She wiped the crystal pink blood from her lips and with her last strength made ready to end access.

"Access, Jody Eyer. Level thirty."

Why she said it, she didn't know. It was recklessly foolish, perhaps fatally so. But in the instant before she spoke, she saw Abigail's cheerful smile and intense eyes, filled with purpose. Jody had actually known Abigail for all of two weeks, and much of that didn't count because of separation or her condition. There should be no reason for her to risk her life this way for a Shard who would probably be dead in a few months. Might already be dead. No reason, but here she was.

The cold was gone, and an orange warmth, spiced with curls of apple and a haze of soft violet, filled the air. Jody rolled to her back, her last action before her skeleton softened to the point that it could no longer support her. Slivers of bone began poking through her skin, bursting into flame. The ground was comfortably warm, covered with a green and light red grass, blowing gently in the ion breeze. Overhead, the sky was solid black, of a pitch so complete that it seemed to draw light into it.

She had no idea what the Quantum looked like now, nor would she ever see it. Her bones had nearly boiled away, and her body had all but collapsed in on itself. She had a single breath left.

"Mi"-- Her eyesight faded and death caressed her, taking away the pain.

"Wow, flesh. You've got a lot of nerve to try this. Must be pretty important for you to talk to Mike."

Gentle water washed through Jody's body, filling and restoring her. She felt her chest rising, and strength trickle into her body. She drew a breath, the first one after her final. It was the sweetest moment of her life. She couldn't move, but knew she would soon. Sight came back to her eyes. Sight, but no pain. Using a portion of her still limited strength, she turned her head toward the voice.

Standing beside her was a small girl. Looking like a pixie, she couldn't have been more than meter high. She was leaning over Jody, looking earnestly into her eyes.

"Tha--Thank you," Jody forced out with still empty lungs.

The pixie's face, fairly serious until then, brightened.

"You're welcome! Now that's important, thanking someone right off the bat."

'Right off the bat'? Where had she heard that phrase before? Wait...

"You... you know Abigail, don't you?" Jody had enough strength to talk now, but remained still otherwise.

The pixie became even brighter, if that was possible.

"Yes! And you do, too?" she asked excitedly. Jody nodded and the pixie leaned closer. "Oh, yeah! I remember your signature, now. You and one other flesh came here with Abby about twenty-eight hundred, seventy-six hours ago. I only saw you from a distance, but you're that flesh that Abby seemed to like."

“Um, could you maybe call me, Jody? 'Flesh' is kind of insulting.”

“Oh! I’m sorry. You’re right. I’ll call you Jody. My name’s Kiki.”

Jody tried moving a little and was able to without pain. Slowly, she sat up and drew her tired legs under her. She was now eye to eye with Kiki.

“Well, Kiki, thanks again for saving me. You know why I’m here?”

“Yep. I noticed you when you requested a search for Mike, then started following you when you went to fifteen.” Kiki looked at her carefully. “That’s pretty dangerous, Jody. You’ve only gone as high as thirteen before. Then when you jumped to twenty, I checked to see where you received the permission to access that high. It took me a few seconds, and before I could get back, you’d gone to thirty. Good thing you went here. Twenty-nine or thirty-one would have killed you right away.”

“Really? Why?”

“Because they’re both primes. Thirty’s the only real safe high level because it’s composed of the first four prime numbers. Composite prime numbers are less stressful to human flesh than pure prime.” At Jody’s uncomprehending look, Kiki giggled. “Sorry, but don’t get me started! I’m Abby’s puterverse programmer, and I can 'get on my soapbox' in a nanosecond when it comes to prime numbers.”

“I’m sure. 'Get on a soapbox'. Another one of Abigail’s?”

“Uh-huh. She’s got a ton of them. I just love using them, but you’re the first real flesh--sorry, 'human'--I’ve met, Jody. Mike’s always been the one to work with them.” She plopped down on the grass beside Jody. “Speaking of Mike, why did you need to see him?”

“Because I need him to help me in a mission. A mission to possibly save Abigail’s life. We’ve just found out that Dr. Phillip Barrett is still alive.”

Chapter Two

“Hey, hey, little girl! Give us a little leg!” The catcalls, even through her dulled mind, made Susan cringe inwardly. But showing them what they wanted was better than another beating. She didn’t mind beatings, but they always picked someone else to assault for her disobedience. Dutifully, Susan lifted up a leg and pulled her ragged knee-high skirt up close to her hip. The guards hooted and whistled.

She stayed in that position, unmoving. The alpha suppression field that was used on them during the night severely restricted free will and initiative. She wanted to lower her skirt and return to work, but needed to be told to. Sarah walked by her, looking at her with dim and uninterested eyes. Aaron followed, doing the same.

“Okay, little girl, get back to work.” Colonel Forncheth’s voice pierced her addled mind, enabling her muscles to do what her soul had cried out for. Being the smallest of the prisoners, she was called little girl by all NATEch personnel, even the women. Forncheth spoke again, this time to the guards.

“Get on with your duties! If you push Lendler outside, I shall put you in there with them.” He’d do it, too, Susan thought dully as she picked up her cutting tools and trudged after the others. Shortly after arriving here, one of the guards had pushed Kate outside of her will suppressant and she had broken free, injuring several guards before being subdued. That night, the offending guard was in the barracks with them, terrified of what was coming. By morning, he wasn’t terrified anymore, just obedient. Three days later, he was dead.

The guards broke up and began overseeing the work on the current project. The prisoners were never told what it was, but it seemed to be a physical shielding layer for a fusion plant. It was never anything difficult or complicated. Having much of their higher intelligence turned off by the field, the prisoners were capable of only simple, repetitive labor. Susan stopped in front of her section and began cutting the two-meter thick metal with a low intensity laser, penetrating only a millimeter with each pass. A fully operating industrial laser could cut out the pattern in less than a minute, but then there would be nothing for the prisoners to do.

The prisoners. Once the Resistance's elite Third Regiment, they were now little more than robots. As part of the long process to crush the will, memory was left intact while endorphin production was shut down. The result was a knowledge of what they had been, but no hope to ever return. Nonetheless, with little else to do but follow the same simple pattern for sixteen hours, Susan was unable to keep her mind from wandering down into the past, to the time when this endless nightmare had begun.

* * * *

There was a rain of popping sounds from the seven hovercrafts as Mike kicked in the ion engines simultaneously. Twenty seconds until the hovers would enter phase. A burst of light flashed from the armory as lasers from Marks' group traced their way across the hanger. Susan's spine tingled when she heard Abdih's screech as his men poured from the mess area, splitting into two groups, one to the hovers, one to the armory. Eight seconds to go. Halteman followed Abdih's men, focusing his group of twenty or so on the hovers where the bulk of NATech's squads were, confused at the hover ignition but gamely fighting on. Two seconds left. Susan gripped the guns tight, then started as Abby slapped her on the ass and smiled. She laughed back at Abby above the booming gunfire and rose to her knees, firing her weapons to give Abby supporting cover. Time. Abby jumped to her feet and ran for the rifle that lay beside Lena's dead body.

Susan was firing steadily at the hovers when suddenly they shimmered slightly as they entered phase mode. Knowing she had ten seconds, Susan began firing repeatedly directly at the hovers. The beams passed through, ripping into the NATech elite forces behind them.

There was a brilliant flash and concussion. One of the big guns was firing into the hanger! Susan strained to look through the pops and afterimages that coated her sight. She wanted to fire, but couldn't discern dogs from NATech. She dropped her two guns and picked up the other two, one a slug gun.

Her vision cleared sufficiently, Susan brought up the slug gun and began emptying the fifteen-shot magazine, coolly firing into every NATech target available.

And there were a lot of them. NATech shock troops, eight to ten cohorts, were flooding the hanger. Fortunately the punch gun had done even more damage to their own troops, trapped behind phased vehicles and fully exposed to the concussion, with the Third laying down a withering crossfire. She saw four converge on Sergeant Abdih, so Susie quickly fired three times, killing two and dropping a third. Her clip was emptied with the third shot, so she laid it down and brought up the energy gun.

Too late. Tomah was bleeding profusely from the neck and would be dead in seconds. Susie burned off his attacker's face, then turned toward the...

Again there was a concussive blast as the punch gun exploded in the hanger. Susan knew it was an all out extermination raid, for NATech had no regard for their own. They were heavily armored, but those that were too close to the blast point died instantly. To NATech, it was worth some of their best troops to utterly destroy the Third.

Susan looked over toward Abby and felt her heart pound. The girl was slumping down to the ground,

having been thrown against the wall by the punch gun. As she collapsed, her jacket jumped several times from slugs. NATech had switched off energy because of the chaotic nature of the fight.

Chaos was the operative word. Susan picked up and reloaded her slug gun, then jumped over the pile of supplies she had used for cover. Halteman was on one knee, his other leg blood-soaked, pulling the trigger of his pistol with incredible speed, then reloading in an instant. The effect was a nearly unbroken roll of booms, every shot seeming to find a target.

Three more were closing in on his left flank, so Susan took them out with her pistol. Then kneeling at right angles next to each other, the two continued firing, covering everyone else's withdrawal to the armory. Inside the room, behind the counter, came a soul-freezing mechanical scream. Marks had opened up with his high-speed slug gun.

Using the powered heavy cyclical gun the way a farmer would use his scythe, Marks made broad, sweeping arcs with his weapon. An entire cohort of shock troops, still clustered together, ceased to exist in a single heartbeat. He swung to the hanger mouth. The sun, blocked by wave after wave of troops, suddenly poked through as those same troops either broke formation or dropped to the ground, coating the hanger ramp with a slick sheen of blood. An attack hov screamed down the ramp and was caught in Marks' fire. The side shredded instantly, despite the heavier shielding, and the engine lost its stasis field, venting ion gas into the hanger. The hov, all personnel aboard riddled to doll rags, crashed to the hanger floor and screeched its way toward Susan and Greg. Susan leapt out of the way.

Halteman didn't. He staggered to his one good leg, then jerked as a slug caught him in the shoulder. Staggered, he was unable to dodge the onrushing hov. Knowing it was hopeless, he coolly fired four more times at NATech soldiers before being smashed by the now burning hovercraft.

Susan jumped forward, knowing he was dead, but still wanting to help. A hand grabbed her and she went limp, knowing there was a knife in the other hand. Caught unawares, the NATech soldier foolishly tried to change his attack. It cost him the last two seconds of his life as Susan shoved the gun under her left arm and fired five times, hitting him with four of the slugs, the last one in the head as he fell. Not bothering to check on him, Susan finished the last few steps to the armory and jumped over the counter, hoping they'd look before firing.

They looked. No one shot her. Susan looked quickly over the personnel still effective, then turned toward the entrance, bringing her gun up. More hovercraft were coming down the ramp and there was another heavy...

The second punch gun fired, this time directly into the armory. Susan felt all the air crushed from her lungs and everything became red, then gray, then black.

Someone was slapping her in the face. She was on her knees and being held up. She raised her hands to defend weakly, but had them brushed aside. Rough hands went over her body, removing her armor and weapons. She opened her eyes.

The fight was over. Her attacker was an elite NATech shock trooper. He had just finished his efficient search of her body, and it was obvious he took no pleasure in it. He was just following common sense procedures. He pulled her up by her torn blouse and threw her sideways toward the doorway.

"She's clean, concussed and partially aware. Toss her into the prisoner transport right away, before she comes to completely."

She felt herself being yanked to her feet and dragged to a waiting phase hov. Unable to resist because of the concussion, she looked around in a daze.

NATech was in the midst of dismantling the base. Two soldiers were looking over the bodies, killing wounded dogs, and calling for medical assistance for wounded NATech personnel. There were at least 150 NATech in the hanger.

She felt her guard/escort come to a stop as a hov passed in front of them. She could have resisted at that point, and did half rise to her feet. But the guard slugged her in the jaw and she slumped back down, still conscious but otherwise ineffective. The guard turned back to the hov which had stopped in front of them. The driver and an officer standing beside it were having a heated discussion.

“You are not authorized to remove prisoners from this compound!” the officer insisted.

“Yes, I am, Captain. Here’s my authorization.”

A pause. “Geez! What’s *he* want with her?”

“That’s none of your damned business, Captain. And what he does with her is none of my damned business, either. It *is* my business to follow his orders.”

“Yeah, I can’t blame you. All right. I’ll record her as killed in action. Just do me a favor, huh? Keep your people under control until after you’re out of my sight, okay? You’d think they hadn’t been with a woman in months.”

The hov pulled away and Susan was carried to the prisoner carrier and tossed in, still dazed from the hit and from the punch gun.

She looked around the dark interior. Raul was lying there, his left arm looking unnatural. Marks was there as well, and perhaps two dozen others. She looked around but didn’t see Abby. Strangely unmoved because of the concussion, she sagged against the bulkhead.

“That’s it, Lieutenant! Everyone else is dead or too badly injured.” He laughed shortly. “Which means everyone else is dead or dead.”

“Very well, Sergeant. Lock it up and engage the field.”

The door slammed shut and magnetic bolts locked them in. Dim blue lighting illuminated the interior. They felt a lurch, then started moving up the hanger ramp and out onto the desert.

There was a barely audible whine and Susan felt a surge of fear. They were using an alpha suppression field! Scared, she covered her ears, as did most of the others. It was a nearly useless gesture, but the only one available. Within minutes, their brains would have gone through the equivalent of a sonic lobotomy, limiting their intelligence and suppressing their will power. Their only hope now was a miracle.

They had traveled for no more than a minute when that miracle almost happened. Even through the now insistent tone of the field, they heard another, louder scream of sound, followed by a dull boom. A few seconds later, the concussion rocked the hov and made it slew to one side. The pilot seemed certain to lose control, but managed to keep on even enough keel to prevent capsizing. He righted the hov and accelerated quickly.

A second wave hit the hov moments later, but it did little more than rock the vehicle, causing Susan to grab instinctively for support. She should have covered her ears again, but she didn’t really want to any more. Instead, she began rocking with the hov’s gentle movement, and stared uncaring, unknowing, as the field drove into her mind, boring deeper... deeper...

* * * *

The work shift had ended sometime while Susan was drifting in her memories, and one of the guards was pushing her in the direction of the compound. He leaned his mouth close to her ear.

“Another three or four months, little girl, and your brain will be permanent mush. Then you won’t be good for work anymore. But we’ll find something you’re good for, won’t we?” He whispered a few explicit suggestions.

She stared at him dumbly, unable to respond, then fell into line behind the one-armed Raul and walked quietly to the mess hall. They stood at a long table and quietly ate and drank their meal. They were served only bland, tasteless food, since anything other than providing nutrition would be wasted on them.

They were taken to the showers where they undressed and showered. Again, it was pointless to provide for more than the absolute essentials, so the water was cold and everyone showered together. Standing beside Billy, Susan should have felt some shyness or discomfort, but there was none. Nor was there for Billy. Neither cared.

They dressed into the clean clothes that they would work in tomorrow and were herded to bed. Although everyone had their own mat, there was only one barracks.

No sooner had they lain down than a guard walked over to the switch and activated the suppression field. Susan lay there quietly, waiting for the slight jolt that always accompanied an increase in the field.

The jolt came, and she started her little game. Whenever the field was increased, she always tried to remember as much as she could, to exercise her mind as a way to resist the conditioning and retain her intelligence. She counted to ten, then a hundred, then two hundred. She ran through the alphabet, first forward, then backwards. There had been some other exercises after that, but she had forgotten them. There only remained one more: Spell her name three times.

S-u-s-a-g-i... R-l-u-s-a-n... L-i-t-s-u-s-a-t-l-e. Satisfied she had passed her tests, at least for one more night, she went to sleep.

* * * *

3:00 a.m. Tuesday, October 28, 2679 (Australian time)

“Barrett! We’ve got a group coming in for you to check on.”

Philip Barrett groaned and rolled out of bed. Unlike his fellow dogs, Barrett had his own quarters. And unlike his comrades, his mind was in no way conditioned. Finally, unlike his friends, Barrett’s hell was not diminished because of the numbing effects of alpha suppression.

Barrett was a prisoner because of his loyalty. Loyalty to his oath, loyalty to his comrades, loyalty to the Resistance. As a zombie, he had no way of helping them. With him at his medical best, there stood a greater chance that the Third would be rescued.

It was a chance that had diminished greatly, at least in his mind. He had worked hard at keeping his friends in the best possible health, but was slowly losing the battle. Given an opportunity to escape the suppression field now, Barrett was sure everyone would regain all cognitive abilities. But another three months, four at the most, and that opportunity would be gone, and he’d only be caring for NATech slaves. What would he do then? But there was still, despite all that, a slender hope.

* * * *

The hope blossomed quite unexpectedly during a conversation he’d had with Forncheth only four nights

previously. He had lightheartedly insulted the commandant when it was suggested he shift his medical practice to the more proper NATEch clinic.

“Come now, Doctor. Surely you can see the futility in continuing to hope for rescue,” Forncheth had chided him. “Not only has such a rescue never occurred, it most definitely is not going to occur with the Third. Everyone, including your precious TAU, thinks you were destroyed by the same weapons assault that destroyed Fifteenth, Forty-seventh and Eighty-third NATEch brigades.”

“What weapons assault? What are you talking about, man?” Barrett had hoped to goad the man into making a slip. He’d had enough to drink to give him that hope.

“You haven’t heard?” The colonel seemed surprised. “No, I suppose you hadn’t. Well, I can remedy that. Computer!” he shouted. “Access Colonel Forncheth, Level Four limited six. Single wall display.”

The far wall faded away and a simple screen appeared.

“Search for and display mission against the Third Regiment of the Resistance that occurred on June Fifteenth, 2679.”

The screen dutifully displayed the data, and Barrett read for the first time about the complete annihilation of the base only moments after their prisoner transport had left. He had no idea what could cause such a devastating attack, nor did the report. With suddenly ignited excitement, he did have an idea who could cause it, though. Like Susan, Doctor Barrett had witnessed the exchange between the NATEch officer and the hov driver. Unlike Susan, who’d been on her knees, Barrett was standing and able to look into the open air hov and see Abigail’s body lying on the deck, one of the soldiers already starting to undress her. This account was proof to him that she had somehow survived, and that this attack was what she would call payback. And payback, Abigail always laughed, was a bitch.

It was comforting to know she was safe, but it was also comforting because if she could, she would find them. If only he could send out some sort of signal. He had an idea. He turned away from the screen, dismissing it with a wave of his hand.

“Yes, yes, Colonel. I’m sure it says exactly what NATEch wants it to say. Excellent propaganda to demoralize the prisoners and build up NATEch personnel.”

“You are calling me a liar, Doctor?” Forncheth inquired softly.

“Eh? Not at all, Colonel! I know you to be a man of your word. I’m calling that report a liar. The source is not one I would trust.”

“You have a better source?”

“Not better, but one I would put a little more faith in. The Anchorage Herald has a small underground Resistance newserver that would or would not verify your story.”

“Then give me the puterverse location and I’ll show it to you.”

Barrett laughed, refilling the colonel’s glass. “I think not, Colonel! Nothing would be gained for me, and you would have NATEch shut down that server in a moment. No, it’s not worth the risk.”

“Perhaps if you accessed it then?”

Barrett stopped his laugh and looked at the colonel long and hard. “Why would you do that, Colonel? I admit, I only need level one access as it’s available to anyone with the password. But what’s to be

gained?”

“Nothing, Doctor! Nothing at all! But what’s to be lost? Must everything be a game of win something, lose something? Here. I shall give you access and allow you to use your password.” The colonel called up a keyboard and offered it to Barrett.

Barrett stepped up and looked at it. He glanced at Forncheth. “You understand that the password is good only once? That you’ll not be able to trace it?”

“Frankly, Doctor, I could not care less about a two-byte Resistance newserver on the other side of the world. But this conversation is interesting. Please.”

“Very well. Access, Philip Barrett, Level one.”

The screen, still active, shifted and dimmed. Barrett typed in his password and was soon scanning the news article referring to the incident, and verifying the colonel’s account. The colonel, for his part, was being very gracious in victory. Barrett turned off the screen, apologized to him, then allowed the conversation to drift to other subjects. Though he remained subdued on the surface for the remainder of the evening, inside he knew he had given his charges the best possible chance from his single access.

* * * *

Barrett finished his long walk to the remote warehouse building that served as his medical facility and mounted the steps. He pulled the door closed behind him quickly; even in the late spring, these Australian nights could get chilly on the southern coasts. He stepped through a small entryway and into the main room. Ten meters up, dim industrial lighting illuminated the group of men inside.

It was a motley crew that awaited him. All four carried the deep red plasma burns that told him most of the story in a single glance. Their hov engine casing had cracked, pouring hot plasma into the interior. It was their poor luck that it had happened this close to a concentration camp. Three guards, who were undoubtedly feeling less than cheerful from the loss of sleep, stood watch.

Ignoring them for a moment, Barrett walked to the far side of the large room and checked on his one patient. To give at least a little privacy, the corner bed was partitioned off =with blankets strung on rope. Barrett stepped quietly through, the injured men and guards watching him closely.

Lying on the bed was Kate. She was pale and sweaty. Her eyes were burning with fever. Fever and fear. Under the blanket, a small mound rose from her middle. He sat on the stool beside the bed, smiling and taking her pulse. She smiled back.

“Hey, Doc.” Her breath was labored enough that just speaking two words caused a fit of coughing.

“Shhh. Don’t talk, Kate. I’m just here to help some injured men, and thought I’d look in on you, first.” Her pulse was strong, but racing.

“Thanks. I suppose this beats working in the cutter, huh?” She paused to cough again. “So. Any reprieve from our commandant yet?”

Barrett shook his head. “No, not yet. But we can always hope. Well, you seem to be a little better,” he lied. “Let’s take a look at your child, shall we?” He pulled down the blanket and pulled up her work blouse--hospital clothing was a luxury--and began a fetal examination.

The child was doing well, much better than the mother. And worlds better than the father, when it came to that. Kate had been raped only days after arriving. The man was placed in the prisoners' barracks as

punishment, and subjected to the suppression field. When the prisoners found out three days later what had happened, he was found dead outside the barracks. It was the last act of aggression the dogs of the Third Regiment made before succumbing completely to mind control.

After Barrett determined Kate had been impregnated, she was shifted to the infirmary for the duration of the pregnancy. In an odd twist of unintentional morality, NATech did not tolerate the injury or death of an unborn child. It felt that the child was a citizen and potential consumer, and NATech was, after all, a business.

Unfortunately, that consideration did not necessarily extend to the mother. Especially if the mother was a Resistance dog. So Barrett was put in the extremely difficult position of watching Kate placed in a suppression field--albeit a much lighter one than her comrades were subjected to--then jumping to help repair the damage.

Finishing the examination, Barrett leaned back and sighed. The child would survive; the mother would not. This was in keeping with NATech policy, which saw this as a profitable exchange of one corrupted soul for one consumer. Nonetheless, he smiled at Kate.

"The baby's doing fine, Kate. Now get some sleep. I'll increase your medication for this evening. Your getting a full night's sleep is worth the minimal risk." He made the appropriate adjustments to the weak uv field. "Well, off to see those poor men."

"Poor men?" Kate's eyes were already dulling as the inferior but quick acting drug took effect.

"Yes. They're not Resistance or NATech. Probably just some civilians who had the foul luck to have engine trouble in a restricted region. They shouldn't have been anywhere near here, but that doesn't justify their having to stay here for the rest of their lives. It's these kind of services that make me really wonder if I'm being faithful to my Hippocratic oath." He crossed a hand in front of his eyes. "I'm sorry, Kate. I shouldn't be downloading my problems onto you. I'm just..."

He broke off because Kate had drifted off into a fitful sleep. He looked at her briefly, then turned away. A terrible waste. He walked purposely toward his new patients, smiling tiredly.

"Well, gentlemen, let's take a look at those burns, shall we?"

* * * *

"Sergeant? They're in."

Sergeant Moss leaned over the young woman's shoulder and glanced at the holodisplay. Corporal Yashimoto had been treated with a micraural wash, and his entire body was able to act as an extremely limited thermal viewer. He could make out four untagged images, three behind his men, and one up close and in contact with Takari. His actions seemed to indicate he was a physician. There was a dim smudge at the edge of the readout. He pointed to it.

"What do you think that is, Jennie?"

"I think it's another patient, Sergeant. Doctor Barrett walked over there when he first arrived and spent about five minutes with her."

"Her?"

"I think so. Look at this." Jennie shifted her hands slightly, zooming the display onto the smudge. To Moss, it now looked like a bigger smudge.

“Ummmm...” he prompted.

“Sorry. See that slightly intense, slightly separate glow?” He didn’t, but Jennie obviously did. She was still fairly new to the unit, only three months served, but she’d already picked up a reputation for being right more than wrong. “I think it’s a fetus, Sergeant. I believe the patient is a pregnant woman.”

Moss nodded. “And her being there would be within NAtch SOP. All right, we’ll have to crowd in a little closer.” He clapped Jennie on the shoulder. “Good work, Jennie.” She continued to study the display, but her ears burned with the compliment.

He turned to the activated terminal behind the copilot’s seat. Private Flanagan was accessing, the look on his face was slightly stunned. Moss stepped into the field.

The hov faded away, turning into a huge game board, occupied by himself, Flanagan, and a small, incredibly bright creature that flitted from colored square to colored square. At each jump, the square took on a unique feature, color and smell.

“How’s it coming, Dave?”

Flanagan started and turned toward him.

“Oh! I’m sorry, sir! I was caught up in Kiki’s work. Isn’t it something?”

“It sure is. But, Dave?” He turned with eager and slightly nervous eyes. Like Jennie, Dave was painfully young and new. “Don’t call me sir. You do that in front of the Lieutenant and she’ll never let me hear the end of it.”

“Sorry, si--uh, Sergeant!”

“Don’t get so flustered, kid. You’re doing fine. Let’s see how Kiki’s doing.” Kiki had apparently reached a stopping point and was bouncing over to them.

“Hiya, guys! I’m just about finished, Len. I’ve got the phase calibration matched to all but four of the mines. They’re older versions and are starting to fail, causing them to fluctuate too much.”

“How closely are we matched, Kiki? You know it has to be within one picohertz.”

She laughed. “Piece o’ cake, Sarge! I’ve got our field matched.”

“Matched? Perfectly?” he said, a little stunned. He looked at the geometric shapes floating over the board, unable to discern that she’d accomplished anything.

“Uh-huh. It’s not too hard, really. Once I determined the link between the phase modulation and the surrounding magnetic fields, then coupled it with the neuron energy signatures, it was a cinch to cross integrate.”

“Uhh, thanks for the compliment, Kiki,” Moss interrupted. “I’m flattered that you even *think* I understand any of that. Your word’s good enough for me.” She smiled, her face lighting up the entire area. “So we’re ready to go?”

“We, as Abby says, are ready to rock.”

“Very well. Let’s lock it up and lock it down.”

* * * *

“What the devil are you men doing out in this forsaken part of Australia?” Barrett asked as he examined the first man.

“Well, we’d heard the stories about the rock that hit Adelaide having a high gold content, so we thought we’d head down...” His voice tapered off as Barrett stared at him in disbelief.

“You’re joking. Don’t you know this is a restricted area? NATech’s closed this entire area, from Port Augusta down to Melbourne Spaceport.”

“Sure,” he shrugged, “but people come in here all the time to mine the rock. And since the drives were vaporized on reentry, there’s no radiation. If our engine hadn’t destabilized the containment casing, NATech would’ve never--Hey!”

The man jerked back as the balm, applied none too gently by a disgusted Barrett, worked its way into his burns.

“Hold still! I’ve got your friends to treat as well. Besides, you’d best get used to hardships.”

“What do you mean, Doc?” asked the man standing behind Barrett’s patient.

“Yeah. What’s NATech gonna do to us?” interjected the third nervously. “We’re just miners looking for some quick creds.”

“Try explaining that to the base commandant,” Barrett said dryly. “For all he knows, you’re Resistance agents, hoping to break out...”

“I think that’s enough talk, Doctor,” the guard nearest the door, a corporal, said roughly. “These men will be treated by you and released.” Barrett snorted, and his patient looked at him with eyes widening in realization.

“You’re not going to let us go!” he yelled. “You’re going to keep us in this concentration camp, aren’t you?”

“Now whoever said this was a concentration camp?” laughed one guard. “We just happen to be a vacation ranch for zombies.”

“NO! NO!” The man pushed Barrett back and jumped to his feet, backing away slowly from the suddenly watchful guards, three guns leveled at him. The corporal sneered at him.

“That’s enough of that. You took your chance and you blew it. Come onto NATech property without permission and you become NATech property. Besides, it’s not all that bad,” the corporal added with mock consolation. “After the first week or so, the alpha fields kinda lessen your problems.”

It was too much for the man to hear. He dropped to his knees and began crying.

“You can’t! I’m married! I have two little kids at home. Two... little...” he sobbed, falling to his hands. All three guards looked at him with disgust, lowering their rifles at the now harmless target.

The guard closest to the other three miners suddenly choked and gurgled, the sound nearly drowned out by the clatter of his rifle striking the floor. The other miners had begun ruthlessly dismantling the NATech soldiers.

Cursing himself for giving their prisoners this desperate opportunity, the corporal swung his rifle around, bringing it up. He was surprised to see not desperation in their eyes, but determination. Realization

dawned and he swung back around toward the sobbing man, who by no coincidence was now in a perfect flanking position.

He wasn't sobbing anymore. He had launched himself from his hands and knees and was closing in fast. His scything foot caught the corporal's rifle, knocking it up just as it discharged, sending the thin beam into and through the roof. A deep, strident tone that signaled weapons discharge filled the entire camp.

The miner had followed through with his kick and was now engaging hand to hand. The corporal tried to jerk the gun up to hit his attacker, but they were too close. The miner caught the rifle under his arm and use the leverage to pull back on it. The corporal held tight, then realized his mistake. He'd devoted his attention to defending the weapon and not himself. The miner's fist shot in at his unprotected throat. There was a thin gleam of metal between the miner's fingers.

The corporal expected the blow to be painful, but in fact he felt very little, just a sharp tugging and then warmth all over his body, accompanied by sleepiness. He understood in the last moments before his lifeblood spilled from his slashed jugular that he and his men had never really had a chance against them. He took no consolation in the knowledge that he was the last of the three to die.

Barrett stood back, stunned at what had happened in front of his eyes. Less than ten seconds had passed, and three men were now dead. One of the untreated men was rubbing his arm gingerly where a thin scratch irritated one of his burns, but otherwise they were no worse than before the fight. The slaughter, rather.

"Doctor Barrett?" the recently sobbing miner said. "I'm Corporal Takari Yashimoto, Company C of the 179th. My men and I have been sent in to extract you."

The paralysis wore off as Barrett took in the statement. Hope sprang up, then faded. He shook his head sadly.

"I'm sorry, Corporal Yashimoto, but it's not possible. Even if we could get out of this building, we've no hov"--

"Our own hov is now coming alongside. It should pull alongside the west wall in less than a minute."

"And then what, Corporal? Escape on the surface isn't even worth considering. And there is a phased mine field underneath the entire compound."

"We're going through the mine field, Doctor."

He stared at him. The corporal seemed quite sane, but Barrett checked anyway. "Are you insane, man? What are the odds of navigating a phased mine field? You're welcome to try, and I hope you make it. But I'm not ready to die yet; I have too many patients to care for, which is ultimately the reason I'm turning you down."

"First, Doctor, I'm not giving you the option. You are coming with us. Second, your staying here without hov is not treatment, it's caretaking of what will be no more than NATech property in a few months."

"We've got contact, Corporal." One of the other men was standing watch at the clinic window, a hand clamped to his ear. Barrett realized he had a micro comlink buried in his hand. "Decoy hov in one minute. Evac hov in four minutes."

Yashimoto turned his head. "Thank you, Mayberry. What are our NATech playmates doing?"

Mayberry peered out the window. The compound was flooded with light. "They don't know what

they're doing. There's about twenty of them, all armed. But they're running around, looking for someone to start the movement to the clinic." He cracked a grin, which became a half wince at the pain his scorched face caused. "I don't imagine guarding mind-doped dogs keeps you in combat condition."

"I don't imagine. Keep your eyes open." Yashimoto turned back to Barrett. "Anyway, Doctor; third, the minefield is not going to be an obstacle. Finally, the reason it won't be an obstacle, and the reason why you're coming with us, and the reason why leaving will help the Third is the same: We need you to help Abigail Wyeth. One of her constructs has matched our phases, so we can come through the minefield, then leave the same way. And we've started the framework to get the Third out of here within the next two months. But every effort is wasted if you don't come with us."

The stunned look was back on Barrett's face. He'd hoped his access would generate some action, but he never expected anything this fast or this comprehensive. He nodded his head slowly.

"Very well, Corporal. I'll trust you. But I do have a request."

"Yes?"

"I'd like to take a patient with us. She"--

"Doctor, we're not bringing anyone else with us. The hov is too small and we couldn't get to the barracks now anyway."

"I understand. But my patient is here." He pointed to the far corner, where Kate lay behind the screens. "She's four months pregnant. You know what will happen to her if I leave her behind. Surely we have room for one more."

It was Yashimoto's turn to nod slowly. "We have room for one more."

* * * *

"Three minutes." The hov moved smoothly under Moss's firm hand. The small craft was running at a depth of two kilometers, the twin ion engines pushing it at just over 1200 kilometers an hour. Behind him, the two rookies were strapped into their seats, their emergency restraint fields full on. Jennie now had the terminal position, continuing to decipher the rerouted thermal blurs.

"On schedule," she drawled out. Speech in phase was almost impossible. Under ERF, it was very painful. As such, it was also very abbreviated. "Decoy deployed. Engines overcharging. Sporadic enemy fire. Internal coordinates set."

"Two minutes." He shifted the hov controls to fingertip pressure, then activated his own ERF. The energy barrier clamped around him, giving him a smothering sensation. The engines began reverse thrust as Moss slowed the craft down, gaining altitude slightly. "Minus one five k. Ninety seconds."

"Engine overcharge blinding local sensors. Moderate enemy fire. Landing zone clear." There was a short pause as Jennie swallowed several times to reduce the burning in her throat. "NATech advance. Twenty personnel." There was another pause, followed by a brutal and decidedly coarse epitaph that was made even more vulgar because it came from Jennie. "Thermal viewer out."

Moss mentally shook his head. It had been expected that an overcharging ion engine would disable all sensors. It had, in fact, been counted on. The last thing they wanted to do was let NATech know there were two hoves involved. Still, they were now as blind as NATech, and had to hope no one entered the landing zone area.

“Approaching mine field. Thirty seconds.”

* * * *

Corporal Yashimoto glanced around at the sound of a plasma void pop. Mayberry had abandoned his comlink for one of the plasma rifles retrieved from their hov. He was clearly fighting the training that would be screaming at him to lay down a methodical, sweeping fire, preventing advance. But such disciplined resistance would almost certainly raise suspicions that they were more than scared civilians. Instead, Mayberry abused the rifle, firing before full recharge, and concentrating his fire, then haphazardly changing targets. He missed a great deal, but was still able to keep the NATech advance slowed. It helped immensely that they still hadn't figured out that the massive flood lamps that illuminated the barren compound were to his advantage and not theirs. There was a break in the firing and turned his head back to Yashimoto.

“Corporal? I can't hold them off much longer. Not with this kind of defense.”

“All right,” he replied. “Give them a little stiffer resistance. We only need a couple more minutes.” He ducked through the hole in the west wall that they had burned to gain access to the damaged hov. He gave a quick glance at the engine casing. It was losing containment, and not slowly. He backed it off about ten percent and reentered the now burning warehouse. All in all, he nodded approvingly, a total disaster.

Yashimoto looked down at Barrett, who sat on the floor, the woman's head in his lap. She was still unconscious, and would probably stay that way. He looked along the eastern wall, the one NATech was attacking, to locate his three men. Each one had a window and was laying down an inconsistent yet effective fire. Hernandez was firing with one hand. The other kept pressure on the compress covering his leg where a NATech laser had punched through. He wanted to send Mayberry to assist, but that would mean crossing the landing zone. He went to the doctor and sat beside him.

“How is she doing, Doctor?” He had to practically yell over the growing crackle of the flames.

“Not good, Corporal. The drugs I have access to are inferior and impure. She's having a mild reaction. It'll be worse when we begin phasing.”

“Can her baby withstand the phasing? I know that children are easily overcome with prolonged phasing. And we'll need to phase the entire trip.”

Barrett shook his head. “To be honest, Corporal, I don't know. Normally, the unborn react remarkably well to phasing. Since they are completely supported by the mother while in the womb, there aren't any side effects. But Kate is very weak herself. She may not survive the phase. But we really have no choice, do we?”

“I'm sorry, Doctor. We were unaware of her presence. We'd been able to determine the clinic's size, shape, and location, which is how we developed our plan. But we had no idea what it looked like on the inside. Nor who would be here.”

There was a yell from Fulton, his third man, stationed at the far end of the east wall. Yashimoto jerked his head and saw Fulton slumping over the sill. Even in the dim, flickering light of the flames that lapped the south wall, it was possible to see a deep stain spreading across his back. At that moment, the room suddenly became darker as the compound lights were finally shut off.

“That's not good,” Mayberry commented.

“Excuse me, Doctor. I’m needed elsewhere.” He gripped his rifle and rose to his feet. He needed to get to Fulton’s position, which meant crossing the landing zone. A big risk, but not as big as leaving that position unmanned.

He took two steps then jerked back. The air suddenly crackled and shimmered. He felt his breath being sucked out of his lungs, then was thrown down as a pocket of hot air blasted him. The evac hov had arrived.

The rear door lifted open, knocking over a table. No one came out.

“This party is over, people!” shouted Yashimoto. He helped Barrett carry Kate into the hov. He didn’t seat them but instead ran down the ramp and over to the west wall, which was now afire. Mayberry and Hernandez were climbing on board, carrying Fulton between them.

He nimbly jumped through the wall and into the damaged hov. He ran to the engine panel and jammed the engines to full, while simultaneously engaging the gravity brakes. The containment field indicator plummeted from fifty percent to thirty, then began dropping at a slower rate. He had perhaps twenty seconds.

He activated the nav computer and released the gravity brakes. The hov jerked and rose up, following a previously inputted flight path. Yashimoto ran to the side door and jumped back into the warehouse just as the craft began to move. He ran to the evac hov and ducked inside, slamming the hatch switch, closing the rear door.

It was very tight. Normally designed to carry five, there were now nine people in the hov. He sat in the seat left open for him just as the phase kicked in.

Everything became translucent. The interior of the hov brightened as the fire from the building shone through the walls. He watched in fascination as the craft plunged into the ground. Moss didn’t want to be anywhere near an overloaded ion engine when it exploded, and was wisely putting as much ground between them and it as quickly as he could.

He had a start several seconds later as a metallic object flashed into his view and passed through him. This would probably be the only time in his life that he’d be able to actually see a deployed phase mine, which was fine with him. It didn’t go off, meaning the phase frequencies must be very nearly matched.

Moss canted the hov further into the ground and made for bedrock. It was still going to be a long trip home, but it was shortened considerably by the presence of all his men, the doctor, and an unexpected, very welcome, passenger. Yashimoto closed his eyes and relaxed as best he could, letting the gentle hum of the McDonald phase unit lull him to sleep.

* * * *

Colonel Forncheth was a lot longer getting to bed. Dawn had come and gone before he returned to his small home. The exploding hov had solved one problem for him by killing all four of the miners they had captured the previous night. It had also created a few problems as well. He was now without a prisoner infirmary and a prison doctor. Both had been vaporized in the blast, as well as a female prisoner who was going through a pregnancy. This was going to make for a very long report.

He crawled under his covers, feeling a small loss. Barrett had kept his prisoners healthy and productive. His own NATEch medical staff could pick up the duties. But they would be without the drive or the devotion that Barrett had had toward his friends and comrades.

He would also miss Barrett as a pleasant distraction. The man could carry on a conversation and had an excellent way of expressing an opinion without being insulting. He'd miss their occasional nightly talks.

It was as he was drifting to sleep that Forncheth had an odd thought cross his mind. Was it possible that Barrett's access in the puterverse only four nights ago was somehow connected to last night? If it was, he would be in deep trouble.

But how could it be? And even if it was, what did it really matter? Barrett was dead, as was the pregnant Resistance prisoner, four miners, and twelve of his men. It was best to just let the whole incident slip into the past. If he pressed it, then he might indeed find that he shouldn't have allowed Barrett access the other night. And if he, Forncheth, found that out, then someone else would, too. No, he would forget the entire sordid affair, and pray that by choosing to forget about it, it would go away.

Chapter Three

Wednesday evening, November 26, 2679 (Arizona time)

Lieutenant Gratz motioned a hand toward me. I rose from my chair along the side wall and stepped up to him. I folded my hands and bowed before him, awaiting his order. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that Major Deiley would need his wine glass chilled and refilled. But I must see to the major's guest first.

"Yes, Lieutenant? How may I serve you?"

"I wonder if I might have another small helping of your delicious stuffed pork chops, Miss DeChant." I served him, making certain to balance it with some more lemon noodles and a taste of apple tart. He openly admired me.

"I am always impressed, sir, by Miss DeChant's gracious obedience. I doubt there is a better servant anywhere." He looked at me. "No offense, ma'am."

"None taken, Lieutenant. This what I've been made to be. This is what I want to be." I placed the plate in front of him and refilled his glass to the proper two-thirds level. I flicked the stem of the glass lightly and the wine chilled to eight degrees. I repeated the action for the major's glass as well after filling it. Since it was the end of the meal, I set the bottle of wine down between them, closer to Major Deiley, so they might serve themselves. Major Deiley smiled at me slightly and nodded.

"Thank you, Miss DeChant. You have, as always, excellent timing."

"Hear, hear!" Lieutenant Gratz pronounced enthusiastically. The Lieutenant was Major Deiley's preferred guest, and had been here four times in the past month, and several times during my first period of service. He very clearly knew that I had but one function: to be a domestic servant. Nevertheless, he had taken quite a shine to me.

Quite a shine? Now, what in the world did that mean, and why did I think it? I had never even heard that term

WHU--WHERE WAS I? I WAS STANDING AT A TABLE, BETWEEN TWO NATECH OFFICERS. ONE OF THEM WAS DEILEY. BUT I HAD BEEN IN THE PUTERVERSE. WAS THIS ANOTHER OF CHRIS' DISTRACTIONS? WHY WASN'T I

forced down the sudden dizziness and concentrated on gathering an armload of dishes as a gentle indication to Lieutenant Gratz that dinner was concluding. Major Deiley's smile had faded and his eyes had hardened with concern and knowledge.

They continued their conversation and I departed to the kitchen to put on the coffee and begin heating the cinnamon apple pie. I had been the major's servant for just about two months, counting both periods, so I knew that he preferred having the dessert served in his living room about forty-five minutes after the meal. By heating it now, I could use a liberal amount of apple butter and brown sugar on the surface, to be topped with razor thin apple slices just before serving. The resulting blend of baked apple and chilled slices always elicited a favorable response from the major's guests. And Professor LeClaire's before him.

I heard their talk fade as they walked into the living room. I pinned back my hair and put on an apron. I placed the pie in the pulse oven and began clearing the table. I then washed the dishes. Unless rushed, I always preferred washing the dishes by hand. It gave a sense of accomplishment and comfort knowing I had personally cleaned each dish, rather than trusting an indifferent machine or pulse field to do the job.

Finishing the first tray of dishes, I gathered up those remaining on the table, then pulled the table cloth for cleaning. I listened in very briefly and determined by the major's tone and subject that his wound was annoying him again. He would want dessert served soon, so he might bring an early end to the night.

I hurried into the kitchen, dumping the tablecloth into the hamper to clean later, and fetched out three apples from storage.

SPACE IN THE LOWER LEVELS WILL BE ALLOCATED ON AN AS NEEDED BASIS, WITH TENANTS WITH LONGER LEASES HAVING SENIORITY IF DEMANDS BECOME TOO HIGH. PLEASE NOTE THAT LOCAL ORDINANCE REQUIRES THAT ONLY NONVOLATILE MATERIALS MAY BE KEPT IN THESE AREAS.

Another spell came over me. I had the distinct impression I was just a building, taking care of my tenants. I shook my head to clear it. I quickly cored and sliced the apples, then retrieved my pie from the oven. I started the pressure perc to brew coffee, very strong. By the time I had spread the slices evenly over the pie, the coffee was done. I poured out the coffee into a carafe, then poured it from the carafe into two cups. Major Deiley always took a whole clove in his coffee, the lieutenant preferred fifty milliliters of heavy cream I put in only thirty, knowing the sweetness of the pie would compensate for the difference. I then sliced two pieces from the pie and put them on plates with dessert forks and napkins. I left the remainder of the pie uncut. The lieutenant and I had worked out this signal during my first stay. If the pie was cut, he knew the major wanted to continue the conversation. If I left it uncut, he knew he should finish his dessert and excuse himself. I appreciated guests who held the concerns of their host so highly, and was quick to help them do the right thing. Moving everything to a carrying tray, I brought it to Major Deiley and the lieutenant.

The major's face lit up when he heard me enter. He rose, something I had difficulty getting used to, and glanced approvingly at Lieutenant Gratz, who also had come to his feet. Trying to hide my discomfort at being extended a courtesy normally reserved for women above my station, I set down the tray and began serving.

They did not linger over dessert, but neither did they rush. The lieutenant finished his coffee and pie, then stretched.

"I hope you don't mind, sir, but I'd like to turn in. I'm taking the Fifth Cohort out on mountain retrieval maneuvers tomorrow at 0400, and I'd like to keep their respect by not falling asleep in front of them." He smiled and stood.

The major saw him to the door, they exchanged good nights, and the evening was over. He sagged back down into his rocking chair, unbuttoning the stiff collar of his uniform. I had just put the dessert tray into

the kitchen to attend to in an hour or so and stepped behind him, working his left shoulder and back. He was always more stressed from entertaining than from any other function. He reached up and patted my hand.

“You were superb tonight, Miss DeChant.” He chuckled quietly. “I think the lieutenant is beginning to have feelings for you.”

“I am sure they are only passing fancies, Major. He knows I cannot and will not return such affection.”

“A man’s heart is not to be trifled with, woman. Be on your guard. I hear that Lieutenant Gratz can be quite the charmer.”

“You cannot charm a person who is incapable of”

FIRING THE FORWARD THRUSTERS. COLLISION ALERT! ALL EMERGENCY CREWS TO DOCKING BAY ALPHA THREE. COMMENCE STATION EVACUATION PLAN MAGENTA FIVE. ALL CIVILIANS AND NON-EMERGENCY PERSONNEL TO REPORT TO DOCKING BAY FOXTROT NINER. FIRING REPULSOR BLASTS AT HULL OF THE DL WHITE. SPEED SLOWED TO TEN METERS PER SECOND. IMPACT IN TWENTY-TWO SECONDS. FIRING REPULSOR BLASTS AT HULL OF THE DL WHITE. SPEED SLOWED TO SIX METERS PER SECOND. IMPACT IN THIRTY-FOUR SECONDS. FIRING REPULSOR BLASTS AT HULL OF THE DL WHITE. WARNING! DL WHITE REPORTING OUTER HULL BREECH. SPEED SLOWED TO FOUR METERS PER SECOND. IMPACT IN FORTY-SIX SECONDS. EMERGENCY CREWS ONE, FIVE AND SIX ARE IN POSITION. EMERGENCY CREWS TWO AND THREE ARE DISPATCHING THROUGH DOCKING ACCESS ALPHA THREE D FOR EXTERNAL RESPONSE.

IMPACT IN TWENTY-NINE SECONDS. EVACUATION PLAN MAGENTA FIVE IS FIFTY-EIGHT PERCENT COMPLETE. EMERGENCY CREW FOUR REPORTS EVACUATION PLAN COMPLETION IN TWO MINUTES, TEN SECONDS. IMPACT OF FREIGHTER DL WHITE INTO GAMMA STATION AT DOCKING BAY ALPHA THREE IN EIGHTEEN SECONDS. CHARGING PRIMARY REPULSORS. DL WHITE REPORTS CREW EVACUATION TO AFT EMERGENCY PODS COMPLETE. IMPACT IN FOURTEEN SECONDS. EVACUATION PLAN MAGENTA FIVE HALTED. ALL PERSONNEL TO BRACE FOR IMPACT. NON-EMERGENCY POWER SHUTOFF IN PROCESS. FUSION GENERATOR CLAMPED AND SEALED. IMPACT IN SEVEN SECONDS. FIRING FULL REPULSORS AT HULL OF DL WHITE. WARNING! THE DL WHITE REPORTS INNER HULL BREECH! VENTING ATMOSPHERE. SPEED SLOWED TO TWO METERS PER SECOND. IMPACT IN EIGHT SECONDS. ALL EMERGENCY CREWS STAND BY. BLOWING DOCKING BAY HATCH ALPHA THREE. WARNING! BLOWN DOCKING BAY HATCH COLLISION WITH FORWARD HULL OF DL WHITE. DL WHITE HULL INTEGRITY FAILING. SPEED SLOWED TO POINT SIX METERS PER SECOND. IMPACT IN THREE SECONDS. STAND BY.

AND DO NOTHING WHILE YOU CLEAN THAT, DO YOU? PLEASE, PROFESSOR, THAT’S FOR ME TO DO. I KNOW I’VE ONLY BEEN YOUR SERVANT FOR A FEW WEEKS, BUT I KNOW HOW TO TAKE CARE OF YOU. NO, I’M NOT BEING OVER ENTHUSIASTIC. THIS IS WHAT I DO. NOW, AFTER I FINISH CLEANING UP THE SHEETS, I’LL FIX YOUR BREAKFAST. WILL SOFT-BOILED EGGS AND GRAPEFRUIT JUICE BE APPROPRIATE? AND TOAST? VERY GOOD, PROFESSOR. AND WOULD MADAME LIKE BREAKFAST AS WELL? PERHAPS A TORT WITH MARMALADE, AND A GLASS OF TEA? VERY WELL, MADAME. HERE, I SHALL CLEAN YOUR CLOTHES AS WELL, IF YOU WILL BE STAYING THE MORNING. NO, NO. IT IS NO TROUBLE, MADAME. YES, I SHALL. BREAKFAST IN

TWENTY MINUTES, THEN, PROFESSOR. OUI, I'LL SERVE IT ON THE TERRACE.

“...had your four weeks, Major, and I'm losing my patience.”

“Yes, sir. She is quite resilient. I think you realize that, sir. But your wait is over. Miss DeChant went into a sharding episode about four hours ago, and there are indications that she will be entering dissolution very soon.”

“I remind you, Major, that the woman's name is Abigail Wyeth, not Miss DeChant. I worry you may be losing sight of that.”

“I am not, sir. It's just that I've never known her as Wyeth. It's pointless anyway what I think of her, isn't it, sir? She'll be harvested in the morning.”

“In the morning? Not now?”

“No, sir. It would be better to establish she is at dissolution. If it's merely a prolonged episode, it might limit the harvest.”

“I'm willing to take that risk, Major. I'm dispatching three cohorts to retrieve her now.”

“I'm perfectly capable of ordering my own men to...”

“Are you, Major? I'm beginning to have my doubts. Have her ready to go within the hour. Good night.”

The dim blue light from the terminal flickered off and Deiley came to the bed. He saw that I was looking at him and smiled. I smiled in return and whispered something. He leaned closer to better hear.

I shot my hand up, going for his exposed throat. He stepped back quickly and I hit nothing but air. Overextended, I tumbled out of the bed. He stepped back up and helped me to my feet. I repaid his kindness by sending a knee to his groin. He turned slightly and I hit his thigh. I felt my uplifted leg being grabbed and suddenly I was off my feet and tossed back onto the bed. He held his hands out, open and empty.

“Please, Miss Wyeth. You're too weak to fight me. Settle down and let's talk.”

It was his use of the word 'miss' that floored me. I looked down and realized I was a woman. There was a fleeting moment of panic. I crushed it down. *I am a woman. I'm Abigail, not John.* I shook my head and grunted. Chris' handiwork on me had extended into the real world. I looked up at Deiley, who had come to the edge of the bed, a look of worry on his face. He said he wanted to talk. I could guess what kind of talk he wanted, so I rose to my knees and jammed a fist at his face. He reached out to block it and I ducked under and around him, bolting for the door. I felt unsteady on my feet. Was it weariness? Or the fact that I felt I was in the wrong body?

I felt an arm around my waist as he grabbed me from behind. I kicked viciously back at his knee, but he simply released me and shoved me into the wall. Again off balance, I stumbled and hit the wall hard with my shoulder. He stood over me.

“Now will you settle down? I don't want this to become more difficult. If need be, I am perfectly willing to risk permanently injuring you to gain your attention, young lady. I hope I have sufficiently demonstrated that I am capable of doing it as well.”

“What do you want, Deiley?” I asked, rubbing my shoulder. He frowned.

“You know me? I wasn’t aware that...” His face cleared. “Ah, of course! From the night you destroyed my previous quarters. That was an excellent subterfuge, Wyeth. You had me convinced Miss DeChant was genuinely in trouble.” He stepped over me and snapped on a security field around the door and windows of the small room. I should have felt trapped, being alone with a NATech officer who had so completely manhandled me. Oddly, I didn’t feel any discomfort. He continued.

“Allow me to upgrade your knowledge. It is now thirty-four days since your failed mission in the puterverse. Other than brief sharding episodes, you have been Miss DeChant the entire time, who has been serving me wonderfully.”

“I’ll just bet.”

“You misunderstand, Wyeth. I have not abused the woman whatsoever. She has been my house servant and only my house servant. The only proof I can offer you are the surroundings--we are in her room right now--and any mental link the two of you may share. I know you carried on a correspondence for several months at your room in Glendale. I forbade her to write to you during the past month, and she agreed.”

“She agreed? Why? Miss DeChant knows I’m the soulner, and would be looking to have me reclaim my body.” Something about Deiley’s manner relaxed me. I would need to be on my guard.

“She agreed because of a partial deception. I told her that if she sharded back as you, I would execute you for being a member of the Resistance. She believed me.”

“And that was a deception?”

“As I said, a partial deception. At the time, I probably would have executed you under most circumstances, but not all. I had no intention of being as ruthless as I led Miss DeChant to think.”

“Trying to be the tough guy for her, huh?” I stood up slowly, still leaning against the wall. “Pretty typical NATech attitude. So now what?”

“You are entering the final stage of your life, Miss Wyeth. Dissolution.”

It hit hard. Hot tears welled up and my heart pressed against my chest. Despite my need to keep a confident front up, I crumbled and sank back to the floor. He stepped up, probably to hit me.

AGAIN AND AGAIN, PLEASE. OH! THE BLOOD ON MY ARM IS SO WARM AND TINGLY! COULD YOU PLEASE DO THAT TO THE OTHER ONE, MASTER?

Instead, he helped me to my feet and led me to the bed. Seating me on it, he then pulled up a chair for himself. He began shaking me gently.

“I want you to tell me how to control microsat reentry, Wyeth. Tell me and I’ll return you to Lockwood.”

I looked at him through tear-filled eyes. I could probably have disabled him in that moment, he was so intent getting me to answer him. A quick head butt, followed by a finger thrust into his eyes...

It wasn’t worth it. He could have been lying about my dissolution, but he wasn’t. Deep inside me I felt a hot urge, and uncontrollable feeling, as though my body was rejecting my mind. Or was it my mind rejecting itself? Regardless, the outcome would be the same. I shook my head.

“No, Deiley. I wouldn’t give Chris what he wanted and I won’t give you what you want.”

“Chris?”

“Your boss. His name is Chris Young. He was the creator of webbing technology, and is responsible for everything NATEch is and everybody else isn’t.”

“And even though I might use this microsat bombardment against him, you will still not tell me?”

“I’ll die before I share such technology with NATEch.”

“As you wish.” He stood up and stepped into the small bathroom attached to my room. He reappeared almost at once, carrying an energy pistol. He snapped the gun to full, and it whined.

I was too tired to move. He didn’t get what he wanted, so I had no further value to him. I was a little surprised he would defy Chris. It would be the end of his career, probably his life. He just didn’t care, and it was probably better this way. The gun toned full charge and I closed my eyes, quietly praying. The terminal suddenly crackled to life, and Chris’ voice broke in.

“Stop this at once, Deiley! If you value your life at all, you will”-- The terminal squealed and popped as the plasma bolt smashed into it. Deiley lowered his gun and looked thoughtfully at me. He reached down and shut the gun off.

“Well, I suppose I’ll be needing to look for another line of work.” He smiled a slow smile. “I don’t suppose you’d put a good word in for me with the Resistance?”

“Why?” I whispered. A streamer of smoke filled curled up from the terminal and danced on the ceiling.

“Your friends will be here shortly. I know you have a construct of some sort who has been monitoring my transmissions for the past month. No doubt they’re scrambling now to pull off some daring rescue. Abruptly terminating the source of the monitoring will force them to act immediately.”

“Why, Deiley?” I repeated.

“You’d best get your things packed quickly. There’s not much, but I allowed Miss DeChant a small clothing allowance and you’re welcome to her clothing.” He laughed. “I imagine they’ll fit perfectly. Get dressed now. I’ll fetch your pistol.” He turned to leave.

“Why, Deiley?” I said a third time.

He turned back to face me. His face was emotionless and he was looking past me and into a distance far greater than the room. He said nothing for a moment, then sighed heavily.

“I don’t know, Wyeth.” His gaze focused on me. Despite his being there, I had begun changing my outer clothing. “Do you know this is the first time I’ve ever said that? I’ve served NATEch now for nearly twenty years. My commission is battle earned, not one of those convenient political posts.”

I nodded, slipping into a darker top. Miss DeChant had a preference for dresses, and they were my only selection. Fortunately, she had a two-piece navy blue that would move freely. I ized the back, settling my shoulders in.

“I know. Alan gave me your history months ago. I knew I had to avoid you while I was here, and the best way to figure your enemy out is to know him.”

“I’m not surprised. Lockwood and I have been playing our little cat and mouse game for years now. He’s quite good, and although the comment would rankle him, I consider him one of my best subordinates.”

“Funny. That’s pretty much what he says about you.” I put on Miss DeChant’s work shoes, which were thankfully fairly rugged.

“Again, I’m not surprised. So why did I give up my commission and put my life in jeopardy? Perhaps Lockwood and I are closer in thought than either of us suspected. I have been charged with keeping the peace in a Shard refugee camp, but I’ve also always considered it my duty to see to their well being.”

“Then explain your rape squads.”

“One works with the resources one has. My first duty was to keep the peace, as laid out by NATech. My cohorts, both the normal ones as well as the SS squads, saw to that. And the peace has been kept.”

“So why not sacrifice me to continue that peace?” I had finished dressing and was sitting on the bed. “Give me up to Chris for harvesting and you get to keep playing your little game with the Resistance.”

“That’s it. It *was* a game. Yes, I kept the peace. And Lockwood had considerable freedom under my command. But Shards continued to die. Don’t you see? We were not working within the system, we had *become* the system. We were perpetuating the very thing your precious Resistance was fighting and I had lost faith in. *It must be changed!*”

“You still haven’t told me why you’re letting me go, Deiley.”

“You are persistent, aren’t you, Wyeth?” he complained.

I shrugged. “Hey, I’ve a lot more experience than you might think.”

“I doubt that. I’ve followed your history quite closely. For instance, do you know what keyed memory encapsulation is?”

I started. How did he...

He chuckled. “That’s right. I’ve done my research. LeClaire perfected the process of pocketing self-writing code and embedding it into the mind, protected by a sheath of psionic barriers that would survive ripping.

“But shortly after he published his work, he disappeared from the public eye. Which meant NATech--still hidden from the public eye--had killed him. And since there were no actual experiments done with KME, his paper was generally disregarded and no further investigation was done. It is my belief that there was no further research because LeClaire was so far ahead of his time no one could even hope to replicate his work without an actual specimen.

I sat motionless in the dimly lit room, enraptured by his story.

“But there *was* a specimen, though no one knew about it. On the night that LeClaire and Miss DeChant were killed, LeClaire embedded a KME and initiated the program. When NATech--under the guise of local authorities--stormed the house that night, they were met with armed resistance by LeClaire. It was useless of course; he was burned down within seconds. But he did shift the focus of the raid completely away from the real source of danger: Miss DeChant. You, Miss Wyeth.”

“I’m not Miss DeChant. We share the same mind, but our personas are completely different. You know that.”

“I do. But I am not talking about the personas. I am talking about the mind. You understand that there is only one mind--one soul, if you will--no matter how many ripes it goes through?” I nodded. “Then you

will see that even though you were completely repressed during your multiple ripings, you were nonetheless there. LeClaire understood it, and reasoned that he didn't necessarily have to embed the mnemonic inlays into Miss DeChant's mind. Indeed, it was altogether to his benefit that he didn't embed them there. It would be the first place they'd look. Besides, the KME would require centuries to mature, and he knew Miss DeChant would certainly not be the beneficiary of the completed process. Only the original persona could ever hope to gain access to the fruits of his labor.

"So he placed a partial capsule into her mind, and hid the real KME in an unused portion of your mind. Again, *your* mind, Wyeth, *not* Miss DeChant's. Are you following me? I mean no offense, but I've been studying this for months."

"You're saying that LeClaire's KME was meant for me?" I felt like I'd been hit with a stun gun, and not lightly. All my problems were momentarily forgotten by this staggering news. "But how could he even hope I'd ever be reintegrated to take advantage of the memory capsule?"

"Hoping is easy when your life is forfeit, Miss Wyeth. I'm sure we both have firsthand knowledge of that. LeClaire did, too. He knew his hours were numbered the moment Far Bank--the being you say is Chris Young--discovered LeClaire had betrayed him and kept the knowledge for himself.

"So he embedded the KME and activated it. He then did what must have been the most difficult thing of all. The NATEch report on the raid of December 4, 2315, lists LeClaire as being gunned down. It also states that Miss DeChant was found lying comatose on her bed. LeClaire had drugged Miss DeChant and had her mind--your mind, rather--shut down to avoid interrogation. He was guessing that once they scanned Miss DeChant's portion of your mind, they would discover the partial KME, find it useless, then store you for future riping. And that's what happened. They found the decoy, missed the real KME--which is embedded in your foundry ripe, by the way--and reaped you. And nearly four centuries later, you were finally restored to your original persona. And no one ever knew that deep inside your mind, a mnemonic inlay was slowly growing and maturing. And that one day it would give its owner an incredible ability. In my opinion, you are the only person, Abigail Wyeth, who will ever fully understand unbound trinary code."

I considered him thoughtfully. He was a man who could scare me. If Chris had had this man's focus, tenacity and intelligence, I'd either be dead or his hopelessly obedient servant.

"I don't think the world will ever know the contribution you've made to bring it back to where it belongs, Major Deiley."

"So? That is your goal then?" He nodded. "Appropriate enough. And certainly within your means."

"If I survive dissolution, which no one ever has," I pointed out, returning to reality.

"Eh?" He seemed surprised. "You doubt that? Ah! That's right, you don't know. You must forgive me, Wyeth. It can be difficult keeping track of what I know and whom I've shared it with. Especially when the person I'm having a conversation with can be any one of several personas."

"I beg your pardon?"

"LeClaire was a genius in the field of mental collaboration. There has been no one else quite like him before or since. He had anticipated a scenario not unlike what you're going through right now.

"The Resistance movement has been actively restoring ripes since 2491, almost two hundred years. But LeClaire died nearly four hundred years ago. There were no attempts at restoring original personas in his day. It had been given up as being impossible. Even he couldn't do it. But he knew it could be done in

theory. He also theorized that there would be a high probability of breakdown in the artificial barriers between the personas. You'll find that the KME will provide a reasonably strong anchor during your upcoming ordeal, Wyeth. Be sure to tell that to Barrett."

"Barrett? Doctor Barrett? But he's... he's..."

"He's alive and well, and no doubt awaiting your imminent rescue. I received the report from my people in Australia. You see, it was I who had you snatched from your unit during the battle that destroyed the Third in Africa. I'd dispatched a small group a friend had loaned me for the mission. I apologize for their attack on your person. They were to subdue you only, not molest you."

I looked at him carefully and slowly nodded.

"I'll take your word for that, Major. I could have killed you at the time, had I known."

"You undoubtedly could have tried. I feel fortunate that you are weak right now. At full strength, you would be a worthy opponent. But I digress.

"What isn't generally known, and what I've gone to great pains to discover without actually trying to find out, is that the few survivors of the Sandrat Debacle were not the remnants of our NATech forces. Just prior to the two explosions that destroyed the entire base, a transport left the vicinity."

I nodded again. "I was in the hov, heading back to engage and saw it pull out."

"Yes. And it was undoubtedly marked as a troop transport. It's a common ploy to mark prisoner transports as troop carriers. It makes rescue attempts during transit a difficult tactic."

What he was saying dawned on me. Some of the Third had survived! Aaron! Could I even hope? My heart raced and I started breathing hard. Susie. Raul. Sarah. Dusty. It was possible. I suddenly had an overwhelming desire to leave. I forced it down, wanting to hear Deiley out.

"Are you all right, Wyeth?" He sounded concerned.

"Yes. Yes, I'm fine. It's just a shock. Then you're saying some of my unit is still alive?"

"Yes. About thirty of them were put under alpha suppression and are being held at a camp southeast of Port Augusta on the Australian continent. Barrett was killed about four weeks ago, during a skirmish with some civilian miners who had wandered into the area. The base commander, a Colonel Forncheth, reported all died in the ensuing fire, and their escape vehicle was destroyed above ground. I know the man, and he's competent enough, but lacks a suspicious mind."

"Unlike you."

"Unlike me." He seemed unaffected by the jab. "I looked into it and was not able to collaborate their story. In NATech, you should always assume the worst until it is proven otherwise. Forncheth assumed they were miners and as such could not survive the fight. I assumed they were *not* miners, and therefore not only survived the fight, but had a reason to start it. My inability to prove they were civilians told me they were Resistance dogs. And since Barrett also 'died', it is my assumption he was the target for extraction. Barrett was with the Third Regiment. You were with the Third. It might be a coincidence. But since I can't prove it, then it's not."

I stood up. It was time to go. I marveled at the man's skill at finding the right path of logic through the maze of leads, false trails and hidden paths. He didn't know everything, but he probably knew more than any other person besides Mike and me.

“Incredible, Deiley. You’ve deduced all this, and haven’t left this house in all that time?”

He smiled. “Well, this one and the one you blew up. I have found that while action is sometimes called for--and it will be in just a few minutes--performing unneeded actions is a waste of time.”

“Why, Deiley? You still haven’t told me why. Why did you turn your back on NATEch, after serving all these years? Why did you turn traitor?”

“Harsh words, girl. And uncalled for. I didn’t turn my back on NATEch. I turned it on Far Bank. On Chris Young. It’s true, I had originally become interested in you personally when you destroyed two of my cohorts in the White Tanks about six months ago. I didn’t know you had used guided microsats until after you repeated the action in the Sahara. The trail was hidden magnificently.”

“Not enough to fool you.”

“Not true. I only deduced it because of my knowledge of the two incidents. The White Tank attack was filed by me and I withheld the full nature of the bombing because it was a skill I wanted to have for my own use.”

“So why haven’t you pressed harder to get it?”

“Because it’s clear that you’re not the one who initiates the attacks. I suspect you have a UTC construct in the puterverse that is capable of performing the millions of adjustments needed to bring it down with such accuracy, prevent burnup, and then hide all trace of the microsat’s disappearance until an appropriate time. Once I knew it wasn’t you personally, I essentially gave up. I doubt I could exert any control over your constructs. Especially since I would have to go into their environment.

“But I also gave up because of my loyalty to NATEch. I am convinced that NATEch can be a force capable of maintaining peace on the planet without sacrificing liberty and personal freedoms. But not while Far Bank is in control. His agenda is far different from any that a human would choose.” He glanced at me. “At least, a human who didn’t permanently live in the puterverse.

“So that is why I have chosen my path, Wyeth. Not to betray NATEch, but to help it survive and become a proper mechanism again. A servant of the people and not its master. You are the best hope that NATEch has.”

He sounded sincere. He sounded convinced and coherent and confident. He had a vision of NATEch as it had once been, in my days of service. I understood how he felt and I know he believed it completely. And I knew he was lying.

“I never thought I would say this to a man wearing a NATEch uniform, but: Thank you, Major. You’ve helped out more than could ever be expected. I wish I could offer you more. Thank you.”

He waved it off. “My reasons are purely selfish, I assure you. If you are successful in your mission of destroying Far Bank and restoring proper order to the puterverse and society, then NATEch will be the obvious choice to be a guide into the future, and my services will be in great demand. If you fail, then I’ve risked very little, because Far Bank would have killed me anyway; I knew too much about him. And you.”

We stepped onto the porch to wait for Alan and the attack force. Deiley seemed confident they would penetrate the outer defenses with little trouble and head straight here. He returned my gun to me, fully charged. I glanced at it briefly, then set it to wide field sonic inducer. It was hard to believe I’d had it modified by Dusty half a year ago, and still had not fired it.

The main NAtch compound, nearly three kilometers distant, was brightly lit. It was past midnight, but it looked like early dawn from the glow of the spotlights and the occasional explosions. The distance was too great to make out details, but it was easy to see a great deal of activity. From the internal net connection Deiley had initiated, it had gone as he anticipated. His units had been caught off guard, first by the order to seize Deiley, then by the attack from the Resistance. No doubt it was the combination of the two, coupled with Deiley's silence on the net, that gave us the time to talk.

While we watched, a pair of hov headlights separated itself from the general melee and began moving toward us. It was a single vehicle, which made it likely that they were dogs, coming to pick me up. The sight of watching them approach brought back another time, and I laughed. Deiley looked at me inquiringly.

"This is almost exactly like the last time I left here. Except then the base was fine and your house was gone. I hope you weren't too hard on the guard I disabled."

"I had him whipped, then put him on latrine duty for a month. I didn't actually blame him since I knew I'd sent him to pick up Miss DeChant, and he ended up with you. But I did need to set an example for the rest of my men. They've become too soft and complacent, guarding a refugee camp like this." He nodded his head toward the compound. "It would seem they still haven't learned. I rather think that Lieutenant Gratz will drive the point home fairly quickly."

"Then he'll be in charge after you're gone? I've never met him."

Deiley chuckled. "He's certainly met you. He seems to have been most impressed with Miss DeChant. Yes, he'll be in charge. I can't guarantee his actions, but I think you'll find we're cut from similar cloth. He'll be under pressure to retaliate after this attack, and he will counterattack. But I doubt he'll put too much into it. He sees the logic of maintaining Glendale's balance of power. Pushing the Resistance too hard will either start a cycle of reprisals or drive them out of Glendale, leaving the care of the Shards entirely in his hands."

The hov was less than a kilometer away, and we could see several dogs were aboard, with one man, probably Alan, standing up. Just leaving the compound and giving chase were two more hoves. Deiley turned toward me and quite unexpectedly took my hands in his. He looked intently into my eyes, and in the backwash of light from the compound I could see in him a proud man who had chosen the best path possible, and was determined to see it through.

"I'm sorry we didn't get a chance to meet under better circumstances, Miss Wyeth. I'm sure we could have been friends. Perhaps we can have another time in the future to sit and talk again."

"What's going to happen to you, Benjamin?" In a flash of embarrassment, I realized I had used his first name, remembered from earlier briefings. He smiled.

"Thank you... Abigail. Miss DeChant could never bring herself to call me by my given name. I understood why, but still regretted it. As to what I'm going to do, I've made several contingency plans for occasions not unlike this one, including a small, one-man phase hov I keep close by. The officer who relaxes on NAtch's watch will quickly end up forgotten or dead, and I'm not quite ready to lay down my life. I'll give you a covering fire, then make my own escape." He paused, as if torn over what he was going to say next. "I do have a single favor to ask you."

"Of course."

"If the opportunity arises that you can communicate with Miss DeChant, please tell her that I"-- He broke off, then continued. "Please tell her that I'll miss her. She was a kind, thoughtful woman, and a

good companion. She--” He stopped abruptly.

“That’s why you’re doing this, isn’t it?” I said softly. “You’re in love with her.”

“Of course not,” he said with a faulty voice. Was there a sheen in his eyes? It was too dark to be certain. “How could I love a ripe? She was an excellent maid, with a keen eye toward detail. I’ll never have as clean a house again.” He recovered quickly and spoke with his normal confidence. “Well, I see your ride has arrived. Let’s not keep them waiting.”

But it wasn’t Alan. It was Gratz, Deiley’s lieutenant. He brought his gun up and lined it on Deiley, who had left his own gun holstered to avoid a misunderstanding with my people. I shifted my own gun, fully charged and in my left hand, behind my dress.

“Please raise your hands, sir. I am under orders to seize command of this base and deliver you to NATech regional headquarters for trial and execution.” His eyes flickered toward me. “Please move away from the major, Miss DeChant.”

I was standing on the porch of Major Deiley’s house. Why were we here? And what was Lieutenant Gratz doing, holding a gun on the major?

“I am sorry, Lieutenant. What did you say?” Major Deiley jerked his head sharply at me and swore quietly. I’d rarely heard him use an oath, and then only when very upset. I hoped I was not the cause of this situation.

“I said, please move away from the major. I have orders to deliver you to regional as well, though under a separate escort.” He gave the impression that while he took no satisfaction in his duty, he would perform it nonetheless. I moved away, raising my hands. His tone and voice sharpened.

“What is that in your hand?” he demanded. Instantly, the guns of his men came up, aimed at me.

“I... I... don’t know, *m’sieur*. I...” I looked at my left hand. I was holding a gun!

“Miss DeChant! Get down!”

I was thrown off my feet as Major Deiley lunged against me. He grunted just before we hit, his body landing on me to protect me. We went down behind the cover of the rose bushes he kept lined along his porch. He quickly snatched the pistol from my unresisting hand, then shoved me along the polished surface against the far corner.

I hit a chair and yelped as a corner jabbed into my back. The major had leapt to his feet and was lining up his pistol at the hovercraft. Slivers of light danced around him, popping holes in the wall behind him but miraculously missing him.

The gun in his hand kicked back, the air in front of his gun shimmered, and suddenly my head hurt abominably. I cried out and covered my ears, but the pain persisted. I curled up around it, hoping the pain would go away...

...but it felt so good that I hoped it would stay. But it didn’t. I felt someone grabbing me and helping me to my feet. I let go of my ears and looked at him. It was a very handsome man. He had blood on his shoulder. I smiled at him.

“Hello. That felt nice. Can we do it again? Is that my blood on you?” I touched his bloody jacket and then licked my fingers. It wasn’t my blood. Maybe it was his.

“Miss DeChant, are you all right?” he said with a big voice. I giggled.

“I’m not Miss Deshard. I belong to Abby. What’s your name?”

His voice when he talked was soft. “My name is Benjamin Deiley. I don’t think we’ve had the pleasure of meeting. What’s your name?”

“Everybody keeps asking me that!” I said, mad that they did. “I don’t have a name. I’m not important enough. But I can still do lots of things. Do you want me to play with you?” I forgot his name again.

“No, that’s all right. I do want you to do something, though. I want you to do two things, in fact. First, do you see those hovercraft coming towards us?” He pointed.

It was dark outside, which meant it was night. There were some lights on a big thing in front of us. It had a lot of people in it and they were all sleeping.

“You mean that thing with all the sleeping people?”

“No. I mean the two hover... things that are behind that. Do you see them?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Good. Those are your friends, and they’re coming to take you...”

“You mean Alan and Dorothy and Abby?”

“Yes, exactly. Except Abigail. I don’t think she’s with them right now. When they get here, I want you...”

“But they’re going to take me to see Abby, right?” I asked. “She’s my owner!” I said proudly.

“Yes, I understand. I want you to go with them. Here, give this to Alan.” He handed me the thing in his hand. It looked like a gun my first owner had owned. He used it on me once, but it hurt too much for me to stay awake, so I didn’t like them.

“I don’t want that. They hurt too much.”

“That’s all right. See? I’ve turned it off. But Alan would...”

“Did you turn it all the way off?”

“Please don’t interrupt. Yes, it’s all the way off. Give it to Alan. It belongs to Abigail. She’ll know what to do with it.” He put it in my hand and I held it, hoping it wouldn’t blow up or shoot or anything.

“Okay.” I remembered something. “Did you want me to do two things?”

“Yes. I want you to tell Miss DeChant that I”--

“I can’t remember words very well. I only remember how to make my owners feel good. When I try to remember words...”

He took me by the shoulders and made me look in his eyes.

“Listen carefully. I should have said this earlier, when I had the chance. Tell Alan that Abigail was right. Can you remember that? Tell Alan that I said Abigail was right.”

“O-okay. I’ll try.” I closed my eyes tight and said the words back. “I’m going to tell Alan that you said Abigail was right.” I repeated them three times, then remembered them really good. I smiled at him and said, “Tell Alan that you said that Abigail was right.” I frowned. “About what?”

“Don’t worry about that. Abigail will tell you.” He took my hand and helped me down the steps. “Now let’s get you to your friends.”

The first thing stopped next to the one with the sleeping people. Alan was in it. I laughed and clapped and jumped up and down, happy to see him. He seemed surprised at first, but then he smiled.

“Hello, Princess. Are you ready to come home?”

“She’s more than ready, Lockwood. She’s only just arrived and I can tell she’s more than I’m willing to handle.”

Alan acted like he didn’t like the man with the bloody shoulder, but he did like him sort of. I could tell. The man hugged me and brushed back my hair. He smiled.

“There, you do have a name, don’t you?”

“Oh, Princess is just what Alan and the lady who died call me. Only the lady who died won’t call me that anymore, because she died.”

“Well, I think Princess is a wonderful name and suits you well. Now let Alan help you into the hov, and remember what I told you.”

“I will. G’bye!” I kissed him on the cheek and ran to the thing with Alan inside. Then he helped me up. Then he took the gun in my hand away from me, which was all right because I didn’t like guns. They hurt too much. Then I remembered what I was supposed to say.

“That man says I was supposed to say that he said Abigail was right,” I said, nice and loud. I was so happy I remembered the words I said them again. Alan smiled a little and looked at the man with blood on him. The man shrugged his shoulders.

“I suppose I deserved that. Ask Abigail later on, what she’s talking about.”

“All right. What are you going to do, Deiley?”

“That’s my own business, Lieutenant. See that you take good care of her. She’s one of a kind. Rather, she’s three of one of a kind.”

“Hopefully not for much longer.”

“Indeed. You have no reason to believe me, Lockwood, but... all the best. And tell Barrett to read up on Professor LeClaire’s work on the KME. I think he’ll find exactly what he needs.”

“You know that Barrett is alive?” Alan said to the man. I wished they would stop talking. I wanted to see Dorothy and Abigail. The man stood very straight.

“I am a major in NATEch Supreme. It is my duty to know these things, then act on them. I hope I have chosen the correct action.”

“Me too, Major. Me too.” Alan did something to the thing and it turned away from the man. It started going fast into the dark. I sat down next to another man that worked for Alan and smiled at him. Then I remembered the man with the blood on him.

I looked behind me. We had gone a long way already. The man was still standing there, watching us. I waved at him, but I don't think he saw me.

Chapter Four

9:00 a.m. Wednesday, December 3rd, 2679 (Siberian time)

"Good morning, ladies!" Barrett's cheerfully gruff voice filled every corner of the small medical facility. He held out a plain white garment to Kate, who was seated next to my bed. "Here. Help Abby climb into this and I'll do a final examination before we initiate the integration session."

I sat up and changed into the gown. Thankfully, it had normal closures and there was no risk of

CONTAMINATION TO AREAS BEYOND THE ST. LOUIS CRATER REGION. IT IS ADVISED THAT ALL ORBITING SPACE CRAFT SHIFT SOLAR RADIATION FIELDS TOWARD THE PLANET, TO PREVENT INSTRUMENTATION FLUCTUATION OR FAILURE.

giving free peep shows to anyone. Putting it on brought back a few memories

SCAN IS BEGINNING TESTING AT LEVEL FIVE. THERE WILL BE A TWELVE PERCENT DEGRADATION OF EFFICIENCY FOR THE NEXT NINE HOURS, FORTY-SEVEN MINUTES. TESTING FIRST SIX TERRABYTES OF MEMORY... TESTING... TESTING...

from my first experience with Barrett and his doctoring.

"I hope I'm a better patient this time, doctor, than I was when you first integrated me." I slipped on

THE ICE ON THE WEST SIDE OF THE BUILDING. MAINTENANCE CREWS WILL HAVE THE ICE DISSOLVED IN A FEW MOMENTS, BUT I REPEAT, THE SUDDEN DROP IN TEMPERATURE OVERNIGHT HAS CAUSED SOME ICY SPOTS AROUND THE COMPLEX. BE CERTAIN TO

the gown, with Kate helping me. She had been sitting only a second ago, but was now standing. My sharding had reached the point

WHERE YOU WILL NEED TO EITHER SHEER OFF FROM YOUR APPROACH OR BEGIN YOUR REENTRY SEQUENCE. NAVIGATIONAL SYSTEMS INDICATE A NOMINAL TRAJECTORY, WITH CLEARANCE TO LAND AT THE MELBOURNE SPACEPORT. PLEASE KEEP A MINIMUM FORTY PERCENT POWER RESERVE IN CASE OF

where I still had cohesive thought, but constant episodes accelerated the time. Kate had finished dressing me.

"Morning, Kate. How's the kid?"

She smiled. "It's afternoon, Abby, and the baby's doing fine. Since the suppression field

HAS DROPPED TO LESS THAN SIX PERCENT CONTAINMENT. EXTERNAL SHIELDING IS DOWN, AND THE ARMADA CAN BEGIN DIRECT BOMBARDMENT OF BOTH NEW LA AND VERMILLION SURFACE STRUCTURES. BELOW SURFACE STRUCTURES STILL HAVE FULL SHIELDING AND WILL REQUIRE ADDITIONAL BOMBARDMENT. ESTIMATED TIME UNTIL

"I'm sorry, Kate," I apologized, only a little frustrated. "It's getting..."

“Kate’s stepped out, Abigail,” Barrett interrupted. “I need to suppress your sharding while you’re in

A STASIS FIELD AND SLEEP YOUR DIFFICULTIES AWAY! WAKE UP TO A NEW WORLD. ADVANCES IN MEDICINE ARE SURE TO HAVE LICKED YOUR PROBLEM, AND YOU CAN LEAD A FULL, PRODUCTIVE, AND MOST IMPORTANTLY, LONG LIFE! JUST THUMB IN YOUR APPROVAL, AND THE HOLOCHURES ARE YOURS FOR THE LOADING. THIS OFFER VOID ON LUNA, IN THE GREATER BRAZILIAN COMMERCE SPHERE AND IN VERMONT. VOID WHERE PROHIBITED BY LAW. THE PROPRIETOR DOES NOT MAKE ANY CLAIMS OR GUARANTEES AS TO THE ACTUAL IMPROVEMENT OF FUTURE SOCIETY, AND IS MERELY SPECULATING BASED ON PAST ADVANCES. THUMB IN NOW! OPERATORS ARE STANDING BY!

“Doctor?” I asked, lifting my head slightly. I was feverish and sweaty.

“Hold still, Abigail.” He poked a finger at my temple and I heard a whine. He had activated an inducement disk. My vision faded and blurred to the point that I could only see soft globs of light. I dropped my head back down to the pillow.

“Whatryou doing?” I mumbled. My head seemed heavy and slow.

“Sorry, Abi..ed to keep... riginal pers... peration... you feel?” His voice kept drifting in and out. I struggled to grasp what he was saying, but I couldn’t keep my focus.

“FeelfinedoesIsposefeelthizway?”

“Sor... supposed to fee..you see any...” He moved something in front of my eyes.

“Izhanorfinng..canwestarsooon?”

“...out... en min... gail?”

“Zorydocantkeepminonyou..donmakmessinmihedok?”

He chuckled and it sounded like the far end of a long tunnel. “I’ll try not to.” I heard him clearly say, and then it was very, very dark.

I woke up, lying on a warm, black surface in a warm, black cave. I should have been nervous, disoriented, even terrified. I was none of that. I was impatient. I wanted this nonsense ended, my persona completely my own, and my life returned to me. Doctor Barrett and I had talked through this many times over the last six days, so I knew what to do. I stood up and began walking. The direction made no difference, the determination did.

Sure enough, I’d walked no more than two or three minutes when I saw the faint glow of light escaping double doors that didn’t quite meet in the middle. I strode toward them and pushed them open.

The oval waiting room had not changed. There was a bank of various computers lining the right wall with windows starting just past them and looping around the oval and coming up the left wall. Directly opposite the double doors I’d entered through were another set of doors, locked tight and with the legend “Main Gate” stenciled across them in red. The middle of the room was empty until the last third, then had rows of chairs mounted on metal railings that kept them in fixed positions. It looked similar to pictures I’d seen of spaceports but was in fact the waiting area of an old style airport. The air was even tainted with the faint smell of jet fumes.

There were two women seated in the chairs nearest the main gate, so I walked up to them. It was Miss

DeChant and the girl. They turned at my approach. Miss DeChant rose, her hands folded elegantly in front of her, a small smile that lit up her eyes and face. The girl jumped up with a squeal and ran into my arms.

“Oh, Abby! I’m so happy to see you!” I shouted and hugged her as hard as I could. She was a small girl, very pretty, with long hair and pretty eyes. But what was most wonderful was that I finally got to hug her.

“Hello,” I said, carefully prying myself loose, but still holding her hands, partly to assure her I cared for her, partially to ensure they didn’t wander. She was bigger than me, which was surprising for some strange reason. Nearly everyone was bigger than me, but I’d always thought of her as being, I don’t know, the size of her intellect.

She was a lovely woman, perhaps twenty or so, with mid-length hair and a figure to die for, which made sense, and had in fact happened. She had the most stunningly brilliant blue eyes. Eyes that sparkled with happiness, yet also lacked the light of a soul. She was a construct, a warped mind’s fantasy brought to near life. Her mind crippled and manipulated, she was in an endless nightmare she was completely oblivious to.

“I love you, Abby!” I shouted, so happy to be with her. “You’re my real owner, and I’m so happy to be with you! Are you staying for always now?”

“Quiet, child.” I stepped up and placed a hand on her shoulder. Abigail looked quite overcome by the girl’s exuberance. “I’m sure Abigail is here to tell us some very important things.” I looked at my soulner, half fearful, half hopeful. “Who’s keeping the watch, Abigail?”

“Nobody, Miss DeChant,” I replied. “Doctor Barrett has induced a sharding episode and placed me into a medical condition called Healer’s Sleep.”

“Why would he do such a thing?” I asked, not at all certain that I liked being left completely defenseless in that world where any man could...

“Don’t worry, Miss DeChant,” I said quickly, noticing the concern in her eyes. “We’re at a small medical facility several hundred kilometers north of Yakutsk, in the extreme northern regions of Siberia. Very few people know of its existence. Jody Eyer from the 179th has some of her people keeping guard over us while we finish this.

“Finish what, Abby?” I asked. I didn’t remember us starting anything. “Are Alan and Dorothy here, too? Can I see them? They’re my friends,” I said proudly. “Alan calls me Princess.”

“Does he?” I said politely. “That’s nice. Now let Miss DeChant and me talk.”

“Okay,” I said. I didn’t like talking anyway. “I don’t like talking anyway. I’ll wait.” I sat down on the floor and waited. Abby and Miss DeChant walked over to the machines with the lights and words on them and kept talking. I started to... but then I remembered they didn’t want me to, so I thought about Alan calling me Princess. It was one of my favorite thoughts. It was almost as nice as my thoughts about the nice lady who played with me that night in the big bathroom. My thoughts were happy, which was fun and different. When I was in this room, I always didn’t have any happy or sad feelings or any feelings. So I thought about Alan. He called me Princess.

“Can you feel the difference, Miss DeChant?” The girl was sitting down, staring off into space, a blissful smile on her face. I shuddered and tried to avoid imagining what she was thinking about. “See? The girl feels it. Our emotions and sense of time are real now. It’s never been like that before.”

“*Oui*, Abigail. I feel it, too,” I nodded. “But how can I? Am I not just an artificial person? Wouldn’t I be just using your emotions?”

“I don’t know, Miss DeChant.” I said frankly. “I don’t think so. I noticed your worry about my--I mean your--I mean our body being left behind. But I didn’t really feel your concern because I knew we were safe.”

“Please, Abigail. It is your body, your mind. Everything is yours. You must accept that.”

“I do accept it, Miss DeChant. It’s just that I’ve come to care for you, and to think of you as a real person. You are a *real* person!”

“Am I?” I asked quietly. “Then when I die, do I go to heaven?”

I opened my mouth to object, then closed it. Tears started to blur my vision, so I wiped my eyes quickly.

“I don’t know, Miss DeChant. But I’m going to try. Do you know why I’m here?”

“*Oui*, I believe so,” I replied. “I’ve been coming up many times since you returned at Major Deiley’s house, and have spoken to Dr. Barrett as well.”

“Whatever possessed you to go to Deiley in the first place, Miss DeChant?”

“He represented an authority that I understood, Abigail. I had served Professor LeClaire for over forty years, and knew NATEch quite well, though very few others did. At least, I believe I had.”

“I thought that once, too.”

“Yes. Your service as John Wyeth, all those centuries ago. Tell me, Abigail, will he be here today as well?”

“No,” I shook my head definitely. “He won’t be because he and I are the same person. I was John Wyeth. Now I’m Abigail Wyeth. It’s the same as I was once a baby and now I’m”--

“Now you’re a beautiful young woman. And you blush so handsomely, *Mademoiselle*!” I laughed and clapped my hands. “Aaron is a lucky man!”

“He will be if he’s still alive, if we can rescue him, and if I can come out of this in more or less one piece.”

“*Oui*, Abigail,” I nodded solemnly. “Which brings us back to the beginning of our conversation, no? You are here because it is time for the child and me to die, to make you a complete woman.”

“You’re not going to die!” I exclaimed.

“No, I suppose not,” I sighed. “To die, one must first have been alive.”

“Stop it!” I shouted, angry at her fatalistic attitude. “Look, Miss DeChant, I can’t say what kind of life you have inside you. And I can’t say exactly what will happen when I pull us together. Or if I can even do it. But I do know that you are alive! Otherwise, I am a mad woman who has been talking to herself, writing notes to herself, and believing that someone else has used my body.” With a sudden thought I added. “And that means that when I was raped, I was all alone. I don’t know that I can bear that thought, Miss DeChant.”

I took a step back and put a hand to my mouth, startled. “I--I had not even considered that, Abigail.” I felt my own tears come up; a very long time indeed since I had last cried. “Very well. I have accepted the

shame and evil that came with my failing you. I must accept also your judgment that I am a person.”

My speaking those words seemed to jolt my heart, and it went quite wild. I touched myself on my bare chest to feel it racing. I looked in wonder at my soulner.

“I--I cannot believe what I’m feeling, *Mademoiselle*.”

“I know. I felt it, too, Miss DeChant.” My heart was fluttering and jumping inside me, as though it too now had a life of its own. “Doctor Barrett must be introducing the microsonic pulses that are meant to dissolve the barriers between our personas. We’re beginning a controlled cascade dissolution.”

My chest started jumping and thumping, like when I’m hit real hard, or made love to. I giggled and pressed my hands against my chest. Abby and Miss DeShard were still talking, but Miss DeShard was holding herself too, like me, and Abby was smiling. Maybe they were done talking and we could play. I got to my feet and ran over to them.

“I feel all nice and pretty inside!” I told them. “My heart is going real fast, like when my owner is making me”--

“I know, child,” I interrupted, saving her from becoming vulgar. “We feel much the same way. Abigail says it is the beginning.”

“The beginning of what?” I asked, afraid. “You’re not going away, are you Abby?”

“No, I’m not,” I assured her. “In fact, I’m never leaving you again. Pretty soon, we’ll be together for good.” The weight of my words hit me. To become whole, I had to accept the girl. Could I?

“Who will be first, Abigail?” I asked her.

“These computers, Miss DeChant. They are as much a part of me as you two.” I glanced at her, an idea tickling my mind for the first time. “Tell me, Miss DeChant. Do you recognize any of these machines?”

I looked at her, quite startled. Why would I know these machines? Still, I examined them closely. After a few minutes, I stepped back and shook my head.

“I’m sorry, Abigail. I’m not very good with machines, and none of these seem familiar.” I frowned at her obvious disappointment. “Why would you think I that I would?”

“Well, since Professor LeClaire used you to embed the KME, I thought one of these machines would represent that KME and look like something you may have seen in his lab.”

“I’m sorry, Abigail. Professor LeClaire never allowed me entrance to his university facility, and his home study had no machinery this large.”

“But what about the KME embedding?”

“Again, I’m sorry,” I shook my head. “I submitted to a suppression field of some sort and do not remember the procedure, nor the equipment the professor used. And beyond that evening, I have no memory at all. It must have been that night that I was... I was...” I felt a sudden surge of sadness and confusion. “Do you know I have no idea what happened to me?”

“Much like the way I came to the end as John. I simply stopped being.”

“Not me!” I said. “I remember my last night. It was fun! My owner cut me in all kinds of places, then he hit me all over and made me feel warm and happy. Then he stuck a big piece of glass into my tummy and

cut all the way up!” I showed them on my body where he did it. “It felt wonderful, only then I knew I had to die and couldn’t make him happy anymore.” I stopped and thought. “Only maybe I didn’t die, because now I’m here. Only I’m back in my body, and when Alan and Dorothy took care of me, I looked like you, Abby.” I pointed at her pretty body. “Am I going back into you, Abby?” I clapped. “I’d like that!”

“Yes, I’m sure you would, uh...” I didn’t know what to call her, and realized I’d never called her anything, referring to her only as ‘the girl’ Miss DeChant saw my awkward moment and stepped in calmly.

“We know you’d enjoy that, child,” I said to her, taking her hands. “But we must do this properly. Will you wait in one of the chairs until we tell you, please?”

“Okay.” I ran over to a chair and sat down and waited. I started to think about being called Princess again.

“Thank you, Miss DeChant. I’ve never been able to talk to her,” I said honestly. “She makes me very uncomfortable.”

“I understand, Abigail. Although Professor LeClaire never indulged in a pleasure ripe, I had to deal with them on occasion when setting up appointments with some of the professor’s colleagues. I personally never saw their appeal, but I suppose that was because I am the opposite of them.”

“Hmmm.” I didn’t mean to come off rude, but I was already studying the first of the computer consoles, and felt an excitement growing inside me.

Each of the machines was curiously similar, all of them being roughly the size and shape of a desk. Their displays varied from flat screen to mist projection to holoinaging. Controls also ran the gamut of variety, from keyboard to voice and sight interface. One had no controls whatsoever. Running my fingers over the primary interface panel of the first one, I recognized it. This was 6 Alpha, the primary unit NATEch had scheduled to use to begin running scenarios on the Pegasus project. Next to it was a system I’d never seen, but one I immediately knew controlled the Net. The others were as easily recognizable.

“I suppose I should get started,” I said with a sigh.

“How do you go about this, Abigail?” I asked, very interested and slightly uncomfortable.

“Doctor Barrett seemed to think that simply accessing it would trigger the cascade,” I replied. I put my hand on the scanner. “Here goes,” I said and pressed down.

The scanner activated and a red light passed underneath my palm. There was a hum as it analyzed my imprint and selected the correct user ID. According to Doctor Barrett, since I had at one time actually been this machine, access was certain.

Five minutes later, I’d decided that access was considerably less than certain. Everything worked, but nothing worked. It ran the scan, identified me, then went back into a wait state. The display showed nothing but idle, self-diagnostic readouts. I felt more than a little uncomfortable. This was not according to plan.

“Is something supposed to happen, Abigail?” I asked uncertainly.

“It sure is, Miss DeChant. I should have merged with the machine, then emerged from it, having regained that portion of my mind, as well as a great deal of the data stored in the computer banks. That’s obviously not happened.”

I frowned and tried the Net machine. This one also had palm print access. It also ran the logon procedure. And it also went back to a wait mode. All that the display mist exhibited was the outside temperature. A hot day, with a temperature of thirty-seven.

The other computers behaved the same way, which is to say they didn't behave. They just acknowledged my presence, then ignored me. By this time, I was very uncomfortable and very nervous. If I had a collar, I'd be tugging at it.

"What are you going to do, Abigail?" Things were clearly not going as she expected. She seemed scared.

"I don't know. If you have any ideas, Miss DeChant, I'm willing to listen to them."

"Perhaps these machines are not meant to be joined to you," I offered. "Perhaps it is just for us three women to come together."

I nodded slowly. "You may be right. But I was positive that I needed to do this in order, and I needed to integrate all the personas. That's not working though, so let's you and I try."

Miss DeChant took a breath, closed her eyes and held out her arms. I felt slightly uncomfortable with hugging a naked woman, but shrugged it off. I had been her after all, so all I was doing was hugging myself. I stepped in front of her and pulled her to me.

Nothing happened. I felt her warm body against mine, felt her arms reaching around me and hugging me. She was taller than me--a buck and a half in dimes was taller than me--but I could still look at her eyes. She had opened them again in anticipation. We stared at each other, but nothing happened.

Reluctantly, I released her and sagged against a computer console. My nervousness had turned into despair.

"We've got to figure this out, Miss DeChant. Doctor Barrett can't leave me in my Healer's Sleep forever. I have to wake up sooner or later, and if I'm not reconstructed, I'll continue my sharding."

"Perhaps you should try the child?" I asked tentatively. I knew I had no other suggestion.

"I could, but I'm sure the result would be the same. She came after you did."

"Could it be you need to start with the most recent ripe, and work backwards?"

"No, because then the foundry console would have worked, because it was the last of my ripes."

"I see." I walked over and inspected the information being given out by the computers. "Do these things tell you anything, Abigail?"

"Not really. They're all standard self-diagnostics. Except for the net system, which is displaying an outdoor temperature of exactly thirty-seven degrees."

"What outdoors, Abigail? We're in your mind."

Her comment jolted me. What an idiot! Her common sense solved the problem so quickly, I realized it was no problem at all.

"Of course!" I jumped up, a big grin on my face. "You're brilliant, Miss DeChant!"

Abigail's shout and excitement caused me to start. An exuberant young woman. I was going to ask how I had helped, but she was racing off to the window. She stared out of it for several minutes. Long enough

for me to join her. Curious, I looked out, too. She turned to me, a smile of understanding on her face.

“What do you see, Miss DeChant?” I asked, feeling the excitement that comes with discovery.

I turned from the window to tell her, and promptly forgot what I had seen. Surprised, I looked again, and tried to describe the landscape. I couldn’t.

“I’m sorry, *Mademoiselle*,” I apologized, shaking my head. “I can see it, I know what I am seeing, but I cannot put it into words. And when I look away, I no longer remember.”

“It’s the same with me,” I agreed. “I know exactly what it looks like, but forget the second I look away.”

“And do you know why that is so?”

“I do now. Come on, let me show you something.” I took Miss DeChant’s hand and led her toward the doors marked “Main Gate”. I flung myself at them, but they refused to open. Exactly as I expected. I motioned to Miss DeChant.

“Give me a hand here, Miss DeChant. On three. One... two... three!”

We hit the doors together and managed to bruise our shoulders. They remained closed. Again, it was as I expected, but it was disappointing nonetheless and I swore quietly, a weakness of mine.

I blushed slightly at her vulgarity, but she seemed upset and it was not my place to correct her. I put a hand on her shoulder.

“Is something wrong, Abigail? Were you expecting us to open it? I’m larger than you, but I doubt I’m much stronger.” I hesitated and looked toward the girl, who was watching us intently, but obediently staying in her chair.

I saw Miss DeChant’s speculative glance at the girl and nodded.

“I’m afraid you’re right, Miss DeChant. We’ll need the girl’s help as well.”

“Afraid, Abigail?” It seemed all I could do was ask questions.

“Yes. I was hoping it would just be the two of us. But I suppose I knew that she would have to come along as well.”

“And those machines?”

“If I’m right, they’re not important any longer. Wait here a moment.” I walked over to the girl. Her eyes were bright with anticipation and eagerness.

“Hello. I was wondering... uh... we want to open those doors and I... um... would you help us out... uh... please?” I wished again for a collar I could tug at or a kerchief to twist.

I jumped to my feet, happy to help, and happy that Abby talked to me.

“I can do that, Abby! I like to help. Only I don’t do that kind of help much. I’m not very strong. I’m only strong enough to...”

“That’s okay,” I interrupted quickly, not really interested in hearing what she was strong enough to do. “If I’m right, we don’t need strength, we need people.”

We walked back to Miss DeChant and I put the girl's hands on the door. I nodded to Miss DeChant and together the three of us pushed.

The doors opened easily and immediately we were standing outside. The room was gone, and the computers were gone. We were alone on an empty plain.

The girl seemed very happy. She was twirling and running around, laughing and giggling. Despite myself, I had to admit she was very beautiful, and her shouts of joy seemed to wash away who she was, if only for the moment. I know how she felt.

"Where are we?"

"We, Miss DeChant," I said with mounting excitement in my voice and soul, "are home. Welcome to the puterverse."

She looked around her, somewhat stunned, and sank to the ground. I quickly brought up some soft, warm sand for her to sit on, then flopped down next to her. The girl continued to--I could think of no better word--frolic. I waited for Miss DeChant to ask one of her seemingly endless questions, but she remained silent. So I picked up the ball.

"Sorry, but that was a little melodramatic. This isn't really the puterverse. It's a representation of what I've made my puterverse into. I've always had a preference for sweeping landscapes."

I swept an arm. "All this, Miss DeChant, is my mind. Every nook and cranny, including what I've used, what others such as yourself have used, and even some still unexplored sections."

"And what of the room?"

"You were the one who put me on that. I had always known I was in my mind whenever I was, well, out of my mind. Every sharding episode didn't evict me, it just shuffled us around as a barrier was breached and a different persona came to the surface. But all of us have the same address." I tapped my head. "Up here. All of us... and one other thing."

I nodded in understanding. "Of course! The memory capsule that Professor LeClaire put into me. Your pardon, *mademoiselle*. Into you."

"Actually, he didn't put it into either of us, Miss DeChant. He embedded it into an unused portion of my mind. It sat there, tapping into my mind but not having full access to my cognitive abilities to truly take root. It would be inactive while it lay in a quiet, unused corner of my head. Inactive and undetectable by the NATEch ghouls that pulled you apart after the raid on your home in 2315. Dollars to doughnuts LeClaire knew that and planned accordingly."

"Dollars to doughnuts?" I asked, the phrase being unfamiliar to me.

"Sorry. Old habit. I still use a lot of old phrases. I should try to cut down. Dollars to doughnuts means it was a sure thing. LeClaire knew what he was doing.

"Anyway, it remained in a nearly dormant condition for more than two centuries, until December, 2543, when I was ripped as the line processing core for a foundry located on the Thames, near London. And with very straightforward duties--the core only carried out four basic instruction sets over ninety-eight percent of the time--the professor's precious little keyed memory encapsulated mnemonic inlay had ideal ground to grow and mature in. That's why this area is so flat and featureless; because the foundry ripe was flat and featureless. I'm sure the other machine ripes look similar to this. No amount of binary programming can match human imagination. We should be thankful that the KME didn't end up in the

pleasure ripe. I'm not even going to try to imagine what that landscape looks like.

"It plugged away at its primary program for one hundred and twenty years. Then, about three years ago, the Resistance tracks down the ripe, swipes it from the foundry and pours it into this body, making me into me again. They messed up a tad on the plumbing, but that's made my trip through life just that much more interesting."

"And what was the KME's primary program, Abigail?"

"To design, create, and then implement unbound trinary code. After it had done so, it would wait for the original persona--me--to be restored."

"How long did it take to accomplish this creation?"

"I've used that same trinary code to calculate that very thing, Miss DeChant. Sixty-nine years."

"And that's all it was designed to do?"

"Yes and no. LeClaire only designed it to create UTC for two reasons. One, that's all he had time for. And two, once that goal was achieved, the KME would use the KME and proceed from there, reacting to situations as best it could.

"Good thing, too. A couple months after I was revived, I was forced into a sharding episode. There were indications that I'd had smaller episodes prior to that. I was a prime candidate to become a Shard, which as you know is a very unstable, very painful, and very short experience.

"The KME recognized that and began developing a solution. I was unintentionally helping it by my heavy accessing of the puterverse. Whenever I was puting, the KME was able to accelerate its calculations and expand its scenarios. It used my first serious episode as an opportunity to teach me how to visualize and use UTC. That way, when I recovered, I would spend even more time in the puterverse. An added benefit was that I actually designed some UTC myself, which had been LeClaire's ultimate goal: to have a human mind grasp and use UTC. Through me, he had achieved that goal.

"Now the problem was to keep me alive long enough to use it. My sharding episodes were very spread apart initially, but they were present. The KME wasn't fooled. It knew my episodes would continue and that the time between shards would decrease. So it created the room we were just in. Why it looked like an airport waiting room, I have no idea."

"I do, Abigail," I volunteered. "It looked much like the old Paris airport. There was a brief period in the 2280's when it was quite popular to imitate the 1980's. Paris was like everyone else and designed a portion of its spaceport to look three centuries old. Professor LeClaire was quite amused by it and visited it frequently. He occasionally took me to dinner there."

I laughed. "I'd have never figured that one out, Miss DeChant. Thanks for the fill-in.

"So it built this place, knowing it would be needed in order to begin repairing my shards. Into the room, the KME placed representatives of each of the ripes, including the computers, even though they would not be used during my reintegration."

"Why not?"

"Why?" I countered. "I have the keys to UTC. Compared to what I can do now, even the most sophisticated binary machine has the computing power of a turnip."

“And the girl and I?” I whispered, afraid of the answer.

“I’m getting to that. Let me tell this in order. Once the KME had constructed this place and populated it, it then began the real work of modifying the ripe barriers in my mind so that it could institute a structured collapse at the right moment. That moment is now at hand.

“I think it was about the time NATEch attacked the Third that the KME realized it had to accelerate the process, which was both good and bad. It was good because you and I had already met as a result of our raping at the hands of NATEch SS.” I shuddered at the memory, feeling dirty. “We needed to meet and understand each other in order for the final reintegration to work properly. Since we were the ones who initiated it, instead of the KME having to do it, we greatly increased our chances at establishing a relationship. A relationship that I value greatly.

“The bad part was, when Posen starting using his micro inducer on me, he tore down much of the work the KME had done on the barriers. There was a dangerously high chance that I would slip into cascading sharding episodes, something the KME would not be able to stop. An added danger was that Posen worked for NATEch, and their top dog, Chris Young, very much wanted my KME.”

“He knew about it?” I said, startled.

“He more than knew about it, Miss DeChant. He was the one that made it possible for LeClaire to create one. Young is the main bad guy through all this. He lived during my time--even worked for me--and was the one who created the puterverse.”

“That I knew,” I nodded. “I would say that every school girl is taught that, which is true, though I started life as a fifteen year old, and never attended school. But I can also say that during riping, every domestic persona is given a good deal of general information so she might function well as a hostess and companion. After LeClaire purchased me, I continued to study, hoping I might better serve him.”

“LeClaire didn’t purchase you, Miss DeChant, nor did we just happen to be put together. You were given to him by Young, who knew that it was me being ripped. Young wanted the most stable mind he could get to hold the KME, and I was his choice. I also know he took a perverse pleasure having me ripped into a woman. He saw it as a type of revenge, or something.”

“So he knew that LeClaire would design a memory capsule?”

“Or something like it, yes. LeClaire was one of the best minds of his era--maybe of any era--and Chris had been following his career closely. Even when LeClaire was in his thirties--years before you were ripped--he had made astounding advances in the application of sonics to the brain. It was, in fact, his achievements with sonics in general--along with Earth’s enforced isolation--that guided technology from that point on. Sonics is used today in many fields, from weapons to medicine.”

“So why didn’t *M’sieur* Young just design the KME himself? Wasn’t he a computer with endless resources?”

“Yes, he was. But he’d fallen into the most common trap of all. Thinking computers were superior in every way to humans, he transferred himself into a specially built region, essentially a self-ripping. From there, he planned to design and implement stable BTC to better control the planet.”

“BTC? Not UTC?”

“That’s right. Chris was a smart cookie, but he always lacked that extra bit of imagination that reaches beyond reason. He *knew* UTC could never exist, so he abandoned it immediately.

“But he did want the BTC. There are three kinds of trinary code; pseudo, bound and unbound. Pseudo uses complex matrices of binary to simulate trinary. When implemented, it creates mock emotions and limited judgment. But there’s no depth. The emotions are not ‘felt’ and therefore cannot be used to affect judgment. On top of that, the coding is tedious, bulky, and prone to bugs and eventual failure if not constantly maintained. Chris is using PTC now, and is probably expending a good deal of his admittedly vast resources to keep it running.

“Bound trinary code goes to the next level. It uses larger and larger binary matrices to simulate emotion. With BTC, there are indications that once a matrix reaches a critical point--actual trinary code, code using twos as well as ones and zeros--it would self-generate, collapsing the matrix into a tighter trinary package. A machine with BTC in its programming would begin to feel actual emotion.

“There are several drawbacks to BTC, however. First, it remains bound to binary code, hence the name. Second, while the emotions are real, they are chaotic. Third, these emotions still cannot be applied to judgment, either a symptom or cause of the chaos. And finally, BTC is subject to instant and catastrophic failure if the host matrix is modified incorrectly.

“Unbound trinary code is the real prize. UTC freely mixes in zeros, one, and twos in its programs, and is bedrock stable. Coding takes up very little room, and creates true emotions; fully stable and applicable to true judgment.”

“You mean, you’ve created life.”

“In a way,” I agreed. “At first I found the thought very uncomfortable. Life can only be created by God. But God chooses to create life through procreation. As a woman, I can bear children. While I do not create that life, I do bring it into the world. Mike and Kiki are similar to my bearing children. I made them, but if they have true life, I did not give it to them, God did. I only brought them into this world.

“So, getting back to Chris and LeClaire. Chris was certain that if given the proper tools and motivation, LeClaire would solve the BTC instability problem and provide him with what he thought was the ultimate compiling code. So Young arranged for LeClaire’s life to be trouble free, brought him up to a position more prestigious than even LeClaire deserved--at least early in his career, and provided a perfect subject and servant; me, ripe as you.

“At first, everything went just as Chris planned. LeClaire continued advancing his work, getting closer and closer to creating a mnemonic inlay capable of building stable bound trinary code. That it took decades for LeClaire to do his work meant nothing to Chris. He is essentially immortal. Besides, the longer LeClaire took to complete his work, the better chance there was that he would use you as the KME recipient.”

“Why, Abigail?”

“Because LeClaire would want to use a subject that he knew and trusted. Young had calculated that LeClaire would be tempted to betray him if he ever thought through the implications of a binary persona using bound trinary code. And since by this time you had been with him for forty plus years, you were the perfect choice.

“But Chris made some mistakes. His first mistake was that he had never given a second thought to LeClaire creating unbound trinary code. His second mistake was that he has a rather low opinion of flesh, and he badly underestimated LeClaire’s ingenuity and resourcefulness. But his biggest mistake was that he was so supremely confident in his own logic and abilities, he never checked his work. It was a failing he had even when he was human.

“LeClaire *had* developed a KME capable of designing UTC. And he had not only figured out what would happen if Chris got his hands on the KME, he had also figured out that Chris would *know* he knew. And with that conclusion, LeClaire knew he was under a sentence of death.

“So when LeClaire was ready to implant the KME, he acted. On the morning of December 3, 2315, LeClaire reported a power leakage in his private laboratory.”

“I remember,” I said with a nod. “I was the one who placed the call.”

“That makes sense. I’ll also wager you don’t remember much more after that.”

I frowned. “Well, the technicians arrived and went to work. Since it was nearly lunch time, Professor LeClaire asked me to prepare them lunch as well, which I did.”

“Really?” I asked softly. “What did you serve them?”

“If my memory is correct, the tall one, Francis, had a wedge of cheddar and an apple, with chilled white wine. The sturdier man, Pierre, had a quarter kilo of cold beef with an ale.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “What did you serve them?”

“I just told you, Abigail,” I said, perplexed. “I served the tall one, Maurice, a crisp salad of lettuce, tomato...”

“What did you say, Miss DeChant?”

“I said, a bowl of onion soup... with...” I raised a hand to my mouth.

“That’s right. You can remember, Miss DeChant. But every time you remember, it’s something different, isn’t it?”

“*Oui*, Abigail. But I’m so very positive it was a cold chicken leg... and... what is wrong?” I felt my heart beginning to race.

“What you’re remembering is an injected memory pattern. It’s made to mimic a real memory, but is not as stable. NATech uses this technique frequently to trap the Resistance when they’re restoring a Cue. Unless you’re looking for it, it’s very difficult to pin down because the person with the false pattern never realizes it. LeClaire used it on you that morning in December. He used it again that evening.” I smiled and sighed. “Between the two of us, Miss DeChant, we cover a lot of firsts in the riping field. Frankly, I think it’s time we took advantage of that.”

“But why did Professor LeClaire do that to me?”

“He had to, because those technicians were not there to fix his leakage. They were there to assist him in establishing the real KME. Then, later that day, he established a partial KME in your section of my mind. He then injected another memory pattern that under scrutiny would reveal that he had flat-lined you at about five that evening, just prior to the KME being inlaid. To throw them off the real KME. He succeeded. During your autopsy, the phony KME was discovered, and LeClaire’s experiment was considered invalid.”

“You mean to say that Professor LeClaire killed me?”

“You must understand, Miss DeChant. LeClaire already knew your lives were forfeit. My mind would continue, of course. But your persona was over. By flat-lining your brain waves, he saved you the agony

of sonic interrogation that would have killed you anyway. And despite your memories of that afternoon and evening, he had actually flat-lined you that morning, shortly after his associates arrived.”

“It all seems so cold and cruel,” I said sadly.

“Oh, get off it, Miss DeChant!” I exclaimed irritably. “This is NATEch we’re talking about. LeClaire was a genius, and he had compassion for you. And he didn’t want to see a world crushed by a power-mad puterverse demigod wielding UTC irresponsibly. But the man made his living by creating methods of mental suppression, coercion, and manipulation. He was as irresponsible as Young. He didn’t give a damn about the consequences of creating UTC. Not really. Sure, he took steps to see it didn’t fall into the wrong hands. But he still created it. He intended it for me, but he had no idea who I was. For all he knew, I was worse than Chris. He just didn’t want Chris to have it because he knew Young was going to kill him. LeClaire was never an innocent in all this. You should know that, Miss DeChant. You lived with the man for forty-one years.”

“You are right!” I cried, feeling pangs of guilt and shame. “He was always pleasant to me, and we were rarely together in public, except at formal gatherings or occasional meals. But you are right. I heard many things about him, things that should have made me hate him, they were so cruel. But I never lost my respect for him. Perhaps I am not innocent as well, no?”

“No!” I exclaimed, regretting my harshness. “You *are* the innocent in this, Miss DeChant. I’m sorry if I’ve made you feel bad. How can you control your feelings for LeClaire? You were made for him. In the same way your sexual desires were cut off, your conscience was blunted in how you viewed LeClaire. Nothing he did could have changed your overwhelming need to serve and respect him. So don’t blame yourself.” I smiled at her. “I don’t blame you, and I’m the soulner here.”

“Thank you, Abigail.” I wiped a tear away. “I am so grateful that you are my soulner. You make me feel so alive, so real.”

“Then I suppose now is the best time to tell you.” She looked at me curiously and I took a deep breath.

“You had asked earlier about you and the girl. What would become of you. The truth is, in one sense, neither you nor the girl are real. Neither of you has a soul, nor true control over your actions, nor a real ability to better yourselves.” She looked about to cry again.

“In another sense, though, both of you are as real as me. You see, Miss DeChant, you *are* me. So is the girl.”

“Abigail! What... what do you mean?” I asked.

“Let me show you.” And I took her hands. Her eyes widened suddenly, and then she was gone, fading away with a shimmer of light. In the last moment, I saw a peaceful smile illuminate her face, and her eyes came alive with the spark of true life.

“Ah, Miss DeChant. I see you’ve successfully negotiated the KME’s tricky path. Good girl!”

I twisted around from my position on the ground and saw a tall man standing over me, smiling coldly. I gasped and raised a hand to my mouth.

“Professor LeClaire!”

Chapter Five

He reached a hand down and helped me to my feet. Unlike me, he was fully clothed, dressed in his

favorite sweater and slacks. He seemed to be in his early forties, the age he was when I first came to serve him. Thinking that, I looked at myself.

I was young again! My middle-aged body, feeling the creaks and protests of advancing years, was replaced by the slim physique of my youth. I gently touched my skin, feeling the soft, smooth...

Wait. I wasn't real. I was an image in Abigail's mind. No. *I* was Abigail! I looked around and saw only LeClaire. The girl had wandered off somewhere. Miss DeChant was gone. More truthful, she was in my memories, where she was wanted and where she belonged.

"Is something wrong, Miss DeChant?" LeClaire said pleasantly. He placed a hand on my shoulder. I looked him straight in the eye.

"You're either going to take that hand off me, LeClaire, or you're going to choke on it when I force feed it to you."

He seemed startled, but removed his hand. He leaned down and frowned.

"You're not Miss DeChant!"

"No, I'm not. I'm Abigail Wyeth. And you're not Philip LeClaire."

"I'm not, eh? Then why am I wearing his clothes?" he laughed. "Come. Enough of this nonsense. Let's sit down and you can tell me how the KME has worked out. I could also do with one of your fabulous back rubs."

He sat down on the sand I'd created for Miss DeChant and myself. I remained standing and let the sand trickle back into the floor of my mind. He looked irritated and perplexed as he stood again.

"What are you doing, girl? It is your station to serve me!"

"No, it's not. That was the relationship between Miss DeChant and LeClaire. And as I said, we're neither. Miss DeChant was a piece of my life, manipulated to serve you and Young. But now she's where she should be: in my mind and in my past. And you're a remnant of LeClaire that he placed in the KME. A waste of time, if you ask me."

He laughed again. "You are quite the little spitfire, aren't you? Very well. You're right, I am a ghost of LeClaire."

"More like a ghost of LeClaire's ego. What is your purpose here?"

"Despite the grim picture you painted for Miss DeChant a few moments ago, I am here to help you. I'll need to hurry, though. I have perhaps five minutes of life. I didn't want to use too much room in the KME." He put his hands behind his back and bounced slightly on his toes, considering me.

"I can't tell you how exciting it is to look at you!" He raised his hands at my look. "Not in a physical sense, young lady. Although there is that, too. I mean in a scientific sense. You have to be the original persona. If you are, then that means the KME has not only reached full maturity, it's activated and has taught you unbound trinary code." He looked at me earnestly. "Tell me--Abigail, was it?--what is it like?"

"Something I can't describe, LeClaire. It's as though..."

"Please, call me Philip."

"I think not. Anyway, it's given me free reign in the puterverse. And I can use the coding directly, though

I have two UTC constructs that do most of the number crunching for me. All in all, it's fit very well inside me." I looked at him. "I'd thank you except I know that what benefits I've gotten from it are just side issues, aren't they?"

"Quite astute, *Madame*. My main desire is to know that it worked. I've no doubt been dead for some time. What you do with the UTC is quite irrelevant to me, or to my bones. My second desire is to know that *M'sieur* Young didn't get that knowledge. And my third desire is the one I stated first: to help you by giving you additional information. Information not included with the KME, nor recorded anywhere else."

"Go on."

"You say you've been able to move freely through the puterverse?" I nodded. "At what level, might I ask?"

"Any level I choose, although my normal access is at unlimited."

"Indeed!" He became very excited. He peered at me closely. "And tell me; are there more than thirty-two levels? Perhaps, say... sixty-seven?"

"I'm impressed, Doctor," I said honestly. "I know that levels beyond thirty-two were not discovered until..."

"Yes, yes, yes. I'm well aware that not all the levels had been discovered by the twenty-fourth century. The only relevant fact is that there are sixty-seven levels. And your accessing; it's without pain or physical weakness, is it not?"

"Yes. I have no difficulty coming and go"--

"Yes!" He jumped and spun, very unusual for a man, especially for a ghost of a man that would flicker out in a few moments. He continued making exclamations and shouts in French, which I now understood fluently. I cut him off after his third outburst.

"LeClaire! We don't have much time! You're here to help me, remember?"

"I'm so sorry, young lady." He calmed down and wiped a tear from his eye. "You are correct. Very well, let me tell it quickly, and you can deduce the rest after you waken. First, briefly about myself. I'll speak frankly, since I am but an image, and my true self has gone on to whatever reward or punishment I deserved.

"I was quite famous as a leading pioneer in the field of sonics. It's a reputation that is well deserved. No doubt many of my discoveries and applications are refined and in use today. I'm sure to be remembered and honored even in this time, which I would estimate to be between 2650 and 2800."

The man's ego would have been staggering if his claims weren't also true. And his guess at the year was very impressive. Here was real NATEch material.

"What is probably not as well known is that I started out not in sonics, but in spatial theory I was among the class of 2251 that tapped into the poorly named fourth =dimension for eighty-nine nanoseconds. Poorly named, I say, because while time is often considered the fourth dimension, we both know it is in fact the real fifth dimension. There is no fourth dimension."

I nodded in understanding. Contrary to conventional wisdom, and the seeming proof of the stability of binary code, mathematics thrived on prime numbers. Non-prime numbers were merely unstable

composites of prime numbers. It tends to be overlooked that the number two is a prime, unlike all other even numbers.

“In any event, this look into the new dimension was very brief. Fortunately, we were fully documenting the event, and in eighty-nine nanoseconds were able to accumulate 944 terrabytes of data, images, and digitized samples.”

“I remember reading about the discovery. I was excited at first, because it seemed like a substantial breakthrough in physics. I wouldn’t know, because I could never gain access to the data, but I imagine that a fifth dimension would probably be a stable merging of the first three along the time axis, which would eliminate physical velocity and acceleration. In that dimension, any form of movement by any object would be instantaneous.”

“Wonderful!” He clapped his hands. “You have an excellent grasp of spatial theory, woman! I am astounded! You’re imaginings are completely accurate. It took the eight of us nearly a week to come to the same conclusion. Further work with the data revealed that a byproduct of non-temporal movement also meant that existing in this dimension would be impossible for corporeal life.”

“Of course. Since any movement would occur in literally no time, the normal movement of living would prove fatal. Air entering the lungs would travel at such high speed, the lungs would be shredded in a moment. The friction caused by blood cells in the veins would cause the entire circulatory system to be burned away. Even a single heartbeat would be fatal, because the muscle would completely implode.” I felt a shiver along my back and a heavy thudding in my chest as I listened to the suddenly familiar description of death in that dimension. LeClaire saw my widened eyes and smiled.

“You have captured the action quite vividly and again quite accurately. Have you ever heard of or witnessed such a death?”

“Yes. A Lieutenant Posen was found dead in his quarters with injuries exactly like that. At least, what was left of him indicated massive and spontaneous organic failure throughout his body. And he had just been in the puterverse, at my access.” My voice rose with the excitement and fear of sudden revelation. “Do you mean to say...”

“What I mean to say, young lady, is that the puterverse is not a creation of Chris Young. It is its own dimension, a dimension we cannot physically enter. He created the original webbing techniques, and he was the driving force behind the development of the Net. But the puterverse, as it exists today, was made possible by the data stolen from us by *M’sieur* Young, who overlaid it with a Net interface to disguise his theft.

“Less than a month after our access, the data, all its backups, and all our research--stored on the university fullframe--was missing. Within six months, five of the eight of us were dead. Within three years, two more had also died.”

“Leaving just you.”

“Leaving just me,” he sighed. I saw particles of light popping and bursting from behind him. He was still solid, but there seemed to be small glimmers peeking through. He saw my stare and looked down.

“I should say my time is concluding. Please, let me finish.

“As you said, leaving just me. It wasn’t by accident I was the last one alive. I figured out very quickly that the only being that could do such sweeping theft of that much data had to be an entity, not a person. Where that entity existed was not difficult to deduce either. To survive my friends, I would need to

become useful to him.

“I shifted my studies from spatial theory to sonics. I had always enjoyed it as a hobby. I now devoted myself to it for three reasons. One, it would be seen as a non-threatening discipline by the puterverse entity. Two, the long term benefits, as a whole to society and specifically to my new, secret employer, NATech, would give me value, as well as a portion of the fame and social status I deserved. And three, I knew that with sonics, I could create a method to develop unbound trinary code without the use of a computer. And once the entity--Young--concluded that it was impossible to create trinary code in a binary environment, he would allow me to continue my work for his ultimate benefit. A benefit I never intended to fall into his hands. He had destroyed by best chance to gain recognition and wealth. He robbed me of my discovery of the fifth dimension!”

There was no question now that he was disintegrating. Already his feet and lower extremities were gone, although he continued to hang in midair, a hideous crucifix. His hands were gone, as was the back of his head. Light shone through his body as through stained glass. He gazed at me intently with eyes that seemed like dark, smoke-filled marbles with a candle glowing on the other side.

“Remember, woman, what Philip LeClaire has done for you. Remember me for what I have done for mankind, not what I have done for NATech.” He flashed a smile and the glow in his eyes faded to dying embers. “And remember that Young is not the master of the puterverse. You are.”

The vestiges of his face lingered, then vanished with a silent pop, leaving me alone with my thoughts and within my thoughts.

* * * *

“Princess!”

I waited a moment, then called again. I’d been searching for over an hour, being pulled along by a deep sense of direction. The landscape had changed significantly and to the worse. Gone was the flat plane of the foundry ripe. I was now entering the portion of the girl’s ripe, and it was worse than I could have imagined. Everything was black, with no relief of shade or pitch. I could make out features only by a sixth sense that seemed to let me see from within my chest. In my blindness, I could make out fissures everywhere, in the air as well as on the ground, which itself was rough and sharp and uneven. No matter which direction I went every step was an uphill struggle. I stumbled frequently and when my hands touched the ground, it felt like bloody flesh. Only once, after a bad stumble, did my hands come against the edge of a fissure. The edge cut my palms, but also gave way, like the edges of a knife wound. I lurched to my feet very quickly, the quiver of the ground underneath filling me with terror and revulsion. Yet this was my mind. At one time, I had lived here. At one time, I *was* this place.

“Princess!” I yelled. Although the name was so completely out of place in this Dantesque horror, it was the only name that had been given her, and it seemed more appropriate than shouting “slut” or something equally descriptive.

I had staggered up a particularly tough stretch of flat ground, jumping over four fissures and walking around two others that rent the air, when I saw a shimmer of deep black in the distance. Occasionally, a flicker of pain would show through, with the smell of laughter. I worked my way toward the shadow, the ground becoming softer and sharper as I went. I finally was close enough to see that it was the girl.

She lay on the ground, near a fissure. Although she was curled up, her face was extended toward the jagged edge. I heard lapping sounds and whimpers of delight coming from her as she licked the massive surface scar. My stomach twisted and I was very nearly sick at this open display of obscene pleasure, but I fought it down. It wasn’t her fault she was this way. That’s not quite true. It wasn’t my fault that I

was once this way. Because the pathetic creature lying at my feet, oblivious to everything but the pleasure pain brought her, had been me. I leaned down and touched her shoulder.

“Princess?”

I stopped my licking and looked up. Abby! She had come to find me! I felt a wave of happiness inside me. I laughed and came to my knees, grabbing her around the waist. She smelled so wonderful! And her skin was so soft!

I half-expected the girl to disappear when she hugged me, but she didn't. We apparently had not reached the point where we were close enough mentally to join. I wondered how I could possibly let Doctor Barrett know he needed to adjust the wavelength of the inducer, when I suddenly just knew that he understood. I felt a curious sensation wash over me, and the bitter warmth of the surrounding air began seeping into me, making me tingly and numb at the same time.

Abigail was standing still and I felt her body get hard, like she was going to hit me, which would be nice. But then her body went softer again, like she liked my holding her. That was nice, too, so I began kissing her pretty legs.

“Stop that!” I scolded. “You know I don't want you to do that!”

“You don't?” I asked, very confused. “Then why are you here?”

“I'm here...” I broke off and lowered my voice. Deep inside, a dark pleasure started rising, and I had the sudden urge to strike her, knowing she would enjoy it. I fought it down. It receded into my soul, but remained alive. “I'm here, Princess, because it's time for you and I to become one person. May I sit down?”

“Oh, yes, Abby! Please!” I let Abby go so she could sit down, then tried to curl up in her lap. She wouldn't let me and anyway I was bigger than her so it would be hard to do, so I lay down and put my head on her lap and looked at her pretty eyes. I couldn't really see her, because it was all night everywhere, but I could see her, too.

She put her head on my lap, leaving her lovely throat completely open to being crushed... I shook my head harshly. Why was I thinking this? We needed to talk. I wanted to know this girl, this lost piece of my past, before she disappeared forever inside me. But how can you carry on a conversation with someone like this? I didn't know, but I would have to try. Forcibly relaxing myself, I began stroking her hair. She sighed and made a sound in her throat not unlike a purr.

I wanted to just talk and wait until Barrett discovered the correct frequency that would begin meshing our minds together, but having her lying there, so trusting, so vulnerable... I grunted and tightened my eyes shut. Why didn't I start talking? Why couldn't I think? What was it about her?

Abby wanted to hit me, I knew, but she didn't. I wondered why, so I asked her.

“What's wrong, Abby? Why don't you have fun with me? Isn't that why you're here?” I grabbed her hand and put it on my tummy and then my face. “Please? I'll be good, I promise.” I licked her hand.

The blood rose up in me as I found her attention wildly exciting.

“What's happening?” I screamed at her. “What are you doing to me?”

“I'm sorry!” I cried. “I'll be better! I promise!” I didn't know what Abby wanted to make her feel better, because I could tell she didn't know either. So I just kept close to her, hoping she would do what all my

other owners did.

My blind eyes were dazzled by ribbons of hate and self-loathing. Desperate to hurt her, I knew I would only be hurting myself. With my last ounce of willpower, I threw her off and scrambled to my feet. She rolled over to her hands and knees and began whimpering like a beaten cur.

I straightened up, and suddenly a massive weight fell on my back and shoulders, driving me to my knees. I felt exposed and guilty and worthless and deliriously happy.

Abby stood up, then went on her knees. Her arms were open, so maybe she wanted me to hug her. I crawled over to her and hugged her as hard as I could.

“Don’t be sad, Abby!” I cried. “I want to make you happy! Tell me what to do! Please! I want you to feel better!”

The girl’s cries of love and mercy cut like razors into my skin, making me want to lash out wildly. I put my hands around her throat and began crushing her windpipe. I watched my hands with a detached fascination squeeze the life from her soft throat. She offered no resistance and in the pitch darkness of hopelessness, despair and vile need, she was willing to give herself up in the impossible hope that she could still please me.

Abby liked me! I was making her happy! She really was my real owner! I felt her strong, soft hands hold me very very tight around my neck, and I felt the wonderful colors and pretty smells make me feel good, too. She hurt me even harder, so I knew she did love me. I only had a little strength left, so before I died, I wanted to do one more thing to make her feel good. I raised my hand and stroked her pretty arm.

Her loving caress seemed to snap me from my thrall. What was I doing? I tried to wrench my hands away, but they only tightened, intent on killing her. I could not stop myself, nor could I stop the pangs of pain and pleasure shooting through me, each stab filled with wonderful colors and pretty smells that made me feel good.

Knowing her death at my hands was only moments away, I threw myself bodily to one side, the girl still locked in my grip, her body becoming limp. My leg hit the edge of the fissure and skidded off. Helpless to stop myself, I screamed silently, once, then fell into the hot, dark abyss, the girl being yanked along with me.

* * * *

It was dark in my room. They had been feeding me, and sometimes they let me out of the chair that held me and let me walk around. And Stays, who was almost my owner, but wasn’t, had been training me. But I wanted to go. I wanted an owner.

The men who kept me in my room were almost my owners, but weren’t really. They came and got me at the place where I woke up and started to want an owner, but they didn’t want me to do anything with them.

The chair let go of me, so I stood up. I wanted to take off my long shirt, but wasn’t allowed to. So I stood up and ran around, trying to get so I would feel better, and be ready when my very first owner came to get me. My legs played tricks on me and I fell. So I got up and ran again and fell again. Then I got up and ran and didn’t fall down. I was getting ready. Ready for my very first owner.

A little light came on, and the door opened. I went next to the chair, away from the door like I’d been told. Three men came in. They had on nice clothes. Even though I could only remember some days since

I woke up the very first time, something in me said they were nice clothes.

They walked over to me, so I knew they were going to talk. I went on my hands and knees and looked at the floor, just like they trained me to do. They wanted me to, so I wanted to, too.

“Is she ready?”

“Yeah, I think so. Let me check.”

A man grabbed me hard on my shoulders and pulled me up. I kept looking at the floor. They said it was bad to look at them, but I didn’t know why.

“Hey, darling. Look at me.” Happy to do what I was told, I looked into his big, pretty eyes. Was he going to be my owner?

“Hi. Are you my owner? I hope you are.” He let me go, so I hugged him, touching him on his nice clothes. “I want you to be my owner. I’ll make you happy. I promise!”

He grabbed me and threw me down. He was my owner! I giggled and tried to get up, but he hit me behind the head and I fell down again, feeling happy inside.

“Damn it, Calhoun! Stop it! Geez! You put a mark on her and Deke will think we’re giving him used goods!”

“I--I couldn’t help myself, Stози! It was like she was messing with my head!” My owner, Calhoun, backed away from me, and I could see in his eyes he didn’t like me. Maybe he wasn’t my owner. “I wanted to...”

Stays snapped his fingers, so I looked up at him. He pointed to the floor. He had trained me, even though he wasn’t my owner, so I wanted to do what he wanted. I went down on my knees and looked at the floor again. I heard him laugh not loud.

“I know what you wanted to do, Berty boy. That’s why we always come in here in twos or threes. She’s got that effect on people. Both men and women, I been told.”

The man who hadn’t talked started talking. “And you better believe what you’ve been told, Stози. She looks like a standard issue pleasure ripe, lower executive, gamma model. But she’s not. She’s a Shiva class trigger, Harting Enterprise’s latest little toy we give to our esteemed competition and our own deserving associates.”

“A trigger?” said Calhoun, who wasn’t my owner. “What you mean, Cut? You mean, like a gun?”

“Yeah, kinda. Only nothing so obvious. The lab boys mucked around in her head, trying for a special mix of pleasure ripe and time bomb. They turned all her nerve endings into, like, pleasure feelings, and changed the signals in her brain over so whatever gets done to her, she loves it. She’s got the brains of a Dalmatian, but she sends out some kinda--I dunno--messages, making people lose control of themselves.”

“Messages? Like how?”

“I said I dunno! Whadda I look like? Some puterfreak? They said like pheromones, and body language and even some mental psycho something. Hits you in the body, in the eyes, and screws up your head. She gets close to you, and before long she gets into you.” Cut laughed. “She gets into you a lot deeper than you get into her! Anyway, it’s fun at first. She’s got a great body. She’s younger’n she looks, but

they pushed her a little. And she never argues with you. Best of all, she can't tell between getting loved and getting beaten. She'll do anything. And you can do anything to her, and she'll love you for it. Ain't that right, sweetheart?"

"Can I?" I asked with my happy voice, clapping my hands. "Are you my owner? Are we going to play? I'll do what I'm told. I promise!" I started to get to my feet so I could get closer to him. Maybe he was going to be my first owner.

"That's enough." He pointed at the floor, so I sat on my knees and looked at the floor some more, just like he wanted me to. So I wanted to, too.

"You get this little trick for a present, and somebody wants you dead. They want you dead real bad. Only she don't kill you. You do that to yourself. She sucks you into her little world with all that crap she does with the girly chemicals and mind stuff, and pretty soon you start feeling sorry for her. Course, she don't know she's doin' it.

"That's the first step, because she doesn't know she's garbage. All she knows is who her owner is, and that she loves him. Then you hate her cause she don't react to pity, and before you know it, you start beating her. Only she loves you even more because of that, and you get meaner, trying to break her. But she never breaks. Never. After awhile, she's all you can think about, all you can hate, all you can deal with. And bang! you're wrecked. Ain't too long and you put a blaster to your head, or access at level thirty, or shoot a NATech grunt. Anything to get away from her. So you kill yourself, and she's like the trigger onna gun you got at your head. And nobody ever knows you just been offed. Ain't she special, boys? A regular princess."

I didn't really hear their words. A lot of them were big and anyway when they talked like that, I knew they didn't want to talk to me. That was good because I didn't like to talk, except to talk pretty words to make my owner feel good. But I heard him call me special. I liked being called special. And a princess, but I didn't know what that was. Maybe he liked me. I wished I could help him like me.

"And we're giving her to Deke? What did he do to rate this?"

"Ain't my business, Berty. But I heard Deke's been sellin' more sniff than he's supposed to have, so he's either cuttin' it or picking up extra sniff somewheres."

"You mean like that hov that sank into the Gulf without a trace?"

"I mean like that. But I'm justa leaner. If the big guy says we wrap up the little princess here and give her to Deke, that's what we do." He grabbed my jaw and jerked my head up. I smiled at him and touched his strong hand. He pushed me back against the wall and snorted. "Deke's a dead man. I bet he don't make it to 2470."

"You crazy, Cut? That's only eight month's! Deke's all man. I bet he makes it a year, easy."

"Yeah? I got five hundred creds to back me up, Berty boy."

"Five hundred?" said the man who trained me. I think his name was Stays, but I wasn't sure because I wasn't good with words. "I'll take some of that! She ain't that dangerous. Put me down for five hundred Deke goes twenty months. To 2471."

They talked some more loud words, then Stays picked me up to my feet. He held me close, but I kept looking at the floor because he didn't say I could look at him. He put his mouth next to my ear and I got all tingly from his hot, wonderful breath when he talked.

“Got good news for you, babe. You got you an owner. His name’s Deke, and you get to love him with all your heart! First, though, we gotta get you prettied up.”

“Deke?” I asked, feeling very very very happy. I closed my eyes as he pulled me out of the room, and I said his name over and over, so I would remember. “Deke. Deke. Deke.”

I opened my eyes and smiled at Stays. “I’m going to go to my very first owner! His name is Deke!”

“That’s right, babe. Only look at the floor.”

I forgot.

* * * *

I was crying out as though the lost agonies and pain and terror of many years were suddenly pouring through me as we fell. The ghastly memories, buried and forgotten in these ragged fissures and hot, bleeding crevasses, crashed over my mind, threatening to tear it apart. Soul-wrenching sadness, never felt, never expressed, screamed and shrieked its way from my raw throat.

Her hands were still around my throat, so it was up to me to stop our fall. Twisting my body, I jammed my hands and feet against the soft crevasse walls. Had this been real rock, it would have been quite impossible to stop. But in the mind, all of one’s strength lay in the will. I willed us to stop. And gradually, we did, with me clinging to the wall, and the terrified little girl clinging to me, her hands still crushing my throat.

I looked up. Even in the vast darkness, where no light penetrated, I could see the top, so very, very, far away. No sense putting it off. I yanked my hand out of the cold fleshy goo of the wall, reached up, and plunged it back in, hoisting us up; we were now thirty centimeters closer.

* * * *

“You worthless bitch!” Deke yelled, hitting me in my broken jaw again. I cried and giggled, trying not to spill blood on the carpet. If I did, he might stop hitting me and make me clean it up. Some splashed on it anyway, but he was too angry to notice, which was good.

“I’m sorry! What should I do? Tell me!” I cried, having a hard time talking right.

“DO? You animal! Haven’t... haven’t you done enough!” He started sobbing, so I crawled over to him to touch him and make him feel better.

“Should I touch you some, Deke? Or do you want to hit me some more?” He stopped sobbing and stared at me.

“It doesn’t matter to you, does it?”

“I like them both, Deke. I want what you want.”

He became very very mad. He stood up and started slapping me in the face.

“What I WANT?” he yelled, slapping me again. My head started to feel dizzy and nice. There were pretty lights in my eyes. “I want my self-respect back! I want my friends back! I want my life back!”

“I’m sorry! I don’t know how to do that.”

“That’s right, slut. You only know how to take them away, don’t you?”

“I--I--don’t understand,” I said. I didn’t know how to do any of those things. I just knew how to do what I always knew.

“Of course you don’t, slut. You’re an idiot. You don’t understand anything. You don’t know even how close you are to death right now.”

“I don’t? Am I close?” I touched my jaw. “That’s not going to make me die. I know that. And my tummy feels really good, and so do my arms, but not good enough to make me die.”

“No? How about this?” He opened his power knife and put it into my chest. My breath got all hot and felt good. I looked at him and giggled, then laughed when my mouth made bubbles from the blood that came up from inside me.

“Thank you!” I groaned. “I’ve never felt that good, not with anything you’ve done to me before, Deke. Please! Do it again!”

He must have been happy, then, because he did it some more times, until I got sleepy and went to sleep. I was a little sad that I had to die, because I couldn’t make Deke happy anymore. But if he wanted me to die, then I wanted to, too.

When I opened my eyes again, I was lying on the floor. I didn’t know if I died or not, but I didn’t think so, because it felt like Deke’s floor.

There were two men in the room, and I could see it was Stays and Cut.

“October 28, Stozi. You owe me five hundred.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll pay. I never figured Deke would go so fast, though. And look at his head! He musta put the thing on overload before pulling the trigger.” Stays laughed. “NATech won’t be getting anything from his dental records, huh, Cut?”

“Geez, you’re a real comedian, Stozi. Show some respect for the dead. Just hurry up and plant the sniff. NATech’s been put on hold, but they’ll be here in a hour.”

“Okay, gimme a minute. How about the girl?”

“I dunno. I think she’s dead.” Cut walked close and kicked me in the ribs, making me all tingly. “Hey! You alive, princess?”

I opened my eyes and smiled a little. The smile made my jawbone move around, so I smiled more. Cut liked me, because he smiled back.

“You’re a tough little trigger. Tougher than Deke.” He jerked his head. “Your owner’s dead, princess. Hey, Stozi! Finish up and help me haul this girl out to the hov!”

“All finished. Deke’s contract is in-val-id, Cut. NATech finds this sniff, and alla Deke’s creds end up in with Harting in less than a week.” Stays walked next to Cut and looked at me. He wasn’t smiling. “She’s still alive? Tough nut. Think she’ll live if we carry her outta here?”

Deke shrugged. “Maybe yeah, maybe no. She lives, we got a nice little trick to give away again. She dies, we dump her inna ditch, no loss. Here, you grab her arms.”

“Shouldn’t we give her something for the pain? She’s gotta be hurtin!”

“Are you kidding, Stozi? She gets off on this. Now get her arms.”

They lifted me up and carried me away from my very first owner. But I didn't mind too much. Cut said Deke was dead, so I would need a new owner. And the way they carried me made me feel warm and pretty all over.

* * * *

I looked up and saw the edge only a half-meter above me. I yanked my freezing, aching feet out of the wall, then jammed them in again, the disgusting squish making my stomach retch. Bunched up, I now pulled out a hand and shot it toward the ledge. The girl still had her stranglehold on me, it never easing once during the endless climb.

My hand slapped on the surface and my fingers scrabbled for a purchase. Another fissure had opened up in the air just beyond the ledge, so I grabbed it and pulled us both over and out of the crevasse mouth.

I rolled onto my back and felt the grip on my neck ease as the girl released me. I felt her come close and lay beside me.

"Thank you, Abby," she said. "I'm sorry for everything that I've done. I..." I placed two fingers on her soft lips.

"Shush, Princess," I whispered. The darkness was relenting, and I could make out a vague form, even while I saw her perfectly with the eyes inside me. "I forgive you. You cannot be responsible for what you were made for, but I forgive you."

She smiled, and I saw tears of genuine happiness sparkle in her eyes.

"I--I'm ready to join you, now."

"And I'm ready to accept you. I..." I choked, feeling the tears in my eyes. "I would be honored to have you as a part of me."

She rose up on her knees and held out her hands, as did I. I looked at her in the early dawn light. She had always been beautiful. Now, with an inner peace, she was more than beautiful. She was real.

We touched hands and I was alone. All around me, the fissures were closing... no, healing... as the light poured across the gently rolling landscape.

I looked back at the fissure we had fallen into, watching it slowly mend its torn sides together, closing the wound. There at the end, I remembered that it was I, Abigail, who had been strangling the girl, not the other way around. We had in some way exchanged positions during our fall, and I had used the girl's body to climb out, with the girl in my body holding on. Looking at myself in the pinkish dawn light, I knew I was myself again. And now the girl was myself again, too. "I forgive you," I whispered. She was at peace now, and I was at peace with her.

Her memories, which had kept me occupied as I climbed, were now a part of me. That meant that my mind was whole. I had survived. I closed my eyes for a moment, then opened them again.

* * * *

"Doctor Barrett!" I heard Kate's excited voice calling out.

"What is it, Kate? Baby doing somersaults?"

"No! It's Abby! She's awake!" Which wasn't entirely true. I was awake in Healer's Sleep. It felt nearly

as odd as it always had before, but it also felt magnificently, gloriously, undeniably real. I heard Barrett's gruff, friendly voice beside my bed.

"So it would seem. Welcome back, Abigail. We're going to take our time getting you out of Healer's Sleep. And we have plenty of time, because the reintegration was a complete success. So if you don't mind," he added with a dry tone, "please stay put and do not pull any midnight wanderings like the first time, okay?"

I absently nodded my head in agreement, then lost the ability as soon as I realized. Kate gasped, and I heard Barrett chuckle.

"That's about what I expected. You are something else, young lady. You really are something else."

Maybe so. But best of all, I was no one else. I was me.

Interlogue One

The duck had had quite enough. As coffee tables went, it was one of the lighter ones, and it even had a very convenient drawer hidden away in its design. But the legs kept shimmying and getting caught in the micro fissures and bumps and minor imperfections that made up the floor of the puterverse. Keeping it clean was a constant source of bother, too. The ion particles were always marring the crystalline tricode surface of the table, demanding to be dusted. And while watching a duck dust a coffee table was hilarious to observers and casual passersby, it was no fun for the duck.

He flopped down from the now spotless tabletop and continued his journey, the soft harness tugging at his progress as the table groaned and shimmied behind him.

Deciding on a change of waddle, the duck dipped his head and went down to level one access. Groucho had been spreading the joke around that he was pulling the coffee table because the thought of a duck pulling two end tables was ludicrous. After awhile, though, it wouldn't sound so ludicrous to Groucho, and it was only a matter of time before he--the duck--would be pulling around two end tables and the coffee table. Probably a whole living room ensemble. The weight was not a problem, but dusting would take hours. So to avoid the whole fiasco, the duck went to level one, where Groucho never went, eschewing it as steerage class, and therefore quite beneath him.

The duck dove through a flooded tunnel filled with microfish, then reemerged at level one. The region was a wide-open, public region, called the Marketplace. Although hundreds of cubic kilometers in size, it was comfortably filled with people, none of whom had ever seen a duck access. The first to point him out was a young boy being tugged along by his mother.

"Hey, Mom! Look! It's a duck! I thought you said only people could access!"

The mother looked at the duck, who patiently stood still to be inspected, then pulled the boy away, not trying to explain to the child something she didn't understand, nor wished to. The duck quacked and moved on. The surface here was under constant access and was bumpier, making progress erratic.

Many others passed by in the next few minutes, but all ignored him. The next person to stop was also a child. She was alone. She stepped up in front of him and knelt, a large smile brightening her already cheerful amber glow.

"You're a duck!" While this statement might have seemed a waste of time to adults, to the duck this was opportunity. He quacked enthusiastically, seeing in her an interest in exploring the odd and out of place.

"Why are you pulling a coffee table around? Is that harness too tight? Where did you come from? I've

never seen an animal in the puterverse before, and I've been accessing by myself since I was six and I'm nine now, going on ten. Daddy says I should learn as much as I can 'bout the puterverse, 'cause it OH!"

The girl rose from her knees and went to the coffee table, where a glowing jewel had appeared. She picked it up, then set it back down quickly.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't touch things that aren't mine." The duck slipped out of his harness and jumped up on the table, quacking all the while and fluffing his wings.

"I said I'm sorry! It's just that it was so pretty, and..." she frowned as the duck continued his noise making and feather ruffling. A slow smile spread across her face as she understood. "You're... you're giving this to me, aren't you?"

For as much as a duck could quack yes, the duck quacked yes. The girl began smiling even more.

"Oh! Thank you! Just wait until I show Mommy and Daddy!" She frowned again. "But how do I get it out of the puterverse?" The duck waited quietly while the girl tried to solve her dilemma, thoughtfully pulling at her lip. They made for quite the spectacle, a duck and little girl at a coffee table in the middle of a busy marketplace. But almost no one paid attention. They were too busy trying to keep normalcy in their lives to deal with the messiness of the unusual.

Finally, the girl smiled. "I know! I'll keep it in a special hiding place in the puterverse, then carry it with me when I'm here. Thank you, Mr. Duck! Thank you very much!" She picked up the jewel and stood. She bowed in thanks once more to the duck, then began skipping away.

She'd gone no more than a dozen meters when suddenly there was a flash, and her aura began to brighten. She stumbled, then caught herself. She stood still, enthralled by the light pouring from her body, then ran back to the duck. Her face was a mixture of excitement and fear.

Just as she reached the duck, he took flight. She jumped up to catch him, just missing him. He flew up high, keeping an eye on the brightly glowing girl who looked up, watching him. He swooped down and flew over her head, again, just beyond her reach. He continued to make low flybys, apparently to torment the girl, who was near tears. Finally, out of anger because the duck was now quacking at her when he flew by, she jumped very high, giving no thought to landing. Immediately, she became airborne, and took after the duck.

It was only a few seconds before she realized what she was doing, but she had already traveled several hundred meters and she squealed with fright. Her squeals very quickly became shouts of joy as she learned to use this exciting new ability. The duck flew up to a high construct, the girl giving chase, laughing all the time. They landed together on a ledge. Far below them they could see the tiny dots and blurs of thousands of people.

"Wow! This is so rammin'! I was about to cry when the jewel broke. And then I was mad when you teased me. But now I'm not sad or mad at all! You gave me the jewel so I could fly! I can't believe I'm really flying! And I know where I am, too!" She started pointing out various landmarks, her heels kicking playfully against the construct. "There's my school's access point, and Daddy's work is over there, and Millie's point is there, and my home's way over there, and the Quantum is that way, and... and... this is so 'nary! Oh, thank you thank you thank you thank you!"

She reached down and hugged the duck, who struggled and flapped in her enthusiastic grip. She released him and slid off the ledge, plummeting a hundred meters before pulling out of her dive and racing off to explore a suddenly new and fantastic world. The duck was able to follow her bright pinpoint of light for several kilometers before it dashed behind a tall spire, circled once, then continued on toward her home's

access point.

It was ten minutes before the duck finally returned and harnessed himself up, and another half-hour before someone decided to investigate him. This time it was a group of ten children, on a field day with a gifted teacher who still saw the wonder in everything around her, who still appreciated the odd and out of place. She laughed and clapped her hands when she saw the duck, seeming to understand the joke.

“Here, children, look at this! It’s a duck! In the puterverse! Why don’t we find out what he’s doing, and why he’s pulling a coffee table. Gather close...”

Interlogue Two

“In the name of our God, to whom all hearts are open and from whom no secrets are hidden, Amen.” The pastor’s voice was warm, soft, and comforting, in perfect harmony with the ancient desert chapel. Before me was an elegantly simple altar, and above it, an elegantly simple cross.

I knelt at the communion rail beside the pastor and held my folded hands tight to my chest. Bowing my head, I began.

“Have pity on me, O God, in keeping with your mercy. In keeping with your unlimited compassion, wipe out my rebellious acts. Wash me thoroughly from my guilt, and cleanse me from my sin. I admit that I am rebellious. My sin is always in front of me. I have sinned against you, especially you. I have done what you consider evil. So you hand down justice when you speak, and you are blameless when you judge.

“Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy.”

“The Lord will have mercy,” the pastor assured me. “As a Christian brother, I will hear your private confession, sister.”

When I finished my confession of the past seven centuries, the pastor stood up slowly, perhaps because of his age, perhaps because the magnitude and uniqueness of my confession weighed heavy on him I would be the first Shard who remembered and repented the sins of her =false personas. False personas, but real sins. Miss DeChant and Princess had called me the soulner, the one who owns the soul. It was way past time I took care of it properly. He place a hand on my shoulder.

“Jesus tells us, his followers, ‘Whenever you forgive sins, they are forgiven.’ Our Lord has authority over death, sin, and the devil, and has paid for your sins and the sins of the world by his death on the cross. Do you believe this?”

“I believe. I believe in God, the Father Almighty. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. I believe in the Holy Spirit.”

His moved his hands and placed them on my head.

“Because of the promise, and by the command of our Lord and Savior Jesus, I forgive you all your sins. You are God’s dear child, and will receive the crown of eternal life.”

I felt a burden lifted from my back, and my heart was filled with comfort and joy.

“Now, Lord, you are allowing your servant to leave in peace as you promised. My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for all people to see. He is a light that will reveal salvation to the nations and bring glory to your people Israel.”

“Go in peace. The Lord will be with you.”

Chapter Six

Saturday, December 27, 2679

“Access, Abigail Wyeth, level sixty-four.” I requested clearly, and immediately the phase hov was filled with water. The water splashed to the sides and disappeared, leaving the puterverse in its wake. It looked much as I’d left it, though somewhat dimmer and less exciting since I was limiting myself. I knew Chris could access higher than sixty-four, but it suited me to come here. I wanted to make a point.

I had a definite purpose here, so I waved off the duck--not before I noticed he was still dragging the coffee table, though--and bounced off my toes and into the air. I hung in the air a moment, debating which wings to use, then decided on my softer ones. They came out of my back and attached to my arms. As I gained altitude, I left a twinkling energy trail behind me, marking my progress as I swooped and glided toward the Quantum.

As I soared over the landscape, a black wall would occasionally spot me and try to prevent access. The walls at this level were very few and very powerful. I could have activated my UTC key and gone undetected, but chose not to. Not that it mattered. The three walls that did intercept me just melted away at my approach, turning into a liquid that poured down their obsidian sides, evaporating before the ionic fluid even hit the surface. The effect would be carried all the way down to the lowest access level, and anyone who entered the puterverse in the next few hours before Chris repaired the damage would be in for a rare treat indeed.

I reached the Quantum in less than ten minutes and set down close to the near bank. I looked around, more out of habit than caution. I was alone.

“Time marker, please.”

“Sergeant Moss reports units one through four and seven are in transit and will arrive at alpha target in twenty four minutes,” a pleasant male voice informed me. “Lieutenant Eyer reports units five, six, and eight are at standby, with departure for beta target in eleven minutes.” That last bit I knew, since I was with Jody.

I bounced up lightly again and took flight. This time, however, I chose not to use wings and instead remained vertical as I crossed the Quantum at a fairly quick clip. I’d been foolish to try sneaking over the last time. I’d seen the partial bridge, discovered the hidden access port, and heard all the stories of the agonizing death that struck anyone who so much as touched the awesome data river, and had assumed I couldn’t cross. Ah well, live and learn.

I was about halfway when Chris tried to stop me. Sheets of energy, the thickness of a two-dimensional line and moving at light speed, rocketed up from the river, with the purpose of slicing me to ribbons. I had already raised my defenses, and they shattered and scattered as low energy red, blue and purple laser light when they hit my feet. A huge wall of data, racing at me from upstream and twenty meters high, engulfed me from my right side. I continued through, unaffected save for a blurred vision as it cascaded off me. A second, and then third data wave smashed into me, having the same effect, which was none. I suppose I could have just ascended to a couple hundred meters and avoided the whole thing, but like the obsidian barriers on the shore, I chose not to. I wanted to send Chris a message.

He apparently got the message, because he was waiting for me when I reached the far bank a few minutes later. He hadn’t changed, and even had his smile firmly planted. Planted firmly and held in place with great difficulty. Even in the puterverse, even with non-organic lifeforms, the eyes remained the windows to the soul. And these windows showed an evil creature that hated me more with each passing

moment..

“I didn’t expect to see you again, John,” he said just as I landed a few meters from him on the flat black ground. “You left your friends at home this time? Are they dead, or don’t you need them anymore?”

“Wrong on three counts. My name’s not John. It’s Abigail. And Alan and Mike are fine and I do need them. They’re my friends, and a girl needs her friends.” I paused, wanting to time this out carefully. “I am going to destroy you, Chris.”

“You mean like the last time?” He laughed. “Well, let’s get started.” He raised his arms and his hands began to shimmer as the energy gathered.

“No. Not yet.” I killed the energy build up in his hands, then reversed polarity feed in the rest of his body. He flashed from black to bright yellow and was thrown back. He landed hard with a grunt, then scrambled to his feet. I saw the fear in his eyes, and felt my beast coming awake. I could have easily surrendered to it and destroyed him then, but held back. As I’d told him, it wasn’t time.

“You bastard! What did you do?”

“Better work on your cussing, Chris. You’re using the wrong sexual vulgarities. All I did was channel a packet of UTC into your hands, then flash arced it to the power coupling between you and the ground, using your body as a conduit. It’s easy. See?” I sent another packet and he flashed bright yellow again and screamed.

“Did you hear me, Chris? I said UTC. All this time, that teeny gob of binary code you call a brain was been thinking how wonderful it would be to get the secret of stable, bound trinary code from me. Stable BTC? Sorry, that’s an oxymoron. But unbound trinary code? Stable as can be. And you’re the one who gave it to me, you and LeClaire. He suckered you into waiting for a mock KME to mature. And all the while, the real one, planted outside Miss DeChant’s mind, kept developing UTC. Not to give to me, but to *not* give to you. Understand, Chris? LeClaire had you figured out ever since the day you stole the Class of 51’s research. You’ve been playing the fool for over four centuries.” I laughed at him. “Looks like we finally found something you’re good at!”

Oh, I had him ticked off! I was using my obnoxious, jarring teen voice tuned perfectly, thanks mainly to my memories and skills as Princess. And, again thanks to her, I knew exactly how to stand and move and inflect my tone to further infuriate him.

He swore at me again, explicitly, vilely. And with that expletive, we both knew I had won, for he had been anatomically correct.

“Hurts, doesn’t it, Chris? But don’t worry. You’ve got some time still. If I destroy you now, then millions will suffer from the sudden loss of dependency on you. So I’m going to keep you alive a little longer.”

“You have no control over me!” Black tendrils sprouted from the ground to embed themselves into me, but withered and died as they touched me.

“No? Fine. Think that if it makes you feel better. But it doesn’t change the fact that I’m going to use you just like you used me. First, though, I’ll need to tell you what I’m going to do, so you take the appropriate actions.” He waited silently, hating me but still hoping I would make a mistake.

“I’ve still got some preliminary things to do, Chris,” I continued. “I’m going to take back my friends at the concentration camp. We’ll be starting that operation in less than half an hour. While they’re recovering, our unit will coordinate the attacks that will begin dismantling NATEch Supreme, your little real-world

puppet. We don't need to destroy NATEch. Just wound it in the right places. Finally, I'll be coming back here to put you out of our misery. So, did you get all that, Chris? Or do I need to use smaller words?"

I'd repeat what he told me, but I'm a lady. Suffice to say his response had very little value as far as content. For setting the mood, however, it was perfect. I'd really rattled his cage. I had hoped there was enough of the real Chris left that he'd act on emotion. He'd obviously done wonders with his application of pseudo trinary code into a living soul, because he still had plenty of emotion. He'd do anything to stop me, which was what I wanted.

"No wonder you can't get a date, Chris," I laughed, using that abrasive, teenager know-it-all laugh. He looked like he was going to explode with hate. If he had had veins, they'd be popping by the dozen. He was spewing out epitaphs, curses and pointless, crude insults. "Such language! And not very original, either. Well, time to go get my friends. Oh, before I go, let me give you something to keep you busy and out of trouble."

My steel wings shot out of my back with a sharp screech and I launched myself into the air. Black bolts pounded at me, but had no effect. Ignoring them, I started firing pulses of UTC-shielded plasma into the surrounding area, careful not to hit the Quantum. Everything my plasma stream hit erupted dozens of meters into the air, leaving behind huge chasms filled with molten energy that bubbled and dissolved the cohesiveness of Chris' black region. Satisfied that I'd started enough chaos, I swooped over him, smiling and waving.

"Catch ya' later, jerk! Don't forget to do what you're told!" I called out, and raced off across the Quantum, nimbly dodging his blasts, just to show him I could. When I last looked back, the area was brightly lit with red and brown, and the ion air was crackling with lightning. I hoped I hadn't done too much damage. I really did need Chris to help me if I was going to accomplish all I wanted. And it was a pretty large list.

At least I'd gotten the first item on the list straight. Chris was practically out of mind with fury and hatred for me. If I was lucky, I could count on him being just a little over enthusiastic with his attacks and reactions for the next few hours. If I was lucky.

I terminated access and got out of my seat. Everyone was wisely waiting outside the hov for me to finish. I opened up the rear loading bay and stepped out. Gary Parkins, the pilot, slipped by me to begin the prephase sequence. Jody and the others were idly busy, leaning against the other PDQs, checking their equipment, and swatting bugs. I flashed a smile and gave Jody a thumbs up.

"Mission accomplished, Ma'am!"

"Thank you, Sergeant Marks." She motioned an arm and everyone began embarking. "You think he'll be off balance for the duration of the mission?"

"Yeah, that's a pretty safe bet. Can you still see my ears? If they're not burned off, they should be beet red from his language. And in front of an impressionable kid, too!" I laughed--but a pleasant laugh this time.

"Lieutenant?" Parkins' voice called from the cockpit. "Ready in two minutes."

"Thanks, Gary. Suit up and buckle in, Abby. It's show me time!"

"Close," I laughed, following her into the hov and securing the hatch. Behind us, three PDQ attack hoves, identical to ours, were already floating quietly, waiting for us to lead. Beyond them were two empty troop transports. They would be leaving with us, but would travel slower, so as to arrive ten minutes after our

initial assault.

I wriggled into my upper body armor and swung my gunbelt around my hips, buckling it securely. While the MacDonald phaser charged, I put on my headset, then took a seat at the terminal. Jody took the copilot's chair. I turned toward the rear to face my troops. With Sergeant Moss setting up the feint in Melbourne with Company B, and Jody coordinating the two forces, I had command of Company C platoons. Sergeant was my new rank, but the job was the same. I tapped the headset, signaling the other hobs to listen in.

"We're leaving in one minute. We do this by the numbers, and we'll be fine. Our primary target is the prisoner barracks. It'll be just after two in the morning, but the camp will be on full alert. Takari, you and Marcy will come in on the surface from the west to draw fire. Scott and I will pop up through the minefield four minutes later near the cutting mills, then swing around to flank Forncheth. Marcy, your people have the northwest and southwest towers. Takari, you've got the middle. Scott takes the other two towers, and we'll take out the center and commandant's quarters. Transports arrive six minutes after second wave. Our people will be heavily suppressed and lethargic. They'll be susceptible to commands, so use a firm voice to get them on board as fast as you can. We should be able to neutralize the camp, but backup from the Melbourne garrison will arrive about twenty minutes after initial engagement. That gives us only ten minutes to load the transports and get them clear."

"We're ready, Sergeant" Parkins had opened and armed the phasing switch.

I covered the mike for a second. "Thanks, Parkins." I spoke back into the headset. "Keep your powder dry, dogs! Let's go get our people back!" As inspirational speeches go, it was pretty lame. But I meant it.

"Phasing... five... four... three... two... one..." I felt the familiar dryness in my throat and eyes as the phase field permeated every molecule of the craft and our bodies. We were in a deep jungle canyon, so rather than try negotiating it, we just accelerated while phasing. To me, it looked like a mishmash of rock and earth, with occasional patches of near normal lighting and plant life as we scooted in and out of the twisting canyon passages. Parkins seemed to find some sort of order though, because he calmly made several minor adjustments, then abruptly pushed forward on the yoke. The craft dove and blended with the rock and we were on our way, cutting through the planet at close to 18,000 kilometers per hour. If all went well, we'd have Aaron and Susie and the rest of the Third back in forty-five minutes.

Needing to kill time, and wanting to monitor Jody's conversations with Moss, I activated the terminal, staying outside the puterverse, but listening in. Kiki was waiting for me.

"Hiya, Abby!" Always the bouncy one, was my Kiki.

"Hey, Kiki! How's Mike?" Ever since Chris had nailed him with a PTC virus, Mike had been slow to recover. He worsened all the time that I did, and only now seemed to be getting back to normal. He and I were somehow linked. As I fared, so did Mike.

"Ask him yourself!" She seemed quite pleased, as she should be. I was all but useless after our botched attack on Chris, so Kiki nursed him back to health, making heavy use of the duplicate coding of Mike I stored in secure locations. How many times have you been told? Always keep good backups. Because I did, Kiki was able to sustain Mike through multiple trinary transfusions.

"Mike?" I asked excitedly. At least, I was excited inside. Because of the phasing, it sounded more like I was a gigawatt short of a full charge.

"Hey, kid!" Mike's abrasive, sharp voice sounded like a choir of angels. "'Bout time we got on our feet,

huh? Not too smart, leaving everything in the pixie's hands. Ow! Hey, knock it off!" I couldn't see into the puterverse while phasing, but I could easily imagine Kiki punching him.

"I'm not a pixie, you jerk! I'm almost as tall as Abby now!" Which was true. Since the attack, Kiki had begun taking on a more normal size, perhaps to better work with us, but I had a suspicion it was to better appeal to Mike. In the slang of my early life, these two were becoming an item.

"Knock it off, you two. You can beat each other's brains out after the snatch. Kiki! How's the place look?"

"Chris just tipped them off, and they're on alert, Abby. There's a total complement of six officers, eighty-six enlisted, twenty-three of them in sick bay." She paused then spoke with uncertainty.

"Twenty-three? That can't be right. There must be some sort of epidemic there."

"Yeah," said Mike dryly. "An epidemic of laziness. Units with low morale normally have high sick call numbers, and prison camp guards aren't exactly cream of the crop, even for NATEch. You'll pick up the finer workings of raid planning with practice, Kiki." He actually sounded like he cared.

"Uh-oh, Abby! The Melbourne garrison is also responding. Chris just scrambled them, and they'll be on the move in ten minutes."

"Bet you a dollar they won't be, Kiki," I mumbled quietly. And tiredly. Ultrahigh speed phasing really beat on a person my age, making me feel like five times my age.

"I'm not taking that bet! That's why Sergeant Moss will be hitting them in five minutes. That's great timing!" she said admiringly. "How did you know, Abby?"

"Like Mike said, practice. Hey, guys, I'm getting pretty ragged out. Sorry I can't spend more time. Kiki, give your reports and updates to Jody. I'll talk to the both of you after the raid, but Mike? I could use a partner during the raid. Are you up to it?"

"Nah, Abby, I'm not. I'm just a sucked dry dweeb without an ounce of energy." he said sarcastically.

"Geez! Why don't you gouge out my eyes, too? Of course I'm ready!" I heard a few clicks in my headset as he switched over. He laughed loudly in my ear, making me wince. "Are you ready for me?"

"Probably not. I'll just have to lower my standards, I guess." I heard Kiki's laugh in the background. "Wish us luck."

"Good luck, Abby!" Kiki called out.

"You don't need luck," Mike whispered seductively in my ear. "You've got me."

I grinned and signed off. He was definitely on the mend. I checked the timer, set the PDQ charge to first out, then took a nap. It wouldn't help much, but in combat I take any and all advantages.

I'd no sooner closed my eyes than it seemed they were open. A glance at the timer told me I'd dozed for ten minutes, meaning it was show time. The loud chime that punched clean through my head emphasized the point. Mercifully, it was a short blast.

"You awake, Abby?" Jody's voice called to me.

"Just now, Jody. Status." I felt myself giving way to my beast. The thrill of combat began to drive the pounding of my heart, and the excitement ran like a field of electricity just above my skin. Jody seemed a little taken aback by my serious tone, but adjusted to it fairly quickly.

“Jack started his front assault one minute ago. We’re coming up underneath the minefield. Moss has tied up the Melbourne garrison, but they’re starting to withdraw to reinforce the compound here. We go hot in just under three minutes.”

“Acknowledged. Arming PDQ.” I flipped through the switches on my left console and activated the power supplies located in each of the eight chairs my dogs and I were in. Each one had a micro phase unit for Phased Deployment Queue tactical attacks. When triggered, the phased chair shot through the hull, deploying the dog into immediate combat formation while the hov maintained attack speed. If in the air, which was almost always the case, the chair’s micro power supply had enough reserve to activate the emergency restraint field around the occupant, allowing for a survivable landing. If deployed underground, there was a small booster to lift the chair and occupant free before release. This was the more dangerous tactic. Although you were protected from enemy fire until the last instant, if the on-chair gyro were damaged, or you PDQed too deep, it made for a mighty short combat tour, complete with nasty ending, when the phase unit drained the power pack and you became one with Mother Earth.

The forty-second chime sounded, bringing me back to the here and now. I banged out the final authorization codes for phased deployment, snapped the safety off on my slug gun, then settled in. About twenty minutes later, the forty seconds were over and the deployment klaxon sounded.

The port in the front of the hov snapped from muddy, half-seen black to crystal clear black with stars, and the ERF kicked in, jamming me to the chair. It was a good acronym for the emergency restraint field; that’s the exact sound you make when it crushes the air out of your lungs. The chair jarred violently to the left and suddenly the stars were all around me as I and the chair cleared the hull.

The view was beautiful, but brief. The gravgyro woke up and righted the chair at the same moment the phase and ERF fields clicked off. Exposed to the environment, I felt the chilly wind whipping around me as I plummeted to the ground less than two hundred meters below. I had perhaps five seconds of free fall before the ERF activated again to protect me from impact. As rapidly as possible, I looked all around me, assessing the scenario.

Beacons from the chairs showed all fifteen of my people. They were all above me, except Scott, the platoon leader in the other PDQ hov. The hoves had come out of the ground in near vertical flight, allowing for tight grouping on the ground without piling us on top of one another. There always remained the chance of a chair landing on you, but no-one ever guaranteed war was a safe game. I looked back up in the sky.

The two attack hoves had already broken formation and were swooping around for strafing runs, their ion exhaust trails painting the sky with the lightest of brush strokes. Unlike the hov that Susie and I had wrecked in Glendale, these compact, rugged ships were very maneuverable and quick in sustained flight. Only lightly shielded, they relied on a good pilot and their three forward rapid-fire lasers to keep them healthy. It helped that the ion exhaust from their high-powered engines magnetized the atmosphere slightly, keeping the area blocked from microsat observation. The PDQ hoves were the reason we could even attempt a mission this big. They’d do fine. I looked down.

There was extensive combat to my left, and blackness on my right. Directly beneath me was also black, black ground. Good, I thought gratefully. I hated going through a building. You either got caught above the floor, or the ERF kicked on and off so much as it hit the roof, ceiling and at least one floor, that all you were good for when you got free of the chair was crawling around on your hands and knees, making a mess of the floor with your most recent meal.

The ground was coming up fast, so I drew my gun and sat back. The ERF kicked in and suddenly I was on the ground. It was great not having your spine liquidated when you instantly went from 180 kilometers

per hour to zero. But it was very disorienting not feeling anything, too. I'd been doing quick deployment with an ERF field for almost three years, and I was still thrown off by the change. The ERF field dropped a final time, the chair straps popped free, and I rolled off the chair to my right, using it as a shield.

I needn't have bothered. No one was paying any attention to us, they were so caught up in the fight they were already in. Takari and Marcy were doing a great job, but it was still sloppy of Forncheth's troops to leave the backdoor this wide open.

There were a lot of thumps in the night as the chairs slammed into the ground around me. I knew I was safe where I was, but I didn't want to stay where I was. The sooner this battle was engaged, the sooner it was over, the beast told me, and I agreed. Looking up to see where the chairs were coming down, I rose to my feet and moved rapidly toward the building that protected us somewhat from the center of the battle line. I motioned my arm for everyone to follow me and took the lead.

By the time I'd made the building, all sixteen of us were grouped, with Corporal Gallen at my right. I expected the building to be the commandant's quarters and it was. I looked back over my shoulder and could make out the dimly illuminated, unmanned towers located on the northeast and southeast corners of the compound. Again, Forncheth was being sloppy. Just because the prisoners were under suppression during the night was no excuse to leave the towers unmanned. They were too good an attack point for whoever controlled them. He'd think of it soon, too, so they had to go.

"Corporal, take out those towers first. Four for each tower, then back here in three minutes. Go."

He moved off, splitting his group, leaving me with my seven troops. I could make out their faces in the backwash of the explosions. Eyes bright and guns at the ready, they were eager, but untested. The ones who lived the night would be real dogs.

"Okay. We're looking to strip off their flanks and split their force. Make it fast, keep low, and keep advancing. The transports will be here in four minutes. Stay near each other, but not close. I don't want a puncher to take out more than one." They looked nervously at each other. As well trained as they were, they were only now realizing this was for keeps. Some of them might not be going home.

Leaving them with that thought to keep them on their toes, I ran around the side of Forncheth's quarters, stopping at the corner closest to the fight. I hitched an eye around.

The combat was going well. Forncheth had crowded his men too closely, and they were in each other's way, able to bring only a fraction of their firepower to bear. They were divided into two groups, Forncheth and about fifty grunts, and a smaller pocket of fifteen closer to us. All four hogs were coming across the lines, enfiling them with coordinated strafing runs. Though they did little real damage to Forncheth's entrenched position, it was making it warm for them. I could probably have just watched and done nothing, that's how well Takari and Marcy were doing. But that wasn't what I joined up for.

I swept a hand in advancing motions, pointing out cover at various points forward of our position. "We're going to take the smaller group. Head out there in twos, constant firing. DON'T wait for a target to show, just fire. First, though," I jerked a thumb at the building, "you two in the back, Zollers and Akagi, punch this out. Let's MOVE!"

I broke into a run, directly toward the nest. They were so absorbed in the front that it was five seconds before I was spotted, and even then the shock of our full-tilt advance gave me another two seconds before they reacted. By then, I had closed to twenty meters, closer than I thought I'd get. I border shifted my energy gun to my right hand, then yanked out my slug gun. By that time, one of the soldiers had whipped his slug gun around to fire.

I hesitated just a fraction of time to make sure my shot was good, so he fired first. It spattered dirt onto my boots as the slug drove into the ground under my feet. I squeezed off my shot and he dropped. Not waiting for more targets, I rapid-fired four more times, then dove behind a covered pile of metal parts. I was joined by two others, Brachmann and Vetter.

“Both of you, pull out a puncher and set to practice mode, proximity detection at five meters. Kelly, you’re first. Throw it straight up about three meters when I tell you to.” I switched to headphones. “Mike, I’m stuck here for a few seconds. Guard my ass, will you?”

“And a pretty...” He cut off at my growl. “You got it. I’m patched through to all four hov’s now, and have a solid image.”

“Good.” There was a double explosion as Forncheth’s place went up and the southeast tower came down. They were joined about two seconds later by the northeast tower. I saw some flashes at ground level where they hit. There were some NAtch men over there, after all.

“Gallen. Report.”

“We’re just fine, Sergeant. Gimme another thirty...” A tone went off in the set.

“Vetter, NOW!” I yelled. The tone meant someone had armed a puncher and was just about to lob it at us.

Kelly started at my yell, then lobbed her puncher into the air. The three of us covered our ears and opened our mouths to avoid a wicked headache.

Her puncher exploded, making our ears pop. The concussion thudded hard against our bodies, and I heard them both grunt. I rose to a crouch and waited for the explosion as their puncher, blown back by the concussion, went off in their faces.

There was a flash and deafening thunderclap and I was on my feet. I caught a bit of the blast, but not enough to affect me. I covered the last twenty meters at a dead run. I could see some of the soldiers at Forncheth’s site begin firing toward us. Several screamed as our return fire found some marks.

I had covered half the distance to the nest when three of them stood up, dazed but still dangerous. I could have taken two with my slug gun, but maybe not three. I brought up the energy gun, set at sonic inducer. Even in the confusion of battle, a dozen things racing through my mind and four dozen people wanting me dead, I still appreciated the grim irony of using a sonic inducer on the soldiers who had used a similar technology on my friends.

The gun kicked slightly from the plasma recoil, and became very warm. The air in front of me shimmered and warped, distorting the faces of my three targets. Since I was still running at them, I was less than ten meters from them, closer to five. Even standing behind the gun, I felt a twinge of pain in my head and ears. The effect on the three soldiers in front of the gun was devastating.

The one on the right started jerking uncontrollably, throwing up all over himself. The one on the left suddenly dropped her gun and began clawing at her eyes, screaming with pain and delusional terror. But the middle one received the brunt of the charge, and his was the worst reaction of all.

He dropped his gun and stood there--to remain standing the last ever command his mind had given his body. I brought up my slug gun and took out the two flanking him, and he did nothing. He was completely oblivious to everything around him. Something inside me, a voice or sense I had gained from Princess, told me that he was no longer human. His body was alive, but his mind was dead. Like the

things that were grown at the NATech physiomanufacturing plants, he'd become a soulless lump of flesh, the way my body had been before I moved in. Though his vacant stare was drained of emotion, intelligence, or even self-awareness, the glassy eyes reflected perfectly the horror of what man could do to his fellow man when profit ruled motivation, and ambition was used as a conscience.

Now, however, was not the time for such musings. I vaulted over the low barricade and scrambled for some punchers. Finding five, I armed and tossed all of them in the direction of Forncheth. They detonated and I risked a quick peek over the lip of the barricade.

It was over. I had clearly over-planned the attack. I hadn't expected top shelf resistance from a prison camp brigade, but they should have put up more of a fight than this. A small warning bell sounded in my head, and I let it keep ringing. I'd learned long ago to listen to my instincts, and this new insight I'd received from my trigger persona seemed to enhance and sharpen it.

The headset snapped in my ears and Gallen's voice came on.

"Sergeant?" he asked cautiously. It was then that I remembered I'd put him on hold.

"Sorry about that, Scott. Things got hot here for a few seconds. Report."

"We've secured the area, and taken down both towers. We're moving in to the prisoner barracks after we make a final sweep."

"Do the final sweep, but stay out there, on your toes. I've got a hunch we're not done yet."

"Will do." The headset clicked off just as Jody walked up. She had stayed on board our hov to man the lasers and keep an eye on all of us.

"Something wrong, Abby?" she asked, having heard my exchange with Scott.

"I'm not sure, ma'am. Could be. This crowd was too easy. I love missions that are easy and hate ones that are too easy. I don't like it. We'd better bug out quick."

She had no reason to believe me other than my experience. Being a good officer, she counted that for a great deal. She nodded quickly and tapped the open circuit on her headset, giving her a channel to all personnel.

"Good work, gang, but it's not over. Prepare for an ambush. I want a split force, quad team scenario. Generate and hold the west and east perimeters. Scott, keep your teams on the east. Marcy, you hold the west. Takari, push the transport loading to maximum. Abby, you're the rover. All hov's ground and prepare"--

"No," I said, careful not to speak into the mike. "Keep 'em in the air, ma'am. When the attack comes, it'll be all out wicked, and the first few seconds will mean everything."

She considered briefly, then nodded. "Scratch that. Keep the hoves up and armed. You too, Gary. Put the lasers on auto, I'm staying on the ground. Bug-out scenario Yellow, thirty seconds after transport departure. Combat control to Sergeant Wyeth." She shut off the mike. "All yours, Abby."

We went over to Forncheth's hole, but there was nothing to learn from them, except maybe how brutal it was to be on the receiving end of five punchers. Forncheth was easy enough to identify; he was the smoldering lump with the colonel's insignia. I told Marcy to keep one quad here, then roam the perimeter with the second quad. Jody was making her way quickly to the prisoners barracks, located in the middle of the camp toward the north perimeter. A low, deep rumbling from that quarter indicated the arrival of

the transports. I called my teams and ran for the wreckage of Forncheth's headquarters, my two quads falling in behind.

"Mike?" I shouted into the set.

"Yo!" he snapped back.

"We're loading the transports now. Run a full sweep of the area. This is going too easy."

"Will do. Hang on for a second. Checking. All clear for one-hundred kilometer sphere. All clear for two hundred... three hundred... everything's fine for five hundred, Abby. There's a bunch of traffic after that, none of it seeming to be aimed at us."

That wasn't right. "What about Sergeant Moss's detachment? And the NAtch units in Melbourne?"

"They've followed our plan about right, Abby. Moss pulled out just after the attack began here, then circled around after drawing off the garrison attack hovers. He made a second attack, which drew the garrison hovers *back* to Melbourne, and Moss has engaged them in a withdrawal movement. He should disengage completely in three minutes."

It was all according to plan. The idea was to tell Chris we were hitting the prison camp, then hit the garrison at the Melbourne supply depot. Chris, having a devious mind and probably attributing the same thing to us, would assume I'd lied to him and that the attack here a feint and the Melbourne one real. When Moss pulled out, Chris would know I'd told the truth and commit his garrison to attacking us. Until Moss circled around, and then he'd think we'd either suckered him yet again or that we'd staged a dual attack, which was true. Since we knew, and he didn't, his indecision, aggravated by his emotional state, would give us enough edge to pull off both attacks despite the smaller force. It had worked for Lee eight hundred years ago, it would work for us. So why did I feel like I'd been the one who'd been suckered?

"Plant here, people. Use the wreckage for cover, but if the counterattack comes, everyone heads there on the double."

They were green, but they weren't scared. Everyone found a spot in the still smoldering wreckage, rifles up and charged. I felt a surge of pride. I hadn't trained them much--it was only three weeks since I'd been desharded (Did Princess have an insight when she called Miss DeChant by the name DeShard?)--but they were my dogs now. I hunkered down with them and waited.

Two minutes later, Jody came on through my private channel.

"Okay, we're almost complete, Abby. First one's loaded and leaving now. About ten more for the second. I'm going to clear the camp before phasing, though. No point in risking the phase mines when I don't have to. How's it look out there?"

"Quiet so far, ma'am. Maybe I was wrong. Either that or they're slow. Will you be starting personnel evac after the second transport leaves?" As I spoke, I noticed the first transport hover pulling out from behind the barracks and begin accelerating through the camp.

"Yeah. The less time we spend in this hole, the better."

This hole? Something started to scream at me. What? What was I missing? Jody was still talking.

"Okay. Number two's pulling out now. Mission accomplished, folks. Let's bug out of here. Begin evac scenario." The second transport began moving across the ruined compound. As soon as it was clear, we'd just have ourselves to worry...

“NO!” I shouted, making my people jump. “No! Abort evac scenario! All hovs maintain attack maneuvers and firing patterns. Transport Two, decelerate and return to prisoner barracks. All personnel evacuate the compound perimeter immediately! That is a combat order!” Though Jody was my officer, she had given me combat command, so my orders were carried out. My set clicked over to private, and a less than thrilled Jody broke in on the suddenly active channels.

“Explain yourself, Sergeant,” she said coolly. It was a measure of her trust in me that she did not countermand my orders. That didn’t mean she wasn’t going to jump all over me if I couldn’t give her a very compelling reason for my actions.

“Yes, ma’am. Wait one second, please.” I clicked off the mike and spoke to my dogs. “Clear out! Move quick to the west at least one kilometer. I’ll catch up. Kelly, you’re in command.”

“Yes, Sergeant!” Kelly’s voice was a little shrill, but she stayed calm. She turned to the others. “You heard her! Let’s go!” They took off, running, but not fleeing. I clicked the set back on.

“Sorry, ma’am. I think we’re getting away with the transports because the hovs are still airborne. NATech is monitoring their ion trails from space. As long as they’re in the air, they know we’re on the ground. Once they land, we’ll be ready to embark and bug out. That’s when they’ll blow the minefield under us.”

“I don’t buy that, Abigail. They’d kill the whole garrison here just to take out us? Not even NATech is that cold. And if they were, why not just blow it now?”

“They are that cold, ma’am. Remember who NATech really is. Young wants me dead. But since the hovs have been airborne the whole time, the same ion trails that mark where they are also disguise everything going on underneath. For all Chris knows, the battle is still raging, and I might be captured. That would give him the chance to get his hands on me and my trinary coding. That’s why I told him I had UTC knowledge, to make him hesitant to kill me out of hope of acquiring that knowledge. Once he knew Forncheth lost the fight, which he’d know as soon as the hovs landed, he’d give up on that and simply blow the place.”

“And your recall of the second transport hov?”

“Another indication that we’d won the battle. One might have made it out and we’d still stay. But if two get clear, we’d bug out as fast as we could.”

“As fast as we were just about to,” she acknowledged grimly. “So now what? We still haven’t bought ourselves much time. It’ll only be two or three minutes before he spots our people outside the ionized field and comes to the right conclusion.”

“I know. But that may be all we need. Mike? You there?”

“Hey, you said to stick around. Lemme guess. You want me to start blowing the mines in counterproductive patterns?”

“Bingo. Use asymmetrical blasts to nullify the effects of the explosions as much as possible. Try to avoid a chain reaction.”

“Well, duh!” he smart mouthed back. “I’m on it. You get out of there.”

“I’m already going.” I was, too, having gotten free of the wreckage and heading west at a fast trot. “Lieutenant? Take your group out with the transport. It’ll be a little tight, but...”

“They’re already squeezing in now, Abby. I’ll be joining you in less than a minute.”

“Ma’am! Please get on the transport! There’s no point in risking...”

“And what army are you in, Sergeant? As commanding officer, would you get on the transport?”

Of course I wouldn’t, and she knew it. I braked and started running for the prisoner barracks. “All right, ma’am. Hold the transport until I get there. We’ll take out to the west as the hov leaves. We should be able to get clear before Young decides to blow the minefield.” She didn’t argue, knowing I’d use the same in-my-shoes tactic she’d just used on me. As second in command, I’d desert her only if it meant saving the lives of my people.

I was almost there when the ground shook violently, knocking me off balance. Mike was detonating the phase mines deep beneath us. Detonated all at once, they could turn this place into a very deep, very hot crater. And although individually they still packed a wallop, activity above ground could continue, disturbed only by occasional upheavals. I regained my balance and picked up my pace. If Chris spotted Mike blowing the mines, he’d know we’d figured out his tactics and would set off the others. He might just tire of the whole thing and blow it up anyway, although I expected the possibility of acquiring UTC would hold him a little longer.

Jody had just finished closing up the rear cargo hatch when I rounded the last corner of the barracks. She spotted me, said something into her set and took out after me. I braked and started back the way I had come. The hov turned slowly and began ambling slowly toward the center of camp. They were obviously going slow to give us time to clear the compound, but there was no point waiting in the dead center of a death trap.

Jody fell in beside me, loping easily. I was in fairly good shape, but I’d only been a going concern for three weeks, and I didn’t have all my conditioning. Also, the long, ultrahigh speed phase had drained a lot out of me. As a consequence, the running was starting to hurt. I was gasping and my face was dripping sweat even in the cool summer night air. Underneath my armor, my burning lungs seemed to radiate heat outward, soaking my slick body sheathe. Fortunately, my legs were still up to the task, so I kept up with Jody, although I sounded like a cheap squeeze box.

We ran across the compound to the west, the small fires and starry night sky lighting our way. If it hadn’t been for the overwhelming urgency and my heaving, about-to-explode lungs, it would have been enjoyable. Overhead, flashing red and green lights flickered over the camp, the hoves continued their mock strafing runs, firing at long destroyed enemy positions. I shuddered at the thought of the carnage being wreaked on the corpses of our enemy. We were about one hundred meters clear of the destroyed perimeter when my set crackled and Mike came on.

“He’s starting to blow the minefield, Abby! Kiki’s changing the manual override codes as fast as she can, but he’s getting through! You’ve got maybe two minutes before he starts the chain reaction!” As if to underscore the warning, the ground lifted a few centimeters, and a deep rumble sounded. It was followed almost immediately by another tremor.

“All hoves and personnel!” Jody yelled into her set, meaning she’d either heard Mike’s message or deduced what the tremors meant. “Emergency evac! Land, load and bug out! Ninety seconds!”

Immediately the hoves broke off their pattern and banked away from the camp, descending at a reckless speed and angle. Ninety seconds simply wasn’t enough time to land and load, but they were going to try. There was a roar as our PDQ Hov shot over us and landed about half a kilometer from us. In the clear air, it was possible to see several silhouettes outlined against the light spilling from the already lowering cargo ramp.

They took Jody's orders seriously. The ramp hadn't even touched the ground and they began piling in. Their movements were quick and orderly, a credit to their unit. Unfortunately, they were moving a little too quickly for us. Jody and I wouldn't be able to reach them before they finished loading.

"Hov Yellow One loaded and phasing," we heard over the common channel. In emergency evac scenario, each hov acted as an independent unit, the pilot responsible only for his passengers. It may have sounded like an every man for himself philosophy, but there was really nothing that could be done to offer support to other hofs during a phased bug-out. They would continue to monitor channels, and would turn back at any distress call, but there was little point in risking lives when the other hofs were probably just as safe.

"Yellow Three. Loading complete. Bugging out in ten seconds."

The hov in front of us was nearly loaded, and we were still two hundred meters away. All either of us had to do was speak into the mike and they'd wait for us. But with the ground shaking continuously now as Kiki fought her losing battle for control of the minefield, neither of us wanted to risk the unit.

"Yellow Four. Loading complete. Bugging out in ten seconds. Anyone have the Lieutenant?" Jody was gasping for breath now, too, but spoke calmly into the set.

"I'm taken care of, Gary. Get out of here."

"Will do, ma'am. See you at base."

The hatch was closing now, the ramp lifting slowly up. The hov pilot, Johnson, wasn't even waiting to secure, and had already started turning away from us. We were less than twenty meters now, but the craft had begun moving slowly away from us.

We didn't make it. We were no more than ten meters away and the craft started accelerating faster than we could run. The ramp was two thirds up, blocking those inside from seeing us. Still we didn't call out. If we made it, we made it. If not, then we weren't risking the lives of those under us unnecessarily.

"Yellow Two. Loaded and phasing."

There was a heavy roar behind us as Kiki lost control of the minefield. More brilliant than a dozen suns, a blinding light poured against our backs, and the warmth of the blast sent a shiver up my spine. Our sharply defined shadows were cast onto the rear of the hov--lurching, stumbling figures that made a mockery of our desperate run. With no reason and little logic, I cursed the images, blaming them for our misery.

An instant later I was praising them as the sweetest art in creation. Someone must have spotted the moving shadows and recognized them for what they were. The hov abruptly slowed down and the cargo ramp slammed down. The hov slowed so quickly that both Jody and I had to jump onto it to avoid running into it. Eager hands grabbed and pulled us into the hov, gripping us firmly as the pilot accelerated as quickly as he could, trying to outrun the blast.

Unable to tear our gaze away from the onrushing explosion, we stared out of the rear of the hov, shielding our eyes from the still blinding light that poured from the vaporized concentration camp. It seemed impossible that we could outrun it.

Nor did we. The explosion surged up to us, then enveloped us. But it did not the slightest damage. It didn't even chip the paint; Johnson had entered phase mode an instant before the explosion would have destroyed us. The ramp, slowed now by its phased state, continued to inch slowly closed. Finally, after

what seemed an eternity, the hatch secured and we could relax. Johnson eased the craft into the ground, banked steeply to starboard, and headed for home.

Chapter Seven

A lot can happen in seven hundred years time, even in a crippled society like this one. Space had been colonized. Vehicles moved silently while sitting on a cushion of antigravity, propelled effortlessly through air, water and solid ground. Pollution, overcrowding, and famine had become curiosities in history lessons. Computers had advanced from an artificially represented three-dimensional interface to an actual five-dimensional adventure that tapped into yet another dimension. Even something as simple as a door had undergone stunning and radical changes. As exciting and wonderful as all these things were to me normally, it was with overwhelming relief and comfort that I clung to the never changing, never improved, never computerized toilet.

My stomach took another nosedive at five hundred knots, then pulled up sharply, so I leaned over and was sick again. I wanted to die. The happiest day in my life, and I wanted to die. I leaned back against the door and moaned. A pounding on the stall door produced a second moan.

“Come on, Abby!” Susie’s voice came through cheerfully but firmly. “If we don’t get your hair up in the next twenty minutes, there won’t be time for everything else!”

“I don’t want to get married, Susie!” I cried out, panic clamping my voice to a throaty squeak. “I’ve changed my mind! I’m not ready!”

“Okay,” she said agreeably, and walked off. I was about to get sick again, when I heard the bathroom door tone closed as Susie left.

My stomach settled down, but then knotted up with fear. She really had left! She was going to tell everyone... oh, no! I scrambled to my feet and yanked open the stall door. What was she thinking? Aaron would be crushed! Dressed only in my slip, I raced out to the shower area--and right into Susie’s waiting arms. She clamped them firmly around me, while I tried to break free. I heard her laugh.

“Sorry, girl, but I’ve had all my strength back for more than a month now, and you’re too mixed up to even try one of your moves on me. Your heart’s not in it and your head’s one thread shy of stripped. Here,” she led me to the mirrored counter, sat me forcefully down on a stool and handed me a cup of cold water. “Rinse out and splash a little water on your face. It will help you calm down. But then we have to get started. The wedding’s in two hours.”

Two hours! I looked desperately into her eyes, wanting to cry and laugh and be sick again all at once.

“Oh, Susie! What am I doing? This is insane! I’m not old enough to get married! What if Aaron isn’t the one? What if I’m not good enough to be his wife?”

“It seems to me Aaron should be the one who decides if you’re good enough. And since he’s standing less than a hundred meters away, dressed in his number ones, with your wedding ring in his pocket, I’d take that as a strong indicator he’s decided.”

I nodded, feeling my heart flutter and soar. “You’re right. He loves me. And I love him. But isn’t it awfully soon to be doing this?”

Susie stepped behind me and began combing my hair out and styling it. It had been over three months since we’d pulled the Third out of NATEch’s little sliver of hell, and all thirty-one of the prisoners had made a full recovery--at least physically. The internal scarring of the soul was permanent. Susie still woke

me in the middle of the night once every week or so to talk and feel alive. She'd have to find another midnight confidant, though; I was changing roomies as of today.

She finished putting up my hair and stood back. She had combed it out and braided it in the back. I'd like to tell you what kind of hairdo it was, I really would. But the fact is that I never had the time to pick up all the great knowledge that teens pick up; my life even under the most liberal criteria was unusual. I do know that I liked it.

"That's great, Susie! How'd you learn to work with hair so well?" The excitement of the day had reversed itself again and was now lifting my emotions.

"Shows what you know," she sniffed. "This isn't all that great. My own hair isn't as fine as yours, and neither were my sisters' But I attended all the same putclubs growing up that my girlfriends did, and you always pick up something." She lightly brushed the sides, accenting my cheekbones. "This'll work fine for you, especially with that gorgeous train you'll be wearing."

"I can't believe the dress I'll be wearing, either!" My terror of only twenty minutes ago had vanished completely. "It's so beautiful, it almost hurts to look at it!"

"Well, what had you expected to have on, silly? A dirty rag?"

"To be honest, Susie, I'd planned on renting a tuxedo. Before Aaron, the only thinking I'd done about marriage had been back in the twenty-first century."

Susie pulled out our makeup kit and began applying it. Neither of us used it much--we were dogs going into battle, not normal women going into town. That didn't mean we didn't like it, or knew how to use it. Susie was again better than me since she had the benefit of a contiguous life span and I did not. She picked up on my comment.

"I hadn't thought of that. You know, Abby, it hasn't been that long since we Cued you"--

"Just over three years," I broke in. She slapped the back of my head lightly.

"Don't interrupt. It's only been three years, but so much has happened to you. To us. You've come a long way from the terrified fourteen-year-old girl to the lovely young woman who's getting married today."

"Hey! Don't hit!" I complained cheerfully. "Tell me about it. All I've done for the past six weeks, since Aaron was enough of himself to propose again, is worry if I'm going too fast. Remember, in the culture I grew up in the first time, normal marrying age was around twenty-five. On top of that, Aaron and I haven't had what you'd call a normal courtship. One date the night the Third got taken out, and the three day-trips Jody gave us as an early wedding present.

"Yet we've worked and fought together for two years. I've relied on him to save my butt two dozen times, and I've saved his, too." I giggled. "Now I know what I was saving it for."

"Abigail! I'd never expected to hear that from you!" Susie sounded shocked, but laughed. "Although he does have a nice butt. Great shoulders, too."

"They're to die for," I agreed, sighing. "When he wraps me up, I feel like the whole world is shut out and nothing can harm me. And his kisses are always warm and soft, except when they're hot and..."

"Settle down, kid. I don't need the details, much as I'd like to hear them." Her next comment was the one she really wanted to make, though.

“Umm... there is one thing I wanted to talk about as far as... that.”

“What?” I sensed her sudden discomfort.

“You know. About Aaron and you. I mean, tonight.” I suddenly knew exactly what she was talking about and tried to keep a straight face.

“What about tonight, Susie?” I asked innocently. “You mean, at the reception? I’m not worried. I’m sure--ow! Not so hard!” She had been filing and finishing my nails and had lost her concentration.

“Oops. Sorry.” She eased off on the pressure. “I didn’t mean the reception. I meant... later. You know, after you’ve gotten to your little bungalow in Arizona.”

“I don’t understand,” I said densely, squeezing the moment for all I could. “What about it? The area is very pro-Resistance, and we have all that we need for the three days we’ll be there. And you can always call us if there’s an”--

“No! Nothing like that. I wanted to talk about something a little more personal. About what happens tonight. Once you get... you know...” She saw my gently shaking shoulders and clamped lips, small tears in my eyes.

“You jerk! You know exactly what I’m talking about!” She tried to look angry, but did a poor job. I started laughing out loud and she joined me. “Okay, it’s funny. I never thought it would be this hard, though.”

“What?” I asked, wiping a tear. “You mean talking about sex? Why is it so hard, Susie? Of course I’ve been thinking about tonight.”

“And what have you been thinking about it?”

“I’m thinking that I’m more excited about making love to Aaron than anything other than the wedding. I waited for marriage before having sex, and now my husband and I can share the reward of my patience. And his.”

She nodded, understanding and agreeing. “My feeling exactly. But what I’m talking about is not so much the when as much as the how. If you have any, you know, questions about, well...” She started to hem and haw again.

“What do you mean, Susie?” I asked with wide eyes, then laughed. “Susie, you’re so good to me! I love you, lady. This can’t be easy for you.”

“It’s not,” she said frankly.

“I can guess. I hope I don’t have the same difficulty when it’s time to talk about sex to my daughters. Thanks for caring and trying. I’m sure Aaron and I can figure it all out. And if we’re not perfect the first time,” I added mischievously, “I suppose it will be a case of try and try again.”

She gasped, then laughed. “How you can be so sweet and innocent one moment then such a tart the next is what makes you so much fun.”

The bathroom door opened and Sarah walked in. Of all the prisoners, Sarah and Aaron had best weathered the humiliations and deprivations of being under constant mind control. After the effects of the suppression field had worn off under Doctor Barrett’s care, both took the very pragmatic attitude that what had happened to them, what had been done to them, was outside their real lives. Each had

therefore mentally written off those months and distanced themselves from the ordeal. That others didn't follow the same path bespoke of the difficulty of doing so. I had firsthand experience with that myself. I had struggled to put my rape of nine months ago behind me in the same way. And it was why my wedding dress was pure white and why I would wear it today without the slightest twinge of guilt. In a way, it had all worked out to our benefit, for Aaron now completely understood.

For the first time since I'd known her, Sarah didn't look like she needed a cigar. A big, strong woman built on a good-sized frame, she was made for front line duty. Yet she had always maintained a subdued air of femininity that complemented her forward nature and tomboyish looks.

That air of femininity wasn't subdued now. In her bridesmaid dress, she ran the risk of looking more beautiful than the bride. Not too difficult in my case, but still a breach of etiquette. She moved with ease and grace, as comfortable in her elegant pumps as in combat boots. She was the perfect image of a refined, cultured young woman, the very cream of high society.

"Hey, anchor girl! What's the hold-up? Too busy thinking about getting laid tonight by your other wingman?" Okay, maybe not a perfect image.

I didn't need the mirror to see my face flush from my neck to the roots of my hair. Sarah had always been able to throw me off. Though the moment was always uncomfortable, I loved her open and honest friendship.

"Sarah!" Susie scolded her. "You walk in here and make rude remarks like that, and I'll never get her color right!"

Sarah grinned and pulled up a second stool. She looked me up and down.

"Nice, Abby! Can't make too many attack moves and still keep the hair up like that, but you look just swell for today's mission." She smiled at me and leaned close. "How 'bout tonight's mission? You ready for that?"

"More than you'd think, Sarah." I was back on balance, and always looking for a way to give payback. "Don't forget, I used to be a pleasure ripe. She left me a lot of knowledge. I can do things that would make your head spin." At her blush, I had my payback. "Rather, Aaron's head. For instance, when you rub"--

"Knock it off! Both of you! You sound like a couple of tramps! This is a blessed event, not a license to talk trash. Now stop moving, Abigail, or I'll just slap some combat camouflage on you and call you done."

Sarah and I laughed, but I sat still. I didn't have to wait long.

Susie finished with a small sweep on my eyelashes and nodded approvingly. She stepped out of the way so I could look into the mirror. I almost didn't recognize myself. Somehow she'd made me beautiful. Very beautiful.

"That's incredible, Susie! How'd you do so much with so little?"

"Don't underrate yourself, Abby. You're a very pretty woman. A real... ummm... fox?" She frowned. "Is that right?"

"The term is right. I don't know if I'd apply it to me. I've always thought of myself as being, you know, a plain Jane."

“‘Plain Jane’? I hadn’t heard that one before. If you mean just so-so in looks, though, you’re way off. Back when you were all arms and legs, Kerry--remember her?--had said you’d be a stunner, and she was right.”

“I suppose.”

“I know. Now let’s get finished up. We have to get back to our room and get you dressed. Your pastor will want to give you some final instructions and encouragement, no doubt. Sarah, will you clear the halls so our bride isn’t bothered?”

* * * *

The corridor was a level eighty meters long, but it felt at least eighty kilometers long and uphill to boot. My veil was paper thin but still managed to cut off all the air. On top of all that, my heart could probably be heard across the entire hanger, which I was about to enter. Sarah and Jody had reached the makeshift altar, and Susie, my maid of honor, was halfway down the aisle. Doctor Barrett took my elbow and whispered into my ear.

“I’ve never seen such a beautiful woman, Abigail.” For a moment I thought he was talking about Susie, then realized he meant me. “It is an honor to give you into marriage to Aaron.”

“It’s your right, Philip. After all, you’re the one who brought me into this world, making today possible. There’s a war waiting outside for us when we get back, but it’s because of you that we can have at least these few days of happiness. I cannot thank you enough, but I can try.”

“You are entirely welcome, dear. Shhh. It’s time.”

The wedding march started and the crowd arose, turning toward me. At Philip’s gentle guidance at my elbow, I started down the aisle, concentrating on my stepping to avoid passing out.

The corridor had been eighty kilometers long, the aisle was eighty centimeters. I vaguely remember the walk, even though I wanted to remember it all. It is more an overwhelming weight of emotion than memories that remain with me.

I came to the front of the aisle and saw Aaron standing there, looking at me with a confident smile, his eyes moist with love for me. He was incredibly handsome in his dress uniform. Beside him stood Raul, his best man, resplendent in his lieutenant’s uniform, the left sleeve folded neatly up.

The rest of the ceremony is all a blur. I so dearly wanted to remember every moment, to lock away forever the sights, sounds and feelings of the day. The truth is, I was far too dazed and happy to even begin to keep a coherent record of it. It was all stored into the memory pools, of course, but nothing can ever or will ever recreate the aura and excitement of the day. I stood by Aaron’s side in front of the pastor, completely weightless and almost giddy with joy. The bouquet in my hands was nearly crushed underneath the flowers, I was squeezing them so tight to keep my hands still. A pleasant buzzing in my ears was quiet enough to hear the sermon and the hymns, but was distracting enough not to let me remember any of it. It was only during the vows that I came out of my fog.

“Do you, Aaron Marks, take this woman, Abigail Wyeth, to be your wife? Will you love her, guide her, and counsel her as Christ loves, guides, and counsels his Church? Will you promise to be faithful to her, cherish her, support her, and stay with her, in sickness and in health, as long as you both shall live?”

“I do,” Aaron said with a firm voice, looking into my eyes.

“And do you, Abigail Wyeth, take Aaron Marks to be your husband? Will you love him, follow him, and

submit to him as the Church loves, follows, and submits to Christ? Will you promise to be faithful to him, cherish him, support him, and stay with him, in sickness and in health, as long as you both shall live?"

"I do," I promised, speaking from my very soul.

"Then, before these witnesses and God, and by the authority vested in me as a called servant of the Lord, I declare you to be husband and wife. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. What God has joined together, let no one separate. You may kiss the bride."

Aaron reached up with trembling hands and lifted my veil. He leaned down and gently kissed me on the lips. His strength seemed to flow into me, bringing me out of my thrall. I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him back. The pastor had to gently clear his throat to remind us we were still in a ceremony. I stepped back a little, smiling. Aaron took my hand and turned us toward the congregation. I heard the pastor's voice behind us.

"It is my honor to present to you Mr. and Mrs. Aaron Marks."

I don't know what was louder, the cheering and applause of our friends as they came to their feet or the roaring in my ears. I didn't care. I was with my husband.

Interlogue Three

Aaron pulled the hov under the pines beside our small bungalow and settled it onto the small, packed-earth pad. I went through power down procedures while Aaron opened up our little cottage and carried the luggage inside. I finished the power down and reached above my head to toggle the puter switchover to the house. If the call came through that terminated our seventy-two hour...

A big hand clamped over mine and gently pulled it down.

"I really don't think we want to be interrupted, do we?" he said softly in my ear. I thought it over for a long time, perhaps as much as a half-second, then smiled.

"No, I don't suppose we do." I activated the external alarm instead. If they really, really wanted us, they'd have to... I switched it off again. Let them come get us if they were that desperate. Aaron chuckled, his breath softly brushing my hair, sending a tingle through me.

"Good girl."

I smiled at him. "Good girl? What am I, your little plaything now?"

He laughed quietly. "Maybe."

"That's why you married me?" I accused him. "Just so you could jump my bones?"

He looked startled. "Jump your bones? What a strange phrase."

I giggled. "It is, isn't it? Let me rephrase that. Ummm... you married me just so you could..." I whispered in his ear while I ran my hand through his thick shock of black hair, and he feigned righteous indignation.

"Abigail! That's not it at all!" He grabbed me and brought me up against him. He ran his fingers through my hair, then pulled back firmly, lifting my face to his. He kissed me deeply, first on the mouth, then along my cheek to my ear.

"Rather, that's not all of it. I married you so I could hold you and keep you safe. I married you because I

love you, sweet, sweet Abigail, and I want to be with you forever.”

My heart was tripping all over itself, making a general mess of my insides while threatening to explode. I looked into his eyes, and lost myself in their bottomless darkness.

“I--I--I...” I couldn’t think straight. I couldn’t think. He put two fingers on my lips.

“Shhh. Don’t say anything, love.”

He picked me up in his powerful arms and carried me to the bungalow. He nudged the door open with his foot and carried me across the threshold, then set me down. It was a small place, only a great room and a bathroom. There was a small kitchen area in one corner. A large king sized bed was against one wall, an equally large fireplace against the opposite wall. Rustic furniture was scattered about.

“I know this doesn’t really count,” he apologized. “This isn’t our home. But it’s the best we’ll be able to do for now.”

“I love it!” I insisted. “And it does too count.”

“I love you, Abigail.”

“And I love you, Aaron.” He pulled me to him and I felt falling into his strong, warm, and loving arms.

* * *

I was the first one awake that evening. Aaron had piloted the hov the entire distance, letting me sleep. Although I was seventeen now, phasing still affected me, draining my energy and leaving me exhausted. It was only our passion when we arrived that kept me awake. Still, I bounced back fairly quick and was now ready for my first evening with Aaron.

I looked at his face, quiet and still as he slept. Seeing him completely relaxed now, I must admit to a certain temptation to... I smiled in the fading light of late evening and eased out of bed, letting him sleep. It was very chilly, so I opened up the comforter at the foot of our bed and spread it over him. He stirred, but stayed asleep.

I padded on bare feet to the front door. Located literally on a mountainside, Jerome, Arizona, had been a mining town nearly a thousand years ago. The mines played out in the twentieth century and it had become a ghost town. Later it became a popular spot for artists and tourists. In the twenty-fourth century, it had a brief resurgence when Phoenix boomed to over three million during the Terran/Martian Wars, but once the fourth war ended, Jerome settled back down to a handful of people and a quiet existence. Today, it was much the same as it had been for most of its thousand year life: a lovely little town that had no real reason but simply was.

Aaron had left the door slightly open when he carried me in, so the chilly night air was wafting in, straining the heating system. I activated the temperature shell, then lingered at the open door, staring out over the stunning valley. How I loved this country!

I finally closed the door and walked back to the bed. I dug around my luggage for my robe to pull on over my admittedly skimpy sleeping clothes.

The kitchen was tiny, but served. I put on a kettle of water in the thermal field and looked around for some tea. There wasn’t any, but there was hot chocolate, which was fine with me. There was also some coffee, which I knew Aaron enjoyed, though I couldn’t remember if he put anything in it. The cooling field had a selection of fruits, so I began preparing some for dinner, along with a block of cheddar. As I

made him our first meal, my heart thudded and thudded as I thought about the commitment I had made to him.

He was my husband. Though he would obey my orders in battle, I would gladly obey him everywhere else. Neither of us knew how long we would be married, except that it was for life. True, our lives were very likely to be cut short within days or weeks. We comprised two-thirds of the front triteam in the newly formed Company A of the 179th. And I had the additional worry of having the cyberleader of NATech--and essentially the world--want me dead, dead, dead. Aaron and I had discussed that shortly after the alpha suppression field had worn off. Would it have been better to wait until after this was over, then marry? Or should we marry now, and run the risk of only one surviving?

It had proven to be a fairly easy decision. We loved each other deeply. Whether or not we were married would make no difference to the sorrow one would feel if the other was killed. Nor did we want to give Young even the slightest satisfaction by disrupting our happiness. So we married. Children, of course, would have to wait until this war was over and we had emigrated. I had seen Doctor Barrett, and the joy of a honeymoon pregnancy would have to be denied us.

I carried the board of fruit and cheese to a low table in front of the fireplace and set it down. The room was warming nicely, but nothing beat a fire, so I began laying a fire in the hearth. Everything about the bungalow, down to the bearskin rug in front of the fireplace, seemed like a perfect dream.

The dream continued when the teapot began whistling and I heard Aaron stir. Having laid the wood, I lazed it and started the fire. Leaning in close, I puffed air into the base of the wood, encouraging it to burn.

A gentle hand settled on my back, pressing and rubbing and feeling glorious.

“Mmmmm...” I moaned, trying to blow on the wood. “Hey, knock it off, husband mine! I’m trying to get this started. Hey!” He pulled on the robe, making me fall back onto him. We tumbled to the rug, laughing and giggling.

“You better eat a little something first, lover, before you start getting fresh.”

The fire was crackling cheerfully now, providing the only light in the cabin, and setting the mood wonderfully. Aaron arranged the floor pillows while I fetched the hot chocolate and coffee.

I set it down, then brought over the comforter for us to wrap ourselves into. His strong and earthy smell seemed to be everywhere. I went to my hands and knees and crawled to him, then curled up in his arms and we stared into the fire. He munched a piece of apple, then wrapped a hand around my waist. We were quiet for a few minutes, eating the fruit and cheese and enjoying our closeness. He was the first to speak.

“Why in the world were you blowing into the fire?”

I shrugged. “Old habit. I’ve never used the laze much to start fires; I’m used to matches.”

“Matches?”

“Uh-huh. A piece of wood with solid flammable chemicals on one end for igniting. We use the microlazes today. A match only gave out limited heat for a very short period, so even if you could light the wood, you sometimes needed to blow on it to help it burn properly. I keep forgetting the laze burns so fierce that blowing isn’t needed.”

He settled back and was quiet again. This time, though, his silence felt different.

“Aaron?”

“Hmm?”

“What’s bothering you?”

He was quiet for a long moment. I was about to ask him again when he stirred and pressed me closer to him.

“Why do you ask?”

“Because I know something’s wrong.” I kissed the arm he had wrapped across my chest. “There’s something you want to say or ask, isn’t there?”

He remained silent, hugging me tighter. I had a feeling he did have something to ask me, and I had a hunch as to what it was.

“Please, Aaron?”

He kept quiet, but finally sighed.

“I’m sorry, Abby. Yes, there is something. It’s silly I know... but it occurred to me while you were talking about matches. It’s so easy to think of you as an incredibly talented woman. Beautiful, mature, with a very scary mean streak...”

“Thank you,” I murmured.

“I did intend that as a compliment. You, Sarah and I have fought as teammates for a long time, and that beast inside you has saved our lives more than a few times. It’s a strange compliment, but these are strange times.

“Anyway, I’ve always known you as Abigail. It’s so easy to just stop there. But then you drop an odd phrase, mention an ancient technology, or refer to an extinct culture, and I’m forced to remember that you’re not just Abigail. You’re Miss DeChant. You’re who knows how many computers. You’re a booby-trapped pleasure ripe. You’re... you’re...”

“John Wyeth.”

“Yes,” he said flatly. “You’re John Wyeth.”

“I see.” I knew this would come. Susie had said months ago that Aaron would only see me as Abigail Wyeth, a woman. But that was impossible. Sure, most anyone, even Aaron, could know me well and think of me as who I was now. Aaron had married me. Still, it had to give him pause when thrown in his face.

“I see,” I repeated. “Aaron? Why did you marry me?”

“Because I love you, Abigail. But...”

“And what about this?” I put my hand on his and guided it under my robe and shirt, to the white scar across my ribs. “Do you still love me even though I’m scarred?”

“What a silly question! Of course I love you!”

“What if it wasn’t a scar? What if I had been blinded? Or what if something had happened when they

stole this body from the physiomanufacturing plant, and I had started out blind? Could you still love me then?"

"Abigail, this is pointless. Yes and yes. It's not your body I love. It's *you* that I"-- he broke off. "I take your point. If I can overlook those disabilities, I should be able to see beyond your past."

"That's partially it. Now suppose I had grown up completely normally. No scars. No wounds or disabilities. No ripings. Just an ordinary, everyday girl."

"You'd never be ordinary."

"That's sweet. Let's just say I was born female and grew up female. Would you have married me if I was only twelve years old? Or eight?"

"Of course not."

"How about four?"

"Abigail!"

"Okay, okay. I know you're not a pervert. You'd only be intimate with the grown woman you were married to, right?"

"Right," He agreed. I waited, not saying anything. He was quiet for a few seconds, then started chuckling. "I take the rest of your point, love. You know I'm not a pervert. You want me to realize that *I* know I'm not a pervert. But what about..."

"What about what?" I demanded impatiently. I rolled over on my hands and knees and put my face within centimeters of his.

"I was ripped over and over for hundreds of years. I was used, manipulated, and humiliated, first by Chris Young, later by happenstance. I lived through them all. And unlike any other Shard, I survived my dissolution because of LeClaire's genius, Doctor Barrett's care and expertise, and, quite bluntly, by my guts. I had to accept all my false personas as having been a part of my past. They have not altered my personality any more or less than a significant event in your past has altered your personality."

"When we were together this afternoon, I knew how to excite you, how to please you, how to enjoy being with you, because of my memories as that pleasure ripe. But it wasn't her you... you made love to. She never existed! It was always me, Aaron!"

I sat back on my knees and looked steadily at him.

"And, yes, I was once John Wyeth. But in much the same way, he isn't me any more than Miss DeChant, the Foundry computer, or the pleasure ripe, aren't me. My body never belonged to him. He never lived in it. He was never a woman." I steadied my voice and took a breath, continuing to look directly into his eyes.

"And I was never a man. Never. I have his memories, his mind, his soul. When I was first ripped into this body, I thought of them as my memories, my mind, my soul--like you have the memories, mind, and soul of the small boy you once were. But as I've truly become Abigail, they've become more like an inheritance from favorite grandparent, as though I'd heard stories of his life so often that I can imagine myself being him."

"As for my past, what is the difference between my life and the hypothetical life I mentioned? Of course

you wouldn't have been intimate with me had I been male. Neither would you have been if I had been a normal, eight-year old girl. Yet this afternoon we shared that intimacy.

"Look at me, Aaron!" I held my arms out, letting him see my feminine silhouette in the firelight. "I'm not Abigail Wyeth, either. My name is Abigail Marks! I'm your devoted and loving wife. I'm as much a woman as you are a man. What's happened to me in the past has shaped me into what I am. *But I am a woman!*" I was close to tears, I so much wanted to settle this between us. From my knees, I bowed at the waist, my face near the floor, to humbly share my strong feelings for him.

"Please say you understand, dear husband. It's not the person I was that's important. It's the woman I am. Here. Now." My emotion were too strong, and the tears came. "And I am a woman who is hopelessly, deliriously, passionately in love with you."

I cried silently, staring down sightlessly at the bearskin rug, wanting everything to be right, hoping I had not ruined it all. What if I was wrong? What if it did matter what was in the past? That what I had been somehow invalidated who I was now? If that was true, was my existence a sham? Was everything I had...

"Abigail," I heard him call softly. I looked up through blurry eyes and saw his arms held out to me, his strong, handsome face smiling gently.

"Come here, my sweet bride. My lovely wife."

"Oh, Aaron!" I lunged into his arms and wept. He wrapped the blanket around us and let me cry in his chest. He comforted me with his gentle voice and gentle touch. With infinite patience, he waited until I had cried myself through it, then hugged me even tighter. How could I have ever doubted him?

"I'm so sorry, Aaron. I let..."

"That's enough of that!" he admonished. "Apologies are due, but from me. You were right all along, Abby. It's who you are now that's important. I was just too thick-headed to see my doubts and worries as useless white noise. I don't care what you have been, other than with idle curiosity. I don't see how who you were six and half centuries ago has any bearing on today."

His words pulled my heart up from the ruins it had created and lifted me in a way I had not thought possible. He continued.

"You did miss out on one thing, though."

"One thing?" I asked, a small, nameless fear rising.

"Uh-huh. You talked about your past and your present. But you didn't even mention the kind of person you *will* be." He smiled.

"You're right," I said, a smile coming to my lips as well. "Did you have anything in mind?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. Here's the way I see it." He settled me into his embrace. "First, we take care of this... this..."

"This 'great unpleasantness'?" I offered. "It was a term used by Southern people when talking about the Civil War of the United"--

"Great unpleasantness is fine," he interrupted. "We'll take care of this great unpleasantness with NATEch and Young". He put his hand on my tummy. "Then we'll see about getting you fat."

“Fat?” I protested.

“Uh-huh. Nothing too much at first. We’ll do it gradually. Nobody will even notice the first three months.” He patted my tummy. “After that, I’d say a steady growth for about... ohhh...”

“Six more months?” I suggested. He smiled.

“Yes. That sounds right. After that, I predict a sudden loss of weight.”

“Well. I suppose I could live with that. And how many times do you imagine I’ll have this kind of weight gain?”

“Difficult to say. How about...” he considered me carefully. “Four times?”

“Four?” I didn’t bother hiding my disappointment.

“Too many? I suppose we could talk about three”--

“Too few,” I interrupted. “I should think at least six. We’ll save that for another time. Right now...” I slid to one side of the pillow and invited my husband to sleep with me. He gratefully lay beside me, pulling the comforter over us. My small body spooned into his, and his tender embrace held me safe in his arms. Together we watched the silent flame shadows scampering around the room, easing us unawares into a blissful slumber.

Chapter Seven--cont’d

“One seventy-nine... 179... this is 179 hover six, requesting approach and docking clearance.”

“One seventy-nine hover six, this is 179. Approach and phased docking clearance granted. Please keep variance from docking buoy at less than 100 centimeters. And welcome back, you two!”

“Variance restriction noted and thank you for the welcome. One seventy-nine hover six out.”

I broke the comlink and patched in the nav computer to base docking pilot. Because of the events of the past three days, of which Aaron and I had only heard about a few hours ago, the 179th was on maximum security and we had to execute somewhat tricky phased docking maneuvers. I left Aaron to do the piloting--I was a fairly good hov pilot, but inexperienced--while I prepared for final approach.

Aaron pulled back on the controls, decelerating quickly. I pressed the imminent arrival broadcast switch, attached the sonic umbilical cord to the docking buoy, and locked the ERF down. When a section of ground has been phased through enough times over a short period of time, it destabilizes and takes on the qualities of a phase mine. Although not a major danger for non-phased objects--unlike phase mines, there was no explosion--it could be very painful for phased people, such as Aaron and myself. To avoid destabilization of a frequently used hanger, quick entry and exit was required. Since the hanger was only ten meters high, the stop needed to be fairly sudden--hence the ERF.

The field snapped on, feeling like concrete casing, and we popped up into the hanger. Even with the ERF, it was not a ride I would recommend. The hov floated two meters above the surface while I shut down the field, allowing Aaron to properly land us. The craft settled and we unbuckled. Aaron left the engines running, which was standard operating procedure when the base was on non-evac maximum security status. We grabbed our personal effects and walked hand in hand down the lowered rear hatch ramp.

Our entire reception committee was Sarah, and while she smiled at us, she also had on her war paint.

The last time I'd seen her, three days ago just after the wedding, she had looked elegant, sophisticated, and relaxed. Now, in her combat fatigues, she looked tough, dangerous, and even more relaxed. The stunning smile of three days ago was a big grin now, and again desperately in need of a cigar.

She pulled me into her arms and gave me a crusher hug, then kissed me on the cheek. She let me go, and while I stood there unsteadily, looking at all the pretty lights popping in my eyes, she mussed Aaron's hair while giving him a kiss full on the mouth. Such was my confidence in Sarah as a friend, Aaron as my husband, and myself as a woman that I took their kiss exactly the way it was meant. You don't charge into battle countless times with the same two comrades without forming a very deep trust between yourselves. I knew Sarah loved Aaron, and he returned that love. I also knew that she loved me and had graciously stepped aside when Aaron and I had progressed in our relationship and had fallen in love romantically.

"Hi, Abby! Hey, Aaron! Welcome back, now get to work!" She laughed, always the cheerful one. She grabbed my gear and slung it over her shoulder, then led us quickly through a maze of marked yellow paths around the hanger to the main corridor. They were paths around large sections of hanger space, each with a docking buoy. These lines hadn't been here when we left, which I commented on.

"Yeah. Stay inside 'em or risk having a hov pop phase through your guts. There's been a lot of changes in the past three days. The alert came down from TAU only hours after you left. The Lieutenant near as a whisker called you two back to duty, then decided against it when it became obvious that NATech thought the explosion hadn't betrayed anything. And if Kiki hadn't been on her toes, it wouldn't have."

Aaron and I exchanged glances of relief and shy smiles. While we would have come back if we'd been ordered to, our three-day honeymoon in Jerome had been heaven-sent, letting us get to know each other in ways no amount of combat could. Sarah caught our look and laughed.

"Yeah, that's what I thought, too," she said, as if reading our minds. "I told the Lieutenant that if the three of us were taking her kids into the real thing, I didn't want to have to keep looking over my shoulder to see if my two partners were groping each other up. I need fighters for my anchor and wingman, not lovers."

We stopped in front of a door that hadn't been there before the wedding. Positioned on the outside wall, it was some distance from either the men's or women's barracks. Sarah dropped my gear.

"Even with all that's going on, the Lieutenant made sure you got your own quarters. All married couples do. Lucky stiffs. I oughta get a husband. Anyway, the Lieutenant said get settled in, grab a bite, then report. Abby, you go to her. Aaron, you and I have instruction courses with B and C companies." She smiled wickedly at him. "I can't wait to hear all the details!" Laughing, she walked off.

"Wait a second, Sarah," I said, grabbing her arm. "Why the rush? We'd heard about the explosion, of course, but not much more. What's going on?"

"The Lieutenant will fill you in completely, but apparently when the thing went off, the shock wave penetrated the entire planet and Kiki got it all. Seems there's a big hole in the bedrock about a hundred and eighty k underneath the Mojave desert, in that place you came from, Abby. No way in, no way out. But plenty of energy readings."

"And the power source?" Aaron asked quietly, already knowing the answer.

"What do you think?" she shrugged. "They're great big NATech fission generators. Looks like we found Chris Young's home address."

* * * *

The United States of America had originally used White Sands for the testing of nuclear weapons, so the ground was hot enough anyway. After the bomb bans in the mid twenty-first century, they used the area to store their now illegal arsenal, figuring the place was already glowing, and an extra ten thousand tons or so of live warheads wouldn't make it any worse. The weapons would remain untouched and safe for centuries.

Then, as happens in a world that went through periodic upheavals, things got forgotten. History, art, culture, names, places. And when the United States of North America officially dissolved in 2388, even stockpiles of atomic weapons were forgotten.

It was the most innocent of mistakes. A couple of kids were ground surfing out west of the Rio Grande. Ground surfing was a popular sport among people who had a great deal of brain cavity to let and were always looking for a quick thrill. Using the Earth's gravity and mass variances, they would scoot in and out of the planet's crust, riding nothing but unstable phase boards. As they hit different rock densities, their hypersensitive grav gyros would overreact, shooting them either deep underground or airborne. The ride was apparently even more thrilling if the dirt was slightly radioactive. I didn't know; my IQ was above room temperature, so I'd never tried it.

They had apparently souped up their phase boards and were able to take them very deep, nearly ten kilometers. Too deep, it turned out. Uranium has such a high atomic weight that it reacts when phased through. If it's enriched uranium, or plutonium, it's a violent reaction. One of the boards must have phased through the core of a missile, causing sympathetic detonation of the firing mechanisms which in turn detonated the warheads. The horrors of the Terran/Martian wars were revisited. Like the New York glasslands, that section of the world was now closed off to human habitation. Preliminary studies placed the date of safe resettlement around the year 46,500 AD.

If it was possible that good could come from such a ravaging of our home, then there was one benefit: the shock waves reverberated for thousands of kilometers through the crust, the mantle and even the molten core of the Earth. And for three minutes, the entire interior of the planet could be captured on seismic film, so perfect and focused a picture that if the proper equipment existed, every nook and cranny would be laid bare. Only the proper equipment didn't exist. On Earth. Kiki had registered the explosion, known what it was and what it could do, and had taken that seismic picture from the puterverse. I was looking at a small slice of it now.

"Here?" I moved a hand up to the dark pocket located 181 kilometers below the surface of the Arizona desert. It was incredible that Aaron and I had spent our honeymoon in almost the same location only a day earlier.

"Uh-huh." Jody acknowledged. "After Kiki took the picture, we asked her if she could run an anomaly study and locate any potential hiding places."

"You'd need to be more precise than that, Jody. I'll bet Kiki found maybe five or six thousand in the first ten minutes."

"I found 8,687!" Kiki said indignantly. I turned toward her and smiled. Mike was sitting beside her, feet up on Jody's desk, green eyes burning bright. We were running total access, having duplicated Jody's quarters perfectly and providing UTC shielding for everyone. Moss, Raul, and Takari were standing loosely around us, trying not to stare at my two puterverse friends. Susie was sitting very close to Raul, clicking her teeth with her fingernails, thinking.

"Sorry, Kiki. No offense." I'd have to get her away from Mike every now and then; he was beginning to

have a bad influence.

“That’s okay, Abby.” Quick to forgive, was Kiki. “Jody gave me a better idea of what to look for, and this place popped up after an hour. I noticed it for three reasons: its size, its energy signature, and the seismic warp that it caused. Jody was suspicious, so she sent Mike to take a look.”

“She didn’t send me. I went because I was curious.”

“Uh-huh,” Kiki said with such a straight voice I had to turn away to keep Mike from seeing my smile. I almost made it, too.

“Oh sure! Laugh it up! Anyway, getting in was a real bear. I had a blast.” He took his feet from Jody’s desk and projected a gorgeous image of the cavern.

“The cavern’s natural, but there’ve been people doing work in there since the mid twenty-second century. Maybe earlier.”

“How, Mike?” Raul asked quietly. “Phasing is a relatively new technology, less than a hundred years old. And the location is far too deep to burrow to.”

“I don’t know, sir.” Such was Raul’s presence and character that he was the only person Mike called sir. I’d have been shocked if I didn’t know Raul so well. And Mike, too. He really was a good kid. Just headstrong and overconfident. When he recognized quiet power and relaxed self-confidence in someone, he respected it.

“I know how,” I volunteered. All eyes turned to me.

“There was an incident in the late twentieth century near that same area that caught NATech’s attention. The NATech of then, not NATech Supreme,” I added quickly. “It happened in the summer of 1992. We weren’t sure what it was, but speculated it was a temporal warp.”

“That’s science fiction!” Moss laughed, not meaning to be rude, but unable to help himself. “How in the world did you come up with such a notion?”

“I would not dismiss Sergeant Marks’ comments so quickly, Sergeant Moss.” Raul said quietly, nailing poor Len with a look that skewered him to the wall he leaned against. “She was one of the brightest minds of the twenty-first century. And is now in the twenty-seventh.”

“I—I’m sorry, sir.” He bowed to me. “My apologies, Sergeant.”

“That’s okay, Len.” I returned his bow. “No offense taken. We didn’t believe it ourselves. I mean we as in NATech. I wasn’t even born yet.

“We came to that admittedly wild conclusion partly because of the never before seen atmospheric readings that pervaded the area from that point on. They still existed when I joined NATech in 2018, twenty-six years later.

“Another piece of evidence was the disappearance of one of our founding members, a brilliant scientist and inventor named Carl Woldheim. He and a lady friend of his vanished the same night the anomalies began. We speculated that Woldheim had constructed a temporal device and had used it.

“But the biggest reason we reached that conclusion was that by using his early work, NATech had created a temporal shifting device of its own.” Nobody said anything; they just stared. Even Mike was leaning forward, considering me through steepled fingers.

“NATech has time traveling ability?” Jody’s voice sounded like she was in phase, the ERF full on.

“No, they don’t. Not anymore. The devices had a quickly drained power source, and a person could jump for only four seconds, absolute time. Worse, Woldheim had apparently solved the spacial relationship puzzle, but we hadn’t. Without the ability to make a coordinated spacial-temporal jump, the traveler stayed in her precise location during the jump while the universe continued moving.”

“Ouch!” Mike winced. “You’d pop out of your temporal field buried inside the ground, hanging thousands of feet in the air, or just sucking vacuum while the planet continued on without you. NOT the way I’d like to end a day.”

“That just about sums it up, Mike,” I nodded. “We were still trying to solve that problem when I was there in the 2020’s, and had gotten no closer.”

“So how does this answer the question of how people...” Jody slapped her head. “Oops. Brain boot. Sorry. Young just pops some people into that temporal field and has them appear inside the cavern.”

“That does not make any sense, Lieutenant,” Takari objected. “Where could you find someone foolish enough to make such a dangerous journey?”

“And what about getting out?” Mike pointed out. “Getting stuck a couple hundred k’s inside solid rock would not be a good career move.”

“That all depends on your mind set, Mike,” I said softly.

“On my mind set?”

“Dear God.” Susie spoke for the first time. “He used ripes.”

“That’s what he did,” I nodded grimly. “Young had already come up with the technology to ripe the human mind. I know that firsthand. Satisfied that he could do it, he continued refining that skill, riping criminals, derelicts, and the mentally unstable into loyal drones, all eager to make that suicidal time jump and be entombed forever in the earth, all to build his little home. And when his own body started to fail in old age, he used all that skill to transfer himself into the puterverse.

“But he couldn’t transfer himself entirely into such a hostile dimension. He had to remain anchored here, in our reality. Since a human body is too fragile and lived a relatively short time, he chose the route he’d used on me; settle into a computer and let your program be your guide.”

“And he picked this cavern as the best possible location to keep his frame,” Len said, nodding. “Now that we have the ability to phase, that place is probably manned and fortified to the eyeteeth.” He frowned. “I do have one question, though.”

“Yes?” I asked.

“Whatever became of all this time travel technology? Both Woldheim’s and NATech’s?”

“I’d wondered that myself, so I tried looking it up.” I shrugged my shoulders. “The answer is, I don’t know. Woldheim and his companion were never heard from again. Perhaps they died during the time trip. Maybe he ran into an anomaly or quirk we can’t even begin to fathom. Your guess is as good as mine.

“As for NATech’s time travel capabilities, it’s also a mystery what happened. I found a vague reference to an incident in May of 2259 that seemed to coincide with the appearance of a spontaneous hyperidor

near the moon. Mahlon Stewart, a third class stellar drive engineer on the *Horizon* was proven to be in two locations at the same instant: on the *Horizon* and on Station Gamma, orbiting the Earth. That's the last time travel incident that can be proven or inferred from all available data. There's no actual connection, but I have a feeling." I sat on the edge of the desk and Jody took over.

"It doesn't really matter now, I suppose. What matters is this." She pointed to Mike's holo image of the cavern. "As valuable as this information is, it will ultimately be useless unless we act on it, and act quickly."

"Why? Wouldn't it be better to take our time, carefully plan..."

"Sorry, Takari, but the answer's no." Jody shook her head. "There are eight people in this room now." I saw Mike and Kiki sit up a little straighter, having been counted. "And while I find it inconceivable that any of you would ever share this information without good reason, eight people sharing a secret will ultimately spread that secret."

"No, I think it's better that we plan carefully but quickly, then hit the cavern from both realities. We've already received TAU's approval and support for the mission."

"Why not just have Mike and Kiki take out the power sources? Or sabotage the hov computers? Or poison the air, or even shut it off?" Takari offered.

"Because I don't kill, Yashimoto," Mike stated coolly. "And neither does Kiki. You flesh might see killing as the best solution to most scenarios, but we don't."

"I meant no disrespect, Mike. It's just that..."

"It's just that since we're soulless constructs, it would be easier if we did your dirty work," Kiki broke in, her flaring anger causing her aura to glow an intense gold.

"Calm down, Kiki," I said sharply. "Takari not only meant no disrespect, he was doing you an honor. This is war, kid. The best assets are used as often as possible in the most critical conditions. As UTC beings, both you and Mike can move freely about both dimensions through the common interface. I can, too, and you can just bet your bottom dollar Takari was going to bring that up next." I glanced at him, and he nodded. "See? He's doing what he's trained to do. So am I. I don't want you two going into combat here because you and I have to take on Chris in the puterverse after we engage him in this dimension."

"Fine!" Mike exclaimed with mock irritation. "Make a liar out of me. I say I don't kill, and then name the one guy I'd love to kill. Oh, well. My reputation's wrecked, I may as well off the jerk."

Nobody took Mike up on his comment, so Jody cleared her throat.

"So there it is, gang. We'll take the next twenty-four hours to plan our attack and continue training. Then twelve hours for on-base R&R. Then twelve more to lock and load. We roll out in forty-eight hours. Computer!" she snapped.

"Yo!" a friendly female voice responded. Mike's ears perked up, but Kiki jabbed him in the ribs. "What can I do for you, Lieutenant?"

"Seal the base. No outside access for any personnel with the exception of those present. Let anyone in, no-one out."

"You got it, Lieutenant. Uhhh... I've identified two anomalies"--

“Yeah, I know. Please log their presence, but don’t worry about them. You don’t have any control over them anyway.”

“Fine by me, ma’am.” The computer toned off and Jody dismissed the meeting. We would see the end of this.

Chapter Eight

“Hey! Get up, Marks! Move that lazy butt! GO! GO! GO!”

I jerked my head up and spun around in the darkness. Where... where was...

“Faster! What an 8088! Faster! Gimme twenty!” he laughed.

I was halfway out of bed, ready to do twenty pushups, when I realized it was Mike laughing and I knew he’d suckered me again. I sagged back down onto Aaron’s bare chest, moaning.

“Don’t *do* that, Mike! Why can’t you just give me some music or something. Maybe a little Sons of the Pioneers, or Beatles, or...”

“Yeah, right. I tried that once, remember? You were so late, Thawell even yelled at Susie. I’d be tempted to try it again, but you’re the Sergeant now, and nobody on this base has the guts to yell at Aaron. Now move it!”

“Okay, already! Geez! What a grouch.” I started to get up.

Aaron moaned and I felt his arm come across my shoulders, pulling me back.

“Abby? Is it time to get up already?” He groaned again. “I just went to sleep.”

“Then go back to sleep, lover,” I ordered, kissing him. “This is just noncom wake-up. You lowly dogs get another hour of much needed beauty sleep. Ouch!” I rubbed my fanny where he slapped me. He grabbed me and rolled over on top of me, smiling in the dim starlight of our room. I pushed against him in protest, but not very convincingly. He brought his mouth down and kissed me deeply. I felt myself warming and relaxing...

“Nope!” Gathering my willpower, I broke off the kiss and pushed him off. “None of that! Try it again and I’ll take Mike’s tactic and have you do twenty pushups.”

“That might be worth it,” he said, considering. His face brightened. “Do I get to do them on you?”

I slugged him with a pillow and rolled out of bed, barely evading his grasp. Pulling on some nightclothes to simulate modesty, I hurried off to the showers before his hormones overwhelmed me completely. My shower would have to be cold this morning. Real cold.

By the time I gotten back to our room, Aaron had already showered and dressed. I smiled at him, envying his speed and appreciating his thoughtfulness of getting up with me. I tossed my clothes and towel into the hamper and started putting on my body sheathe.

“Hey, Mike!” Although Mike could project himself into any room with puterverse access, because I was married now he showed restraint and care by not doing so when Aaron and I were together in our quarters.

“Yeah?”

“Stop staring at me and wake up Sarah.” I was only joking about the staring. He extended our privacy by not visually monitoring us. Again, very mature and very much appreciated. “I want her in the hanger in thirty minutes. Is the armory open yet?”

“Uh-huh. Lieutenant Sanchez has been there for three hours. I’ve been helping him and Susie perform final checks and calibrations on all weapons and armor. And Sarah’s already in the hanger. She wants me to tell you, and I quote, ‘Get your hands off each other!’ and gave *you* thirty minutes.”

“Did she? There’s no respect for Sergeants these days. Okay. Tell her we’ll be there in ten.”

I finished dressing and started to comb out my hair while Aaron straightened up our room. The bed was a tousled mess from earlier that night. He was a lot neater than I was, while I was a lot slower getting ready, so it worked out fine. I tied off my hair into a ponytail and picked up my gun belt from the peg. I held it by my side and smiled at Aaron, shifting my hips out seductively.

“Last chance, lover,” I invited him.

He wrapped his arms around me, crushed me to his chest and buried me in a deep, lasting kiss. I dropped the gun and kissed him back as hard as I could. Two hours from now one or both of us might be dead. This could be our last moment of tenderness together. We lingered over it, knowing once I put on the gun, I’d be Sergeant Marks.

The moment had to pass, and though we held on to it as long as we could, pass it did. I picked up the belt, took a deep breath, and buckled it on. Far down inside me, my beast stirred, awoke, and began climbing slowly to the surface.

“Okay,” I said, looking at my right wingman. “Let’s go.”

We walked to the hanger and cut across it to the armory, ignoring the yellow walkways. Every dock had a hov now, and nothing more was coming in. Though not as active as it would be in half an hour, the hanger was already coming to life as the hov crews armed and readied the two dozen PDQs.

Sarah was waiting for us at the armory. She’d already put on her heavy armor and was carefully loading the holoknife quiver in her left sleeve holder. She looked up from her work and smiled, a grim, self-assured smile. I nodded and started putting on my lightweight armor. Unlike my wingmen, I relied on my small size and quickness to provide most of my protection. It wouldn’t help in a wide-open terrain, but this mission was going to be in tight quarters for the most part.

I slid on my leg armor, settling the form-fitting gel packs into the proper locations before izing them to my pants, leaving my booted feet and waist free. I used five layers of powered micro-armor around my waist and midsection, the dull material hardening and glistening whenever pressure was applied. More gel armor went for my upper chest, shoulders, and arms, again sacrificing maximum protection for increased maneuverability.

Setting the single-piece head armor aside, I stepped up to Raul to get issue.

“Good morning, Sergeant,” he said, offering me a tabinal.

“Good morning, sir. Requesting mission issue.” I pressed my thumb against the tabinal and inspected the weapons Susie laid out for me. One nullifier, one small caliber slug gun with ten clips of twenty slugs, four throwing knives, one arm quiver with ten holoknives, six magpucks and one sonic grenade. Anything else I might need I would acquire as I went. My own boot knife and energy gun I already carried. Quietly, I armed myself.

Sliding the final knife home into its neck sheath, I retrieved my helmet. Covering my entire head and face, it contained multiple comlinks, puterverse link, image strobe and forty-minute oxygen supply, yet extended no further than three centimeters from my head at any given point. With no visible faceplate, I had painted on a shining gold cross, a final witness to those I was about to kill.

There was a heavy click as Aaron rammed home the arming bolt of his high-speed slug gun. Dressed in powered heavy combat armor from head to toe, he looked more machine than man. Painted on his battle helmet was a large, staring eye, a hideous object that had distracted or unnerved more than one NATech grunt.

“Ready, Sarge.” Sarah stood beside me, gripping her high-velocity phased slug gun. Using a combination of energy and matter, the rifle projected a tight, fluctuating phase field that the fired slug traveled along. Any target within fifty meters would also enter phase mode, then be vaporized when the unmatched phased slug came into contact. A properly trained dog could demoralize and dismantle the most disciplined NATech cohort in seconds. Sarah was a highly trained dog.

“Good.” I lifted my rifle and led them to the hanger and the lead PDQ hov.

“You be careful, Abby!” Susie called after me. I turned back to her, Aaron and Sarah holding position on my flanks, ready to aggressively protect me in an instant. She couldn’t see my face, but knew it would hold little expression. Knowing her skills, I would have liked her with us. Sayonara Susie was a good combat dog, but she would serve us better here, coordinating our attack with the other Resistance units.

I considered her comment for a moment.

“No,” I replied, and turned away.

* * * *

Three minutes.

The hov cleared the glasslands radiation zone and began accelerating as it shot through the bedrock toward our target, four thousand kilometers distant. The display in my helmet flashed briefly, indicating that hovs seven and ten were out of formation. Less than five seconds later, I received the “in formation” green arrow. Good. A sloppy entry was always the kiss of death.

We were the lead PDQ, just Aaron, Sarah, the pilot and me. Ours was the hot spot. We’d go in first and open things up while everyone else positioned for full assault entry. Aaron was on my right, Sarah was behind me. Two of the remaining five seats contained equipment for our second follow-up mission, the one that counted. I ran a leisurely equipment status check through internal diagnostics and was satisfied.

Two minutes.

The attack was a coordinated effort of six regiments. Two local regiments, the Seventeenth and Nineteenth, would create a diversion. The Seventeenth was the regiment Kenny and Wayne belonged to, and I was glad to hear they’d both survived our adventure in Glendale. Their regiment and the Nineteenth would take out the two supply bases on the surface. Meanwhile, the Eighth, Sixty-sixth, 201st, and our unit, the 179th, were to hit the massive cavern in three waves. The cavern was three kilometers by two kilometers and nearly five hundred meters high, and we were going to hit it from all sides, then perform a collapsing action on the middle with three regiments in the second wave.

If it went according to plan, when NATech had fortified themselves in the center, we would pierce them with the third wave, the phased insertion of the 8th, the most elite regiment of our attack force, directly in

their center.

Before all that, though, was the first wave: Aaron, Sarah and I. While the remainder of the 179th joined the Sixty-sixth and 201st in the second wave, we would blaze the trail for the Eighth, appearing in the most unlikely, most dangerous location of all: the main barracks of the NATech Xeno forces.

A unisex barracks holding roughly two hundred soldiers, it was located in the middle of the western end of the base. Our first objective was to do as much damage as possible to the Xeno personnel. Although there were six other, smaller barracks scattered about the compound, crippling this one with a surprise attack would be half the battle.

If we were successful, we would then have to fight our way through the collapsing front and work our way to our true objective: a small access tunnel located behind the backup power generators, half a kilometer from our phase-in point. From there we would set up a puterverse access point and I would go after Chris.

One minute.

“Arming PDQ.” I worked the console quickly. “Activating on-chair gyros. Synchronizing with puterverse virtmap. Forty seconds. Employ explosive dismount.”

“Acknowledged.”

“Acknowledged.” Both my wingmen had fallen into combat readiness.

“We’ve got a synchronized virtmap, Sergeant,” Parkins reported. “Beginning attack approach. All safeties released, downloading onboard navigational array to chair gyros.” He paused. “Regiment break-off in progress.”

I flipped up the regiment display and saw the other twenty-three hogs veer off our flight path, beginning a wide circling maneuver that would bring them together, then join them with the second wave, which would hit the cavern five minutes after we did. I had just switched off the display when I heard my private comlink activate and Jody’s voice came through.

“Make it messy, Sergeant,” she said, “and we’ll clean up after you.”

“Acknowledged. Twenty seconds.”

I settled back in the humming darkness as tons of rock passed through my body each second, and closed my eyes. My beast was still caged, but only just. The heat of imminent battle was like the scent of blood, driving it--and me--to a plateau where only the most ruthless, most cold, most driven can ever visit and survive.

Their faces gaunt, their eyes were blurred,

their shirts all soaked with sweat,

they’re riding hard to catch that herd,

but they ain’t caught ‘em yet.

‘Cause they gotta ride forever,

on that range up in the sky,

on horses snortin' fire,
as they ride on, hear their cry.
Yippee-aye-aaa. Yippee-aye-ooo.
Ghost riders in the sky.

“PDQ engaged. Two seconds.” The deployment klaxon sounded and Parkins corkscrewed the hov violently, allowing for a tight entry. The ERF clamped down and the launcher jammed us clear of the hov and into hard, hard bedrock, 181 kilometers beneath the cool green hills of Earth.

For a moment only, I tumbled out of control as the gyro oriented itself and initiated the nav program. Then the jets fired and the chair steadied. The low power indicator began glowing, a dull yellow at first but quickly brightening to gold, as the power draw from the ERF, gyro, and phase unit sucked the battery dry. It began blinking red, and then I was clear of the mantle, and shooting through the cavern itself.

We traversed the seven hundred meters of open space and buildings, aimed for the barracks. The power light was steady red. I committed the unstable emergency battery for each of the five chairs and hoped we had enough power to phase through the barracks wall.

We did. I went through first, with Aaron and Sarah close behind and the two equipment chairs following. There was a brief sense of darkness and then a heavy jolt as the chair exploded me free. The ERF protected me from the force of the explosion and the sudden change in velocity. With an ear-shattering crash, the chair smashed into the wall bunks, crushing and scattering men and women. It slammed against the far wall with a deafening, hollow sound that tolled the beginning of the end of Xeno Brigade Four.

Still moving at a modest speed, I curled up and tumbled, landing on a metal cot. Its occupant, a woman, had been awakened by the dismount charges and was reaching over her head for her pistol. I slid a holoknife from its quiver on my right arm and made a straight, fast stroke, laying her open from stomach to armpit. Knowing the holoknife had a life of only five seconds, I needed to use it quickly before the micron-thick energy blade evaporated. I flicked it at the bunk of the woman on my right. The knife sliced through her neck, nearly severing her head before the blade disappeared into vapor.

I jerked out a magpuck and whipped it at a grouping of four about three meters in front of me. I chose them because they held the optimum location for Sarah and I to divide and attack the soldiers while Aaron wreaked havoc on the bulk of the force. My infrared visor snapped on as the puck exploded, spraying molten magnesium on all four while blinding dozens others. Two similar flashes on my flanks came from Sarah and Aaron. I pulled the slug gun free.

There was no communication between us. None was needed. Each understood and trusted the others. Considered the best triteam in the Resistance--to the point that even NATech knew and respected us--we operated as one efficient warrior. The Xeno troops swarmed around us, already adjusting to the impossible, the very best NATech had. They'd been caught by surprise, but all carried their own weapons and all were fast and ruthless killers. One hundred and sixty nine very tough soldiers who would fight to the death, refusing to understand or accept fear.

Not one was going to live another three minutes.

A sudden, rending scream from the depths of hell made even these seasoned veterans jerk and twirl toward this terrifying, unknown enemy. Aaron's high-speed slug gun had the piercing screech of a banshee as he stood there--his legs so immobile despite the wicked recoil that they seemed bolted to the

stone floor. With his upper body and shoulders, he muscled the gun in sweeping motions that disintegrated cold metal and warm flesh alike, each shredding like paper from the gun's heavy slugs. They danced and lurched on invisible strings that plucked them from both sides; the ricocheting pieces of jagged metal being even worse than the slugs.

Sarah dropped to a knee and brought her rifle up, smoothly opening fire at the far end of the barracks. I followed the phased slugs in, confident she'd not hit me. We had used this tactic over and over with devastating success. In attacking me, the closer and more vulnerable of the two targets, they'd have to open themselves up to Sarah's constant and accurate gunfire. If they chose to take out Sarah first, my own weapons and skill would tear them to pieces. The correct solution, split forces, would not occur to them for five to ten seconds--far too long a time when we were already attacking.

I tossed two more magpucks into the gathering crowd, then tossed one high toward the back. My solid-display visor kicked in as the pucks detonated. The image strobe in my helmet flashed for a millisecond, capturing both the location and movement of the forty Xeno troops directly in front of me, then downloaded the data to my helmet imager. Their forms popped up on my visor and I went to work.

Opening fire with the slug gun in my left hand, I snapped on the inducer charger of my energy gun with my right hand. Knowing I didn't have any allies in close, I shot freely at anything and everything.

The inducer required four seconds to charge--the energy signature conflicted with phase technology so it had needed to remain off until now--so I was able to empty the twenty-shot clip and reload. A hand grabbed me from behind. They had chosen me, leaving Sarah free to pick her targets. Continuing to fire the slug gun in my left hand, I swung back my right arm and snapped my hand down, releasing a holoknife from the quiver. It sliced up and along the arm of my attacker, burying itself in his throat, where it turned into a vapor that penetrated his brain.

The energy gun toned ready in my ear and I jerked my right arm down, cleanly drawing the gun. I slug shot two goons to clear a path, then fired the inducer. Just as I did, two more Xenos softly exploded as Sarah's phased slugs took them out. I now had a very clear path to about six others who had grabbed their rifles.

The gun kicked in my hand and my ears started ringing, despite the helmet. All six were affected by the sonic inducer, three immediately dropping to their knees, vomiting blood, and the other three staring at us, unaware of what was happening. I'd kill them later. Right now I had six more on top of me. Time to get nasty.

I dropped the empty slug gun into its holster and pulled out my boot knife. The first one was attacking. I rolled to my back and kicked my boot into his unprotected groin. He screamed, then fell away, a large, smoking hole where his chest had been. Sarah never missed. With my knife, I sliced through the feet of two who had come too close. They staggered back and fell. I brought my right hand around, but since I wanted to save the energy shot, I snapped my hand down and fired two holoknives. The first one caught the blade in her gut as she lay, and it sliced up through her, severing her spine. She'd live at least another two minutes, unable to do anything except experience her approaching death. The second was luckier. Having fallen down on his stomach, his head was closest to me. He looked at me just as I fired. The blade punctured his face and traversed his body, partially exiting from his right leg before evaporating.

Although I appeared in the weaker position now, lying on the floor armed with only a knife and energy pistol, the reality was much different. Spinning over to my stomach, I swept a leg around. Knowing I could easily break their legs in my armor, three jumped clear while one attacked. I jammed my gun into his stomach and squeezed the trigger just as his head snapped back. Between my laser and Sarah's slug, he died instantly. He nearly fell on top of me, but I scrambled free and rose to my feet.

The barracks was eerily quiet, Aaron's metal terror having fallen silent. Even the attack siren sounding from outside only seemed to intensify the stillness.

Covered in their blood, I lifted the visor and faced my enemy, who mustered a mere ten. They drew back in numbed horror. In their faces was the fear of inevitable death. Though four were armed, they seemed unable to act, unaware they even had weapons. One had soiled himself. We had taught them to understand and accept fear. What they had witnessed had been too much. All that remained of Xeno Brigade Four were shattered bodies and memories of past glories forever tainted by this brutal, humiliating end.

Coolly, I sheathed my boot knife and reloaded my slug gun in front of them. Aaron's heavy gun hitting the floor as he discarded it made them jump like frightened animals. Having their measure, and needing to bivouac, I turned my back and walked toward the equipment chairs. Like a ravenous wolf, Sarah swept past me, her holoknives being far more fang than these shattered warriors could cope with.

The equipment chairs had survived intact, and we could begin loading up. Aaron pulled loose the heavy access grids and effortlessly carried them over to one of the two entries into the room. The barracks took up the entire building, and each door led to a relatively narrow outside walkway. Sarah had joined us and put on the energy tap and cloaking equipment. Not having strength-enhancing armor, I carried nothing extra. I pointed at the north door, then held up two fingers. She picked up two of the less damaged corpses and carried them to the door.

Standing to one side, I pulled out both guns. I would normally use a sonic grenade for this scenario, but since the fighters most trained to ambush us now lay dead at our feet, what lay on the other side of that door could be easily managed while lowering the risk of deafness and equipment shut-down from the blast.

Aaron picked up a heavy foot and kicked the door open. Sarah stepped up and heaved the two bodies out, her powered armor giving her the ability to hurl them three or four meters. Immediately the corpses were riddled by gunfire coming from our right. That was all I needed to know. I waited for the inevitable cease-fire when they realized they'd been taken, then launched myself into the momentary calm.

I didn't wait to identify my targets. I simply opened up with both guns, and used the normal course of combat to assess my latest enemy. Again my ears started ringing as the inducer discharged. I had no idea if they were in range of the inducer or not, but didn't care. My slug gun was accurate to two hundred meters.

They were just barely in range of the inducer. They were also just barely soldiers. Looking more like support personnel than front line combat troops, they didn't react at all when I appeared. It seemed likely that the inducer numbed them to an extent. But they were a solid twenty meters distant, too far for the inducer to have any lasting effect.

They were, however, well within range of the slug gun. Bringing up my left hand, I trip-fired the slug gun, going for percentages rather than accuracy. They snapped out of their thrall and scattered. All but five. We now had the walkway to ourselves. I stood up, reloaded, and headed east. Sarah and Aaron were quickly at my side. I motioned up and Sarah jumped easily to the roof of the barracks, drawing her forty-shot speed pistol. If they had been watching this door, they'd be watching the other, and would be running here to back up their friends.

Aaron and I split up and ran down the walkway in opposite directions, Aaron going west, where the attack would most likely come from, while I headed east, toward what would be their rear.

Running past the five I had gunned down, I snatched up one of their energy guns and glanced at it.

Standard issue, eight-megawatt reservoir, six-second recharge, and on the bottom, twenty-second suicide switch. I didn't have twenty seconds, so I split open the reservoir casing with a holoknife. The knife lost cohesiveness as it neared the energy core, so the casing was only deeply scarred. Perfect. I locked on the suicide switch, pulled the trigger, and felt a tingle up my arm as the energy core began spilling its contents. I had maybe five seconds.

Rounding the corner, I caught a face full NATEch goons running in terror. Aaron must have caught up with them. Heaving the gun toward their rear as hard as I could, I toned an incoming warning to Sarah and Aaron, then got to work with the dozen grunts who now surrounded me.

I felt a wicked blow in my gut as someone discharged their energy gun into me at point-blank range. The micro-armor absorbed the blast and spread it to the gel packs, but I was down to four layers.

The person who fired had been the most dangerous, but now had to wait for six seconds before she could fire again. I border shifted the slug gun to my right hand and pulled out my boot knife with my left. I spun in a tight circle, holding the razor-sharp knife at arm's length. Turning the haft up, I slugged the person nearest the wall, then stepped around his falling body, pulling and holding the trigger of the slug gun.

The yammering of my smaller gun was muffled abruptly by a horrendous blast about twenty meters down the walkway. The suicide gun. It may or may not have taken out some NATEch grunts, but it certainly cleared the way for Aaron to give me support.

And support was becoming desperately needed. The base had been on full alert for three and half minutes now, and the place was coming alive with hostile activity, all focused on us. They had made the logical assumption that the amount of damage we were doing pointed to the main focus of the attack. And so it was. But we were only the first part of a double feint.

The last of my attackers fell away just as the gun emptied. I released the clip and reloaded in an instant. My first attacker, the one who had actually shot me, was on the ground, her head, neck and shoulders shot away from Sarah's overhead assault. She jumped down from the roof, landing near me as Aaron came around the far corner and loped up to us. We were now in an undesirable position, highlighted against a wall, with the enemy out of effective range for us to attack. We were best gone.

I ran back to the east side of barracks, then cut north to the walkway we had first entered. The walls were now popping and chipping as slugs and beams began tracking us. My right shoulder gel pack jumped as it deflected a slug. Another five seconds and they'd have our range.

We needed only three seconds to reach our objective, which was the far edge of the walkway. Below it was darkness. Though located in the west center of the cavern, the Xeno barracks was at the northwestern edge of the base. In front of us were rough-cut and partially used service areas. This was our way out.

I leaned over the walkway and pinged the depths. Empty, flat cavern floor.

"Fifteen meters, flat," I called. Without hesitation, Sarah vaulted over the railing and disappeared into the darkness. Aaron picked me up and followed.

"Bogies," I heard Sarah call, just as bright spots beneath us lit up. Damn. We'd wasted too many seconds outside the barracks, allowing NATEch to get one of their powered quad teams into position. They had state of the art enerarmor, too. My sensors hadn't registered so much as an anomaly during my quick scan. That was good and bad. Bad that we'd been surprised, good because stealth armor didn't have the staying quality of front-line issue.

There was no turning back. Sarah was touching down, and Aaron and I were in free fall. We had been caught fair and square. Of course, you can also catch a tiger fair and square. It's what you did after you caught him that counted.

Aaron threw me off a split second before touching down. But he didn't throw me to safety, he threw me at the head of the nearest of the four. It was a risky move. If this NATEch goon reacted in time, he could snap me in two with his powered armor. If he didn't react, though, I had one of two superior positions: either on him or behind him.

Mama Wyeth's little girl lucked out. He couldn't react in time and I crashed into his upper helmet. Using my momentum, I grabbed on and threw him back. He had the strength, but I had the leverage. He hit the ground with a loud bang, not doing any damage, but distracting him enough for me to pull the nullifier off my belt and attach it to his back shoulder. I clicked it on and it started the decoding process.

He moved to throw me off, but I anticipated his action and slithered inside his grasping arms. Jerking my right hand down, I fired my remaining holoknives into his chest plate.

His armor snapped and crackled as the knives disintegrated against his energy shield, doing no damage other than some scorching. He laughed and swung his arm like a club. I raised my arm to catch the hit in my upper chest armor. Just as he crashed into me, I launched myself in the same direction. Between his hit and my leap, I landed three meters from him. Rolling over, I drew my energy gun and fired the laser. The beam took him straight in the chest as he rose, but as with the holoknives, it caused a great deal of crackling and popping but little damage. He laughed, thumping his chest.

"Go ahead, you little whore. Shoot away. You're not going to penetrate NATEch enerarmor with that little popgun. Even if you did, I still have enough hard armor to take a dozen more shots."

The man was an idiot, and obviously didn't consider me a threat. Unneeded talk demonstrated either his lack of training, his lack of confidence, or both. No point in showing him the error of his ways. I should have thanked him, though. He gave me the time I needed for my gun to recharge. It toned and I fired.

As before, his armor crackled and sparked. This time, however, the effect didn't fade away. It gained intensity and began spreading over his entire suit. The nullifier had used my attacks to find the armor's energy frequency and was disrupting the flow of power. Now was the moment. I drew my boot knife and ran at him.

He was flailing wildly, ignoring me for the perceived danger from the energy backlash. I stepped nimbly under his arm and slid the heavy blade between his chest and arm plating. He screamed through his solid mask and fell to his knees. He'd put all his faith in his wonderful combat suit, and was now finding out the truth: it's not the suit, it's what's in the suit. My slug gun came up, the barrel jamming into the space between his chest plate and helmet, and I pulled the trigger a quick five times. The gun pulled free as he fell back and I went to help my wingmen I seriously doubted the blood would jam up the barrel significantly.

Sarah was holding one in close combat. His helmet was off and he was raising an arm to hit Sarah's faceplate. I stepped up, drawing the knife back, but it was suddenly over. Her hand shot to his throat and even from five meters distant, I distinctly heard a series of cracks as she snapped his neck. It sounded like lions cracking the rib cage of a zebra as they feasted. She tossed him away and I came to her side. As a pair, we went to Aaron. Close to Aaron, that is. To come too close would invite disaster.

Being the strongest of our squad, he'd sought out and engaged the strongest of theirs. And now they were locked in each other's grip, motionless, silently waiting for the moment of weakness that would decide the outcome. Despite centuries of refinement in the art and weapons of war, their struggle was

reduced to this most basic form of conflict. Two huge beasts engaged in a primal battle of brute strength. Until the decisive moment came, neither could advance nor retreat. One was already dead.

The moment suddenly came and it was over in a heartbeat, literally. There was a high whine as the shoulder servos in the NATech suit burned out. Aaron jerked the man's arm down, breaking it, then punched his fist into the chest plate. The chest plate collapsed into the man's ribs, then popped out as Aaron's fist broke through. I saw the dead man's back plate dent out, then Aaron lowered the broken suit with its broken contents to the ground. Not out of tenderness but to place his foot on the man before wrenching his fist free.

"Number four?" I said.

Sarah jerked a thumb to a bloody mess about eight meters to our left. Sarah had no equal in a knife fight. Conditions made no difference to her; she could cut up a powered suit as easily as the flesh underneath. The shredded suit and woman that lay crumpled in the darkness only underscored how inevitable the result had been. There was only one way to fight a war and that was for keeps. I nodded.

"Good. Let's move."

I glanced up at the walkway above. There should have been an audience by now. No one. I looked at the internal clock. Six minutes, thirty-eight seconds since the PDQ. That explained their absence. Our friends up top had other things to worry about. Three regiments of other things. I clicked on the common channel and listened in for a few seconds, then turned it off. Phase Two was on schedule.

We worked our way to the east, following the cavern floor. The floor, now a rough corridor about ten meters wide and ten meters below the base main level, continued straight into the darkness. Undoubtedly guarded during normal operations, it was empty now. The commander of this base was no fool. The fight for the life of this base was occurring at main level. He'd left a powered quad team down here, probably thinking it was overkill, but wasted no more resources. Any squad caught down here could be obliterated from above. And other than undetected movement, the corridor offered no advantage.

We moved quickly, staying close to the cavern wall. About three hundred meters along the corridor, my foot stepped on a piece of wood, cracking it with a dull snap. I jumped to one side and landed on another piece. Knowing we could not be heard or seen, I held my position and shone my helmet light onto the cavern floor.

Scattered about carelessly by the thousands were bones. Human bones, ancient and dry. At least a hundred were sticking out of the solid cavern walls. An open graveyard of the workers who had built this fortress centuries ago. Those in the wall were the ripes who had not made the time jump precisely and had died horribly when they appeared in solid rock.

I raised a hand to the bones that jutted from the wall. How horrible a death it must have been, I thought in numbed wonder. Just below one half-embedded skull dangled a diamond cross necklace. Why would a ripe be wearing this? Not that it mattered. She had long since passed from this world and hopefully to one infinitely better.

There were no words to describe the sense of deep sorrow that hung over this scene, so I turned off the spot. We continued on, thinking our own thoughts, and reached our objective in two minutes: a small, rough-cut access corridor that trickled north behind the backup generators.

Although the Eighth regiment would be performing their insertion attack in just under five minutes, we three no longer had a timetable. Just a goal.

We moved quickly up the narrow passage for forty meters. Hard rock all the way, then the tunnel suddenly widened on the right. I turned a spot on the area and saw the dull white glow of the generators. Located on the far edge was the power access port.

Sarah dropped the gear and headed back down the corridor to make sure we weren't bothered. I picked up the equipment and lugged it over to the power access. Latching the relays, I ran the fiber out toward the center of the floor. I unlocked my helmet and took it off. Even the stale air of this ancient cavern felt cool against my sweat soaked face. Aaron had already set down and set up the access grids, positioning them into a square, three meters on a side. I connected the power feeds to each of the grids, and they began to hum. It was possible that the significant power draw would be noticed. Possible but not probable. By now everyone who might be concerned had more immediate problems to address than why a backup generator was experiencing a five-percent power drop-off.

There was a hiss of compressed air behind me. I stood up after connecting the final power grid and saw Aaron had removed his helmet. In the soft white glow of the generators, his face looked carved from granite, his wet face and hair glistening slightly. His eyes shone like pinpoints of light from the shadows cast on his face. Had I not known him, I would have been frightened. As it was, I still felt concern. He had never broken combat regulations by removing armor unnecessarily. He obviously had something important to say. Something personal. I struggled with my beast, leashing it for a moment, and walked up to him.

He said nothing, instead staring into my eyes. So quiet was the cavern that I heard the micro-servos in his arms as he lifted his hand and ran it gently along my chin to the back of my head. With his enhanced armor, he could have burst my head like a soap bubble. Instead, he held me so softly, that same soap bubble could have nestled in his palm. He continued staring into my eyes, then brought his face down slowly. His lips brushed mine and we kissed tenderly, our mouths trembling, as though scared to bring something as soft and intimate as love to a place such as this. He released me, still staring into my eyes, and stepped back.

"Finish this, love," he said with his eternally soft, eternally strong voice. "I want to take this armor off today and never have to put it back on."

I nodded and stepped into the center of the access grids. Looking at him one last time. I smiled slightly, then looked away. I tossed my head, throwing my ponytail back, and the beast tore loose. Mike and Kiki would be waiting for me to get there. And Aaron would be waiting for me to come back.

"Total."

Chapter Nine

The three of us stood on a high pinnacle, all alone, just Mike, Kiki, and me. Beneath us lay a vast panoramic view of the puterverse.

It was indescribably beautiful. At unrestricted access, where we were now, there were no barriers to mar the horizon, no limits or veils to cover the vivid colors, enhanced scents and million shades of light that made up this fantastically unreal place. Overhead, a sky so black that it stole one's breath poured its deep quietness onto the world below it, sharpening and increasing the beauty. Far to our right was the mighty Quantum River, the primary carrier of the vast amounts of data transported around the world at the speed of thought. Throughout the entire puterverse, and we could see only the smallest portion from even this high vista, nothing could be seen to sully or ruin this dimension. The ion breeze brushed my aura, making me think of lilacs and meadowlarks and deep space. The whole of the sensations were stunning. Almost overpowering.

“Destroy it,” I said.

I stepped to the edge, facing out, and raised my arms. Mike and Kiki did the same and we joined hands. All our months of effort had culminated to this single point in time. For as beautiful as the puterverse was, as efficient and fast and exciting, it had underneath it the rotting odor of evil and the stench of death. Despite all that I had done to hide Chris Young’s selfish influence here, my work was only stopgap and diversionary. I’d known from almost the beginning that this needed to be torn down, then rebuilt from the ground up. Not in the image of its creator, but in its own image. Because the puterverse was not a series of webbing techniques. It was not a complex database, or information processing center. Nor was it a virtual reality, capable of holding simulated life forms. The puterverse contained elements of each, but was much more. It was real. It was an actual dimension that supported trinary code as living things, and could be visited and used by physical creatures. But we had made a mess of it, and the three of us were going to clean it up.

A whirlwind of yellow blew on my back as a vortex sprang to life in our midst. Groaning to release its energy, we held it in check, waiting. From beyond the Quantum, a black cloud rose from the unseen ground and boiled rapidly in our direction.

With incredible swiftness, the cloud crossed the Quantum and obscured the plain beneath us. Like a living thing, it scaled the high spire we stood on, clawing its way up desperately, as though its very life depended on reaching us. Which it did.

“Abby, I’m scared!” Kiki cried above the roaring wind.

“Good!” I yelled back. “I’m glad you’re just scared! In a few seconds, you’ll be terrified! All three of us have to keep holding hands! Share your strengths and your weaknesses!”

The black mass was almost on us. It was Chris’ best attack, for in it he had committed much of himself. I could sense his presence within. Terror began to build in my heart, threatening to frighten even my beast. I looked to my left. Kiki—standing taller than me now—had thrown her shoulders back and was gripping me with an iron grasp. Though I couldn’t see her face, I could feel the moist gold of her tears as they whipped away from her face and splashed against me.

On my right was Mike, his green aura painful to view. Of the three of us, he was the most resolute. He had been horribly wounded by Chris when we first attacked him. A polluted Pseudo Trinary Code virus had invaded his body, threatening to rewrite him from existence in the same way Chris had rewritten me into oblivion so many centuries ago. Yet Mike had not learned to hate. He was disgusted by Chris’ actions. Repulsed, angry, and saddened by them. But he did not hate Chris, nor could he kill him. Mike, more than Kiki—for Kiki had not experienced as deeply as Mike the failings of humans—had seen what we could become, known he could follow, and had turned away. He was not pure because his creator—me—was not pure. But here in the puterverse, Mike could administer justice without revenge, could punish without anger, could correct without hate.

The cloud spilled over the edge of the pinnacle and engulfed us. The glow of the vortex and our own bodies faded as the slime of the cloud’s interior coated us. My entire body began itching wildly as millions of energy locusts bit into my aura, wanting to feed on me until I was nothing more than a gutted husk.

“ABBY!” Kiki screamed.

“Wait! Not yet!” I gripped her hand, nearly crushing it, and poured my life energy into her, hoping to give her enough strength to endure the horror a few moments longer.

* * * *

Aaron Marks stood just outside the energy perimeter, guarding and watching his beloved wife. He didn't like what he saw, but was helpless. To step inside the perimeter would mean his instant death.

She was standing very stiff, arms thrust up and back, staring out and gasping. Blood was trickling from her left hand. Her entire body was rigid, racked by pain. He had never seen her access with any difficulty before, and he was afraid for her.

He was afraid for himself as well. Twenty-three years old, Aaron had joined the Resistance nearly eight years ago, at age sixteen. Though he had known several girls before going in, he had viewed all women as comrades and fellow dogs shortly after joining. His rapidly advancing skill in combat and his ability to patiently solve whatever problem arose had earned him respect throughout the entire unit. Unfortunately, it also distanced him from everyone but Sarah. Sarah had understood his quiet solitude, and was always there to cheer him up, or keep him from withdrawing too far. She loved him, and he loved her. But it would always be a sibling love, one born from respect and identity and the knowledge that neither was meant for the other.

Then Abigail had come. At first only a Cue, he had thought nothing of her other than a symbol of what he believed in and what he fought for. He had been on the raid that stole her then empty body from the physiomanufacturing plant in Bern. She was just a thing, hemolixer her only covering. She had no thoughts because she had no mind. She had no shame for she had no soul.

The mind and soul made all the difference. After she was alive and walking around the base, he noticed her. First with curiosity mixed with discomfort. He'd felt bad about putting a male Cue into a girl's body. But he had no difficulty in laughing at the crude and sometimes cruel jokes about her that floated around the men's barracks.

After Abigail's fight with Susie in the gym, however, he began to feel different. This wasn't just another Cue. And she wasn't a man trapped inside the body of a young girl. She really *was* a young girl, struggling to understand and come to grips with her new life and new identity. He stopped laughing at the jokes.

As she continued to grow over the first few months, he found that he was keeping a watchful, interested eye on her. She was making mistakes and learning from them. Very late one night, a couple weeks after her IHAD, Aaron and five of his buddies were taking showers. Exhausted from spending hours in the puterverse that she was already mastering, Abigail had strolled into the men's showers, only slightly more dressed than they, and completely unaware of where she was. They'd stared wide-eyed as she waved at them sleepily and then used one of the bathroom stalls. Finished, she stumbled back to her quarters, leaving them gawking after her. The next morning, she gave no indication she'd remembered anything.

He'd never mentioned it to her, but it was then that he'd begun falling in love with her. So different, so open, so alive, this young Cue became a beautiful young woman in his eyes that day. He began to understand that this was a *person* he was falling in love with, and the Creator had blessed him with this miraculous set of circumstances for him to be able to pursue that love. Her incredible combat skills soon put her in with him and Sarah, and the best triteam in the Resistance was born. Then came two years of working beside her, aching and wondering and hoping, but ever-patient, knowing the time hadn't arrived. He was crushed by her sharding episodes, and lifted by her returns. Months after her rescue, when she had begun feeling the natural urges of her body, she finally noticed him as more than a comrade. The little things he'd dreamed of for so long started happening. A shy smile, a small laugh, an extra squeeze of his hand. The time had come and she was falling in love with him.

And now they were married. Gone were his doubts, his fears, his loneliness. He was completely in love with her, knowing he would spend the rest of his life with her and praying it would be a long life.

Blood had begun seeping out of her right boot now, and there was a long scratch on her neck. He frowned. These were not the ordinary injuries associated with access. Something unusual and frightening was happening. Frightening because he could do absolutely nothing to help. She was in her world now.

The headset clicked on and Sarah's voice came through.

"Company, big guy. Looks like a power quad with... damn! The fifth one's a psychosuit! Power up and give me a hand, double time!" His headset crackled from interference caused by a drawn holoknife, and he ran up the tight corridor to his wingman, his fear for both women being frozen out by the deadly coldness he relied on in battle.

* * * *

The crescendo had arrived. Chris had fully committed now, and while the damage we'd taken was considerable, we were in a position to hurt him bad.

"READY?" I screamed. Both nodded their heads slightly. I could tell they were reaching the end of their endurance. I had passed the end of my endurance.

I turned out to the storm. My right foot was icy cold, and there was a bright black mark on my neck from a vicious cut Chris had given me in the nanosecond I had dropped my guard to send more support to Kiki. I was feeling weak in a way I hadn't since Posen had physically attacked me while I was accessing. That meant I was probably taking a beating in my physical body as well as here. No matter. Time for some payback. And payback is a bitch.

"Atarasikusuru!" I cried into the storm, using the Japanese word meaning renew.

The vortex behind us instantly turned into golden ice. The roar from the grinding, twisting maelstrom exploded into a thundering boom that swept away every shred of black on the pinnacle. Ramming the poisonous cloud back, the billions of shards that had been the vortex spread over and through the puterverse. At the same time, huge clouds of UTC crystals identical to the vortex erupted from the ground and countless structures where we had been laying the UTC mines for the last two years. Ripping the gilded, artificial surface into a fine mist of color, scents and sounds, they revealed the true face of this spoiled world. Black, rotting and putrid, every square meter of the puterverse lay open like a festering wound, an unhealthy puss seeping from every gash, a fetid mucus spurting from every encrusted pore. The horrible stench of oily gray and sickly green filled our lungs while the rumbling agonies of exposed hatred crashed against our senses, numbing them with needles of rancid code.

A soul-wrenching scream swallowed all sound. Torn out of shredded lungs, clawing with razor sharp hooks to remain entombed inside itself but being forced out, it laid open deep cuts on our arms and legs, and spilled hot bile onto our bodies. Chris Young was fighting every moment, every millimeter, every portion of his death. But he was dying.

Unable to hold the puterverse in his perverted grip any longer, he released his hold to save himself. Instantly, the venomous fluids and gaping wounds began boiling away. From the healing wounds, the true surface of the puterverse appeared.

Kiki pulled her hand away from me and stepped off the ledge. She floated for a moment while beautiful white wings spread out from her back. Raising her arms above her head she beckoned to the skies. They moaned with relief, as though a mighty burden had been lifted, and began shimmering. From far inside the

blackness came a flash of deepest blue. It pulsed a second time, then spread through the skies. It seemed, at first, as though the obsidian darkness would relinquish its reign, but no, the blue was from the sky, but not of it. Racing and glimmering, it coated the black with a dark blue that grew lighter and lighter. Pinpoints of solid black began peeking through, then shafts, then areas. The blue condensed and shrank, lightening and intensifying in color, and then it was raining. A peal of electron thunder tore open the skies, and in the backwash of deafening noise came the long, thin wail of a lost soul who had passed from this reality and into the eternal one that awaited him.

Kiki, her glowing form dripping from the rain, turned and smiled at me, laughing. Ignoring my pain, and shouting with joy, I jumped off the ledge and joined her in the air, and we began playfully chasing each other, swooping and diving and acting quite insane. Like small children, we flitted about, losing our fear and pain in the downpour of healing energy that washed away forever the presence of Chris Young.

I vaulted over Kiki in mid-flight, laughing, and swung around toward the pinnacle where we'd fought our battle. Mike was still standing there, staring off over the plain. I flew down and landed beside him.

"Hey, party pooper!" I bumped up close to him, throwing my arms around him. "C'mon! It's over! Let's go for a tour of the place, huh?"

"No," he whispered.

"No?" I asked, feeling just a trifle less happy. "Why not? Look, if it's because of the damage, don't worry. We can fix"--

"No, Abby" He shook his head, voice intense with fear. "No! It's not over! Young's not dead yet!" I let go and backed up.

"What are you talking about, Mike? You heard him. You saw him. This rain is everywhere in the puterverse by now. Where could he..."

"There!" He raised an arm and pointed. I looked, walking up to the edge in dazed and horrified realization.

The Quantum. It hadn't changed. All along the bank the rain was splashing and dancing on the ground, washing away the last vestiges of Chris' influence and presence. But there was no rain falling on the Quantum. It continued on, undisturbed by the otherwise complete transformation of the puterverse.

A stab of molten despair filled me. I sagged to my knees, sobbing. I had done everything I could do. There was nothing left. And Young was still alive. Alive and in a place we could not reach. Still, there must be some way. There had to be.

"What is it guys?" Kiki landed beside me, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder. "What's wrong, Abigail?" she asked softly.

"It's that bastard Young!" shouted Mike, his rage and frustration darkening his green aura. "He's still alive! See? The Quantum! It's unchanged! He's in the Quantum, that..." Mike called him an unprintable name, then fought down his anger. "He's in the Quantum," he finished quietly, "and we can't touch him."

"Can't we mine the Quantum?" Kiki asked, a hint of hysteria in her voice as the nameless fear she had conquered only minutes before returned.

"We can't mine the Quantum, Kiki, and he knows it," Mike replied bitterly. "There's too many lives that depend on the data in that river. Life support patients. Phased vehicles. Traffic controls. Space stations. We destroy the Quantum and thousands, maybe millions, die."

“If we forced him out of the river, we could”--

“We could what?” Mike interrupted roughly. “We gave it our best shot and he’s still breathing. It doesn’t matter, though, because we can’t force him out, and he ain’t coming out, Kiki. And he knows damn well we can’t get him.”

“Yes we can.”

Mike and Kiki turned to me. I stood up slowly, my entire body aching from the pounding, both here and in my own world.

“Yes, we can get him,” I repeated, trying to convince myself I wasn’t insane with grief and that what I was thinking would really work.

“What... what do you mean, Abby?” Kiki’s voice trembled in fear of my answer. “You can’t go into the Quantum! Not even our UTC shielding would hold off the massive weight of that much binary.”

“Kiki’s right, Abby,” Mike said softly. “It was one thing when he hit you coming across. It was just streams of data from the river. No real force. But you go into that river and you die.”

“I know that. To be honest, if I could go into that river and know for certain that I could take Chris with me, I would. But I don’t know that. I *do* know that I don’t have to go into the Quantum to get him.”

“Then how?” Kiki asked.

I told them.

* * * *

Aaron could smell the nose-wrinkling stench of burned out servos even in his sealed helmet. He limped back to the side alley that they had left Abby in, Sarah leading the way. Her left arm was dangling, and her helmet had been cracked open. Blood ebbed from a scalp wound, slowly coating her armor. He was little better. His knee had been badly wrenched and his right wrist was broken, as were at least two ribs. They needed at least a minute to regroup.

It was a minute denied. A bright spot speared out of the darkness behind them, skewering them in its unforgiving light. They’d been spotted, and pursuit was inevitable. They had made a good account of themselves, taking out three of the quad team. But one more remained. One more and the psychosuit.

“I’m about all in, Aaron.” Sarah gasped through her still functional headset. She wasn’t complaining, she was apprising him. “That freak broke my arm in the last attack, and I’m bleeding bad into the suit.”

“Weapons?”

“Ammo’s out. Holoknives gone. I’m down to a blade, my muscle and some dirty words.”

Despite the grim situation, Aaron smiled. There was no better combat buddy than Sarah. Sarah and Abby.

“Me, too. I’ve got five slugs, a sonic grenade and a magpuck. Okay, let’s make it tight and nasty. No exit scenario.”

Sarah nodded, understanding that the time had come for them to exchange their lives for the success of the mission. She ducked up the alley and moved quickly toward the small cavern where Abby was accessing.

Following, Aaron reached down with his left hand and detached the grenade. Arming it, he dropped it in the tight passageway and moved as quickly as his injured knee would let him, hoping to put at least ten meters of rock between him and the blast.

He entered the cavern and was grabbed by Sarah, who jerked him aside just as the grenade detonated. Tons of rock came crashing down into the small passageway, blocking their pursuers out and blocking them in. The reverberations continued for a half minute as the tunnel collapsed completely, entombing them. He put an arm around Sarah and sagged back against the rock face and sank to the floor, sighing. Sarah slid down next to him and grinned, nearly suppressing the grimace of pain.

“So, this is what it takes to be alone with you,” she said.

“You watch yourself, woman.” Aaron chuckled. “I’m a married man.”

“Aaron?” came a distant and unsteady voice.

Aaron and Sarah jerked their heads up. It was Abigail, looking confused and dazed, but looking at them.

* * * *

I could barely make them out. They seemed to be sitting down against the wall. Sarah’s suit appeared damaged, but it was like looking into a sandstorm during a heavy fog while it rained on a moonless night.

Aaron stood up and walked slowly to me. Was he limping? I raised my hands sluggishly feeling like my bones were about a half-meter behind my arms.

“Don’t come any closer.” I hoped I sounded clearer to him than to me. “I’m still in the puterverse.” I continued raising my hands and began undoing my armor. The upper chest gel packs fell free and I felt a little better.

“...gail... matter?” He sounded as though he was shouting from the opposite end of a long tunnel, and while I could hear him, the echoes tripped over themselves, making him difficult to understand.

“We destroyed Chris’ hold on the puterverse, Aaron, but we couldn’t destroy him.” I removed the rest of the armor and dropped the holster. Removing the excess matter made me feel better, but the movement in both dimensions was very disorienting and nauseating. I began working slowly to remove my boots. The right one was sticky, and a tingle of cold went up my leg when I pulled it off.

“..at... u ..ing?... ll .ight?”

I shook my head, not understanding. But I could guess.

“I have to go after him, Aaron. We beat him here, but if I don’t finish the job in our reality, Chris will just come back. If not this century, then the next. Or the one after that.” Having taken all my armor off, I began removing my uniform. The less mass I took with me, the less energy I’d have to use. Each kilo that I took off eased the pain.

“Abi... !” He seemed upset at what I was doing.

“Aaron, you have to clear the base! Get everyone out of here! I’m going to make absolutely certain Young is dead. To do that, I have to blow the generators.”

“...oooo!”

“Please, Aaron! This has to be done. I’m partly responsible for what Chris has done to this world. To

our world.” I felt an icy hot tear trickle down my cheek. “To you. If it hadn’t been for our NATech in the twenty-first century, there wouldn’t have been a NATech in the twenty-seventh. For 600 years he has controlled the lives and deaths of billions of people. It ends here. Now.” I was now wearing only my torso body sheath. I stooped down and through the thick fog found my boot. I drew the knife and stood up.

“I’m blowing the generators in twenty minutes. Get everyone out.” I stared at him, his form even more obscured by my tears. “I love you, Aaron.” I turned away.

“Abi...!”

“Total.”

* * * *

I slipped back into the puterverse and sagged to the ground. I had not felt so exhausted since my IHAD, three years and a lifetime ago. I looked in my left hand. No knife. But then, I hadn’t expected one. Not yet.

Kiki lifted my shoulders up and laid my head in her lap.

“Hey, Kiki. Is Mike back yet?”

“No, not yet,” she said quietly. “He’s constructed the shunts, but he has to rebuild the access structure before he can initiate the generator overload routine.”

“S’okay,” I said sleepily. “I’ll just wait here, if you don’t mind. You’ve really gown up, Kiki. You must be a dozen centimeters taller than me, now.”

“Uh-huh,” she said noncommittally.

“What’s on your mind, lady?” She really was a lady, too.

“Abigail, are you sure this is going to work? Transferring your presence into the puterverse is one thing, but your physical body? Can it be done?”

“I’m sure it can be done. Whether it can be survivable, that I’m not sure. But there’s no choice. Mike’s shunting programs will work for a while, trapping Chris in the real world, but Chris will figure a way around them. We might have the superior code, but he’s had centuries of practice with his.”

“I suppose.”

“Hey. Would you rather I didn’t try? What then? I won’t live forever, Kiki. The day will come when it will be just you and Mike. Do you want to see this beautiful dimension ruined again? Now that you two have the chance to make it the way it should be?”

“But what about all your computers and programs? What about the link that’s been binding our two realities together all these centuries?”

“It will continue, Kiki. In fact, I’m counting on you and Mike to oversee it. Just think, Kiki! As twisted, perverted and restricted as the puterverse was under Chris’ hand, it can be that much the opposite under yours! The children who played at level one will be able to run and learn and enjoy at any level, because there won’t be any levels. Not in the way there had been. A select few have been getting a taste of such a world for several months. Now, everyone can have that taste.

“Kiki, these are two worlds, tied together in a commerce of information. You and Mike are the first natural, living beings in this world. You can begin...”

“You, too, Abby. After all, you made us.”

“Yes, I did,” I said slowly. “I can move freely here, without physical cost. And I can act like you and Mike. But I’m not of this world. I’m from the flesh world. It is there that my husband is. It is there that we’ll raise our children, Lord willing. It’s there that I was born and there I will die.”

“Just not yet!” she insisted with a smile.

“Let’s hope not,” I smiled back at her. “Here comes Mike. Time to get ready.”

* * * *

Aaron looked helplessly as his wife went rigid again, becoming unaware of him. He had clearly heard every word she’d said, although she apparently hadn’t heard him as well. His heart pounded against his fractured ribs as though trying to impale itself on them. He nearly wished it would.

Nearly. He looked at his wife, knowing she was lost to him, but would carry out her final wish. He clicked on the headset, switching over to the Lieutenant’s channel.

“Lieutenant Eyer? This is Marks.”

“Where are you, Aaron? We’re cleaning up here. You three head to my beacon on the double. We could use a little muscle to”--

“Sorry, ma’am, but that’s not possible. Abigail is still accessing, and Sarah and I have caved in the entry tunnel. We’ve got a couple suits on us and we need to hold this position.”

“And your objective?” she asked tonelessly, knowing the entire battle was pointless without the destruction of Chris Young.

“Still undetermined, ma’am, but not for long. Abigail was successful in the puterverse, but needs to blow this base to finish the job. Generator detonation is in eighteen minutes.”

There was silence on the other end as Jody reflected on Aaron’s words. A successful mission, then, but at a very dear price.

“Very well. I’ll spread the word. I’ll send a team down there stat to pull you two out. Maybe we’ll get lucky and we can yank Abigail before overload.”

“Aaron?” Sarah was standing up, staring at the piled rock in the alley. There were crackling sounds from beyond the cave in. “They must’ve wanted us bad, because here they come.” Aaron nodded and spoke into his headset.

“We’d appreciate that, ma’am. And the faster you got here, the more we’d appreciate it. Marks out.”

He snapped off the link and drew his heavy slug gun. Shifting it to his uninjured left hand, he stepped back in direct line of sight of the tunnel. Sarah, her knife gripped in her right hand, pressed against the far wall. It wouldn’t be long.

* * * *

“You’re sure about this?” Mike stood facing me, holding my hands. Kiki waited for us behind him. We

were standing out on the vast, unspoiled plain of the true puterverse.

“Yes.”

He leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek.

“Then be careful.” He squeezed my hands once and walked to Kiki. Arm in arm, they walked a hundred meters off, then turned and watched.

I looked around. There was nothing to see but Mike and Kiki. And off in the distance, the Quantum River. Well, no point in putting it off.

Gathering my will, I looked down at my left hand. My knife was supposed to be there. My knife was supposed to be in my left hand. It had to be there, it belonged there. I wanted it there.

And it was.

Immediately a fire exploded from where my puterverse being touched the real knife, searing the skin off and pressing the molten haft against my raw muscle. I screamed, but kept my feet. Blood oozed around the hot metal and I felt the ragged otherworldly knife settle against my living bone, bonding to it with agonizing slowness.

Slowly, ever slowly, I forced the pain from my mind. My knees weakened, but I refused to surrender to the agony. Surrender meant death for me and victory for Chris. I could not allow that. I would not allow it!

“I will not give up!!” I cried, sobs of pain and anger ripping the words from my throat.

Looking down at the knife, I marveled at it. Unlike anything else in the puterverse, it had mass. It had substance. It was a reality inside another reality. I had done it. Lifting the knife, I held it out.

“I will not give up!” I screamed again.

Gathering my will, I looked at my body. My body was supposed to be here. My body was supposed to be in the puterverse. It had to be here. It belonged here...

* * * *

With a crackling roar, the rocks exploded free and a hunched blur leapt directly at Aaron, going for his throat. It was the psychosuit.

Like the lurker in a standard NATech patrol, the person in the psychosuit was an outcast, a psychotic being that had been ripped by NATech to serve them. Bonded permanently to the light armor combat suit, this unstable fighting machine was part berserker, part cold computer. Not anchored too firmly to reality to begin with, the woman inside this suit had had her moorings completely torn free, and she was allowed to act out any impulse she wished. Of course, those impulses were imbedded in her ripped mind and were to NATech’s bidding. Eventually, if she survived long enough, her mind would burn out completely and she would be a husk. The suit would be cut off her and she would be disposed of. To NATech, the suit was far more valuable.

For now, though, the psychosuit was fully functional. She hit Aaron high up on the shoulder, knocking him back. His damaged gyros tried to compensate and succeeded. His damaged servos tried to obey the adjustment commands from the gyros and failed. He crashed to the hard stone floor, landing on his back and grunting in pain as his broken ribs tore at the cartilage. His gun clattered free.

He wasted no time but rolled to his side and rose to his feet. The psycho was already on him. He swung his right arm, grimacing as the wrist crashed against her armor. But he was lucky. It caught her full and tossed her ten meters toward Sarah. He closed immediately.

Sarah was fighting the remaining member of the quad team. She had disarmed him of his energy gun, but still had to contend with his holoknives. Since she had no enerarmor, and her knife was metallic, she couldn't afford to be touched by a holoknife. Unfortunately, she already had; several pieces of sliced armor lay on the floor, and blood was dripping steadily now from her exposed left arm.

There was a low, mechanical growl and Aaron jerked his attention back to the psycho. His injuries had started clogging his mind, and he was losing focus. He had to end this quick, or she would.

She jumped at his head again, then when he raised an arm to smash her, impossibly changed direction in midair and slashed at his legs. He jumped back instantly, but felt the sharp surge of electricity as the holoknife sliced through his armor and four centimeters into his leg. He tossed her off again, causing no damage, and backed up to the wall. This was not going well. If they defeated Aaron and Sarah now, all they needed to do was destroy the access grids and Abigail would be at their mercy.

There was a scream of agony and Aaron snapped his head up. Abigail!

She was twisting and convulsing, a primal scream being torn from her throat. Such was its quality that it froze everyone in their motion, for the moment completely oblivious of anything except the anguish of the hideous marionette inside the access grid dancing on a madman's strings. Even the psycho turned, startled at hearing a kindred soul.

Aaron stepped forward. He had to do something. He couldn't just leave her in such misery. To his left he heard the bestial growl as the psycho roused herself out of the instant and prepared to launch again. Ignoring her, he reached out, ready to enter the access grid.

She was gone!

Before his eyes, Abigail disappeared! She was there one moment, blood dribbling from her left hand, and the next she was gone!

A heavy weight slammed against him and something deep inside him snapped. Ignoring the stabbing pains in his left shoulder, he reached his right arm across his body, moving so rapidly the psycho never saw it coming. A massive hand closed over her head, pulling her free.

Maddened with grief and fear for his wife, Aaron brought all his desperation to focus and closed his right hand. Unaware of the blinding pain in his right wrist, unaware of the thrashing and wild attacks of the psycho, unaware even of the cracking that was coming from the helmet in his grip, he focused only on closing his hand.

Wild squeals came from the creature, the terror of helpless prey as it succumbs to a merciless and relentless predator. The thrashing became frantic, then disjointed, then weaker. Finally, it ceased altogether as, with a loud crunch, Aaron closed his fist.

He stood there, uncaring, holding the gruesome, limp burden in his outstretched hand. He had poured all his anger and frustration into that final attack, and his cold, efficient, combat mind had returned. Abigail would find a way to get to him. He had absolute faith in her and her abilities. All that mattered was for him to get out alive. He didn't want to disappoint his wife by dying.

Tossing the destroyed suit aside, Aaron turned quickly and scooped up his gun. Moving quickly to where

Sarah and the last NATech grunt were fighting, he pulled loose the magpuck and set it for ten seconds.

Sarah's eyes flickered at him as he closed, and he held up the magpuck.

"Eight!" He shouted, then tossed it toward her right, forcing her to move out of position. She never hesitated. Though it made her injured side vulnerable to attack, she immediately moved to grab the airborne puck.

Seeing his chance, the NATech soldier stepped up, his holoknife thrusting forward. This would be over in...

Something overwhelmingly strong seized him and spun him around. So intent was he on the kill that he'd failed to notice either the death of the psycho or Aaron's attack. Too late, he realized his mistake.

Holding his gun low and close, Aaron fired all five rounds into the stomach armor of the NATech suit. Then, jamming his right arm against the throat of the man, he rabbit-punched the stomach armor with his left fist. Finally, he brought his left arm up and around the man's head, obscuring his vision for a moment. In that moment, Sarah slipped in and attached the magpuck to the cracked armor plating.

Terrified, the NATech soldier shoved Aaron off. He and Sarah fell back, watching. The soldier looked at them, falling into an attack posture. Seeming to feel their intent stare, he stood up quickly, the fear of understanding jolting through him. He looked down at his armor just as the magpuck exploded.

Screaming through the mask, he tried to tear the magpuck free. But the 1100-degree heat of the boiling magnesium fuel was far beyond the tolerances of the suit, and the puck had bonded to it, melting first the suit, then its circuitry, and ultimately the man.

Staggering blindly, pounding at the instrument of his death, he lurched forward. Stepping quickly to one side, Aaron watched impassively as the dying man stumbled into the grid area and was instantly accessed at unlimited level. His motion stopped immediately and the suit, now devoid of life, crashed to the ground, the still flaring magpuck casting hard, cruel shadows on the injured and dead.

* * * *

I rose to my feet, still holding the knife. The pain of accessing was gone. That part of me that had been Princess--that perhaps still was--reveled in the sweet agony that made me so alive. The terrible dragging and sluggishness was gone. I could see and hear with incredible clarity.

Mike and Kiki were still watching me. Their looks were a combination of wonder and fear as they looked on me as I really was for the first time. I wanted to go to them, but there wasn't time. I needed to go to Chris' location immediately.

Not knowing how I could, but knowing that I could, I exited the puterverse, wanting to put myself with Chris.

Lights popped and flashed all around me, and the pain returned. So it wasn't the being there that you paid for, it was the getting there.

Hurt more than I could stand, I found I couldn't stand. Collapsing to the stone floor, my knife clattering free, I gasped and twitched as my body seemed to burst into flames. I was a fool! Chris wouldn't need to maintain a life-sustaining environment; he was buried inside the memory core of a computer no doubt locked away in a vault deep in some hidden chamber.

Still gasping from the thin air and high heat--it was easily 60 degrees--I rose shakily to my feet and

looked around in the dim red lighting. There was a single unit with a display against the far wall, with cables strewn all about the floor. Picking up my knife, I cautiously approached the computer. In just the few seconds I'd been here, sweat was already pouring off my body

"Hello, Wyeth." Chris' voice came from all corners of the small room. His voice sounded strained. Partly from his shellacking in the puterverse, but more likely from his efforts to circumvent Mike's shunting routines that kept him trapped here.

Not having anything to say, nor the breath to say it, I ignored him and began studying the panel. It was fairly straightforward I should be able to cut power by...

A razor sliced through my upper right arm, another my inner thigh. Crying out, I spun around, knife out and ready.

Nothing. The room was... wait. Up in the corner. I noticed a slight movement. A laser! I dove underneath it, hoping it couldn't depress far enough to fire. It couldn't, but I was stuck in this corner. I heard Chris chuckle.

"Really, Wyeth. I'm surprised you even thought I'd leave myself undefended."

"Marks, Chris. My name's Abigail Marks. Or have you lost too many memory banks to remember?"

"All right, bitch! Abigail it is. I'm glad you've gotten used to your tiny body."

That was it! I could get to him, but not in the way I'd thought. And I had an idea about how I could get to him physically, too.

"Better than no body, Chris," I shot back in my snotty, fingernails against the chalkboard voice, the one you lose when you turn twenty. "I should thank you. Because of you, I'm happier than I ever could have been. I'm married, I have friends, I have a healthy body. Everything you don't have, you video game reject." An ancient term, but from a time we'd both lived in. And appropriate, too, because I'd pushed his button.

He had a lot to say about that. He just didn't say anything printable. After thirty seconds of filth, I cut him off with a laugh.

"What's the matter, Chrissy-boy?" I twirled in a circle, carefully staying under the laser. I knew now why he only had one. It wasn't to disable or kill; it was to detain. "Can't you do this? You might have had your chuckles for centuries past, but I'm alive! I get to move and breathe and travel and love! You..." I sneered, "you get to stay in this dark little room while I go out into the world and live." I laughed at him.

"I'll be alive tomorrow, Chris," I pressed on, hoping to anger him to the point of recklessness. I had to hurry, though. The air was becoming less and less breathable. "I'll be alive and you'll be dead. Mike's got you trapped in here!"

"Not for much longer." He seemed to have regained some of his composure.

"Nope. Not for much longer," I agreed with a harsh laugh.

"Why should you..." He broke off, then gave out another outburst. "You little ! Your damned construct's blowing the generators!"

"Uh-huh. I said I was going to destroy you, Chris. In less than five minutes time, I'll keep my promise. And I'll let you in on a secret." Here I went out on a limb. "I'm leaving the same way I came! So you can

die the way you existed: alone.”

That got him. The far wall on my right opened suddenly and a NATech suit entered. Lean and tight, just barely larger than me, he looked like a hungry jaguar. I could make out thin slits beneath his wrists where holoknives could slide easily into his hands. His mask was solid black with the pale glimmer of a skull projecting through.

“Kill her,” Chris said flatly.

He lunged at me without warning, but I didn’t need a warning. I suspected this type of arrangement had to exist. That Chris had a perimeter laser told me there was access to this room by humans. That there was just the one told me he counted on his own humans to take care of intruders. I’d goaded him into sending for the suit even though he knew I couldn’t really damage him with just a knife. With luck, Chris had summoned his own executioner.

I flung myself around him, dodging his knife and putting a foot to his throat. Feinting for the door, I suckered Chris into closing it to keep me in. I wanted it closed as much as he did. At least, I think I did. I’d know in a few seconds.

He came at me again, in a crouch, a fresh holoknife in his right hand. I jumped over him and gave him my blade in the back. It skittered off the armor, but I got a good look at his equipment belt. Standard NATech issue, even down here.

My shoulder hit the hot stone floor and I rose quickly. He had recovered as well and was already attacking. I fainted to the right, then...

“Aaaahhh!” I screamed. The laser! I’d pulled a rookie stunt and forgotten the laser! It punched a hole through my left shoulder and stayed on, pinning me. If I moved in any direction, it would cut away more muscle, bone, and artery. Worse, my opponent knew it and wasn’t wasting any time in finishing me off. His knife punched forward to slice open my stomach.

I jerked back while swinging my blade above and behind my shoulder. The laser cut for several centimeters, nearly causing me to pass out from the pain, then was blocked by my blade. I stepped back quickly to get out of the laser’s scope, then tripped over the floor cabling. The NATech goon fell on me, his hand slashing at my stomach.

Nothing happened. The holoknife had evaporated.

Seizing the initiative, I slashed my own knife--still glowing hot from the laser--down on the inside of his arm. I was rewarded with a heavy jolt of power as I sliced through the holoknife energy lines. I was still in mortal danger--his strength even in this low powered suit would be four times mine--but we were closer to equal.

Slamming my right hand to the back of his head, I jammed the knife in my left into his throat. The armor allowed the point to penetrate, then hardened, resisting my strongest thrust. I rolled hard to my side, bringing us up against the companel. He remained on top of me and grabbed my left wrist. Squeezing, he broke it, forcing me to drop the knife. He then brought his hand in and wrapped it around my throat. I slid my right hand down his back and found the sonic grenade I had seen earlier. I twisted the dial quietly to one-second fuse. The suicide switch.

In this killers embrace we remained locked. Having me helpless, he was waiting for Chris to give the order. I heard Chris chuckle. It was a metallic, humorless, humanless chuckle. I couldn’t kill Chris, after all. He’d been dead for centuries.

“It looks like you’ll be breaking your promise, Abigail. I’ll be through your construct’s shunts in less than a minute, and the generators won’t detonate for another two minutes. This works out nicely. Everyone will think I’m dead, and I’ll be rid of you. I made a mistake, 654 years ago, Wyeth. I should have killed you, not used you.”

“It was a mistake, Chris,” I choked out. The lights were beginning to pop again. “And you just made another one. Check those shunts again. I’ll bet you find a second layer. Mike always was a tease.”

“NOOOO!” he screamed. Then, with a hate-filled voice, he yelled, “Kill her! Kill her now!”

“Total,” I said, and armed the grenade.

Epilogue

“Attention, please. Your attention, please. Will all passengers bound for the settler hyperidor ship *E. Ann Hinman* please check into terminal eight. Attention, please. Your attention, please. Will all passengers bound for the settler hyperidor ship *E. Ann Hinman* please check into terminal eight. Shuttle craft embarkation will begin in two hours. Thank you.”

“That’s your call, Abby!” Susie shouted over the stall door. “Geez! Maybe we should just unbolt the toilet and you can take it with you!”

She was being sarcastic, but it wasn’t a half bad idea. The last month, I’d been all but living in the bathroom. I didn’t think she’d take it right, though, so I ignored her.

My tummy settled down by itself and I met her outside. Kate was with her, holding her daughter, who seemed to be all curls and smiles. The three of us wandered over to terminal eight, where Aaron, Raul and Sarah had already gone. Aaron smiled his slow, quiet smile and held up our boarding passes. He gave one to me, the other to Kate. Susie snuggled up close to Raul and smiled at us.

“So, into the wild blue yonder, huh? Any regrets?”

“Yeah!” I said. “I wish you were coming with us!”

“Sorry, runt,” Sarah broke in. “but traveling through hyperidors isn’t my cup of coffee.”

“Cup of tea,” I corrected.

“Uh-huh. Whatever. I’ll just stay here and keep my feet on the ground.” She grinned. “Or in it, if that’s what Jody wants.”

“And she’ll want it, no doubt,” Raul said. “Company A sergeants are in high demand, now that the Resistance is an official coordinating force with the various planet governments. And there will be a long period of adjustment as NATech finds its new niche as society begins hatching from its centuries old shell.”

“How poetic!” Susie exclaimed with admiration. “How come you never talk to me like that?” He smiled and whispered in her ear. She moaned and sighed. “Never mind. I guess you do talk to like that to me.” Sarah laughed.

“Knock it off, Raul. I don’t want her flying us into a mountain on the way back to base 'cause you got her all hot and bothered.” Susie and Raul both blushed. Sarah had found her next targets. We sat around a table near the huge windows that looked out over the Melbourne spaceport, and the shuttle that would take us to our settler ship.

I held on to Aaron tightly, and stared out the window, listening in as my friends talked among themselves. I was a lucky woman. In the six months since the death of Chris Young and the vaporization of the NATech stronghold, Earth had moved rapidly forward to make up for the lost centuries. Already we had established diplomatic ties with eighteen planets, joining their System--a kind of federation of planets.

NATech still existed, but their grip and grit were gone. Wanting to throw them off, but knowing they couldn't without risking chaos, the many city-states of Earth instead reformed NATech, fracturing it into locally managed resources. They were able to maintain organization, but now truly served the public. Maybe Deiley had been right after all. He had not been seen since that night in Glendale, but I somehow was sure he'd make his presence known again. He was too good--and too smart--a man.

The puterverse was being slowly rebuilt. Because of our safeguards, embedded at the same time we'd laid our thousands of mines, the critical systems had been rewritten in UTC the same instant they'd ceased to exist in binary. It was a vast, open land now, was the puterverse, but it wasn't a wasteland. It was--to be trite--a new land, there for everyone to explore and use and enjoy.

And perhaps one day travel through. I had been the first--and undoubtedly for a long time to come, the only--traveler to pass through the puterverse. I wouldn't be the last. Although my two trips through the puterverse--first to Chris' lair, then to Dr. Barrett's sick bay as the sonic grenade detonated--nearly cost me my life, I had proven that the distance between two points no longer mattered. In a dimension without real time, movement was instantaneous, limited only by the relevant time required to hold body and soul together. Space travel was not nor never would be obsolete since puterverse entry and exit depended on open access points. There was now, however, an alternative.

And Mike and Kiki would be there as guides and mentors, the founders of a new kingdom and perhaps a new people. If they were living code, then could they in turn make living code? I placed a hand on my growing tummy. Was the creation of inorganic life any more or less miraculous than organic life?

We passed the warm spring afternoon away, quietly talking and laughing and sharing these final moments together as a group. Kate and her daughter were going to come with us; she had no one here to keep her and enough sad memories to push her. She loved little Lena dearly, but the circumstances of her conception would haunt her for many years.

Sarah was regular army. In it for life, she would undoubtedly go far, provided she learned how to blunt her observations a little more. She was, as Raul said, the Sergeant of Company A in the 179th, a position gladly abandoned by me. A commission was almost inevitable once Jody made captain.

Susie and Raul were still attached to the Resistance and Jody's outfit, though the association was becoming looser each month. My first flash of woman's intuition almost four years ago had been on the money; it was only a matter of time before they started talking quietly about going to the stars.

The boarding call came through and it was time to say good-bye. With a mixture of excitement and sadness, we made our farewells. I cried and cried and cried, holding on to each of my loved ones, not wanting to let go, until Aaron pulled at me gently. I let go of Sarah, and we walked to the boarding ramp. Susie was there, holding back tears. Aaron went ahead to help Kate settle Lena in, leaving the two of us alone.

"See?" she teased, wiping a tear. "I told you not to discount marriage and children so quickly. Of course, you didn't listen, so now I can say I told you so."

She held me close while I squeezed her with all my strength.

"You're such a beautiful woman, Abby. I'm so proud. I love you."

“I’m here because of you, Susie. I owe you everything. Thank you. I love you.”

We pulled apart and I followed up after Aaron. Halfway, I turned and looked down the ramp. She was still standing there, keeping an ever watchful eye on me. I would miss her dearly.

I boarded the shuttle and found my seat. Aaron had thoughtfully chosen an aisle seat for me, knowing even on the brief three-hour trip to the far side of the moon, where the *E. Ann Hinman* was orbiting, I’d need to make one or two trips to the ladies room. Since he was so big, he had the aisle seat across from me.

I was reaching up to store my travel bag in the overhead compartment--didn’t air vehicles ever change design?--when I heard the elderly woman in the seat beside mine give a little chuckle.

“You might want to get a little longer top, young lady. Either that or keep your arms below your shoulders.”

“Oops. Sorry.” I bowed in apology, then tightened the soft white tie around my midriff. I sat down next to her and quickly configured the restraint field to keep pressure off my middle.

“Pregnant?” she asked.

“Uh-huh. Four months. The baby’s due in February.”

“Aren’t you worried about taking your baby on a hyperidor trip?”

“No, not really.”

“Ah! To be young again!” the older woman reminisced with another quiet laugh. “So free of worries and cares! Life won’t be as easy when you get older, young lady. You wouldn’t believe the things I’ve seen in seventy years.” She smiled a wonderful grandmother’s smile. “So. Have you chosen a name for your baby, yet?”

“Not yet,” I answered, looking forward to our trip together. “My husband and I are still trying to choose good ones.”

“Take it from me, young lady, and pick a traditional name. They hold up the best. You give your child a traditional name and there’s no telling how far he will go. But make it a solid name, too. Like John.”

“John’s a nice name.” I smiled at her as the engines began their startup whine. I gazed out the window, my heart fluttering with excitement as the craft slowly moved away from the terminal. “I knew someone a long time ago named John.”

The End