

CONNOR'S STORM



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Connor's Storm

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The insistent beeping would continue until I got out of bed, and lifted up the receiver on the phone. I didn't want to turn around to see the expression on Cliff's face. I knew he was awake now too, half sitting up, anticipation on his face. Or was it dread? I squeezed the receiver in my hand, and punched in the code that would tell United World Defense Headquarters that I acknowledged and was responding. I sighed, then told Cliff in a voice that no matter how hard I tried still carried the slightest traces of an Irish brogue, "I gotta go."

"Jesus, Connor," Cliff complained, "you just got back from a ten-month stint on Jupiter6. I thought they'd give you a few months at least. You've only been home a week."

I hated it when Cliff whined. It was a particularly annoying trait he had, but I couldn't say I blamed him this time. There was a part of me that felt like whining with him. "It might be nothing." I shrugged, but even as the words came out of my mouth, I knew it was a lie. UWD never called me on that phone unless it was an emergency.

Cliff was suddenly standing in front of me, watching intently as I pulled on my one-piece, form-fitting black suit, which had been made by the grace of nanotechnology. This suit allowed the soldier to

blend into any environment. It could adapt to all kinds of temperatures, detect poisonous fumes and enable you to carry ten times the weight you normally could carry without feeling the effects.

I stopped to look at myself in the mirror. I looked scary as hell with my skintight black suit stretched over a six-foot-four, muscular frame. With those big black boots and broad shoulders, it was enough to make poor civilians quake in their place. Maybe I was saved by my black, wavy hair, which at the moment was in defiance of regulations, curling on my collar the way it was, or my indigo blue eyes which people said made me look kind. Then again, with the helmet on, no one could see what was underneath.

"Do you think you'll have to leave immediately?" Cliff asked.

"I don't know," I replied, meeting his eyes. I never knew, but I had to be prepared in case. I picked up the helmet. "I'll call you as soon as I can." I leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. My heart was pounding in my chest, but it had nothing to do with Cliff. I always felt a rush whenever that phone rang, a mix of anticipation and excitement.

There was a strained silence as I headed to the door. I turned around once and looked at him. "We may have to put off the ceremony, depending on..."

"Don't worry about it," Cliff threw back, folding his arms across his chest. His voice was as cold as stone. "I'm used to it. Gives you a good excuse, doesn't it?"

I sighed, clutching the helmet. "I can't help my job, Cliff."

"You've paid your dues with the interstellar forces, you could always leave."

"And do what?" I demanded, narrowing my eyes. "Goddamn it, Cliff, it's not the time to argue with me now." I hesitated, ever conscious that the car was waiting downstairs. I thought maybe Cliff would come over to me, hug me or something, but he didn't. He turned his back instead.

I sighed and left the room. This marriage thing had been a constant source of conflict between us. Cliff wanted to get married. I'd been less enthusiastic. I really didn't know why. Finally, Cliff had worn me down. We'd already made the plans, set a date and now this. As I made my way downstairs, I pushed it from my thoughts. I spotted the car waiting on the curb when I got outside, walked over and got in.

Inside the great halls of the UWD, I was greeted by Major Charles Dunn, a middle-aged armchair soldier with good family connections. He saluted me as I walked in the door. "Colonel MacMahon. How nice to see you again. How are you, Sir?"

I saluted him back briefly. "Fine, and yourself?"

"I'm well, and thank you for asking, Sir. The General is waiting in the Red Room, along with Lieutenant General Gibbons, and the Major General."

"Red Room?" That meant something. *Shit.*

"Follow me, Sir," he said.

I sighed, and began to make my way down the long corridor, glancing around at the photographs of

high-ranking officers on the walls and catching the reflection my boots made each time I took a step on the super-polished, black and white ceramic floor tiles. I couldn't help having a certain sense of déjà vu. I'd made this very same walk just ten months ago.

The Major in front of me pushed open the two heavy oak doors, and stood aside to let me in. The room was silent as I walked down the aisle toward the front, where three grey-haired men sat silently. I saluted them each in turn.

"At ease, Connor," the General said. "No need to be formal here."

I placed my hands in front of me and widened my legs some.

"Thank you for coming so promptly, Connor," General Harding began. "I know you just came off a long haul on Jupiter6. We were hoping to give you a little downtime."

I inclined my head. "I was hoping for that, too, Sir."

My comment was ignored.

Lieutenant General Gibbons looked at the Major General and said, "Well, should we get started then?"

The Major General, a younger man in his fifties stood up. I'd spent some time training under Major General Devine. He was a good man. Unlike the other two, he'd never hesitated to get into the trenches with his troops. He looked at the back of the room. "Can you bring up the pictures? Please, Connor, sit down." He indicated a chair in front of him.

As I walked over to take my seat, I looked curiously at the screen in front of me, which was

projecting images of a strange planet I couldn't remember seeing before.

"Colonel, what you are about to hear in this room is highly classified information."

"Of course, Sir," I said. *It wouldn't be the first time.*

"Sanctum," he began, pointing to the screen, "a rocky planet which is hidden behind Jupiter has been capable of sustaining life for at least three thousand years. It's been inhabited since 1875, almost two hundred years. Population is approximately one million."

The pictures clicked on and off, showing satellite images of Sanctum.

"Sanctum is a very small planet, not much bigger than Earth. UWD discovered Sanctum shortly after our second conflict with Deino ended, around 2023. At that time, Deino didn't know of its existence. Sanctum has managed to remain a mystery for many years, and the people there asked us not to disclose their location. It was originally colonized by a man named Alexander Varek, who escaped from Deino when they began to follow the teachings of right wing prophet, The Father of Will."

I raised a dark eyebrow. The Father of Will was well known to Earthlings. Deino and Earth had already engaged in several interstellar battles. The Father of Will was the revered prophet of the Deino religion. The Deino strongly believed that their mission was to convert as many people as possible to the faith. I had fought the Deino more than once and was familiar with their culture, which was a strange mix of religious fever and militarism, but as for this

planet of Sanctum, it was all new to me.

Devine went on. "We have kept the existence of Sanctum secret, not only to protect it from our mutual enemy, but because if our own population knew about the nature of our relationship with Sanctum, it might cause undue panic."

I looked at the other two men.

"You see, Connor," General Harding began, "the atmosphere on Sanctum allows for the manufacturing of a very special compound. This compound, known as ATC, prevents Earth's population from dying of toxic poisoning from the atmosphere."

My eyes widened. The scientists had informed the population that toxins in the air were under control. I had no idea that some substance produced on a planet I'd never heard of was keeping us alive. "How is...it...distributed?"

"In our drinking water, and through our ventilation systems, heating systems...it can take many forms," the General replied, looking somewhat ill at ease.

"And what would happen if...if we could no longer obtain this substance?"

"It is essential to our survival. Without it, we would die," the General said. "Not only would the population of Earth be totally wiped out in the course of one hundred years, the deaths would be, let's say...horrible."

I was speechless. I wanted to ask them why we had been lied to, but that would be a waste of breath. I tried to stifle my outrage, and pay attention to what was being said.

"Sanctum trades the compound with us for many necessities." Devine said. "We're on very good terms with their leader, Handle Samson."

Gibbons spoke. "Colonel, we have a problem. As you can guess, the problem is with the Deino. They have discovered the existence of Sanctum and its location. Apparently, there was a defector from Sanctum who returned to his home planet. They also know about the ATC, and its purpose."

"I see," I managed, my lips tight. *This wasn't good.*

"Commander Syit of the Deino forces is attempting to invade Sanctum. They intend to wipe out the people, and confiscate the ATC. If they do this, Earth will be at their mercy."

"Lieutenant General," I said, "how can the Deino rationalize the wiping out of an entire planet?"

"Commander Syit has the backing of The Prophet of Will. As you already know, Colonel, the Deino acknowledge only one sexual union; the union between female and male. It's the reason the first inhabitants of Sanctum fled Deino. Anyone found guilty of loving someone of the same sex was put to death. The population sees this planet as immoral. They intend to punish all the Deino defectors, who according to the Prophet of Will are subject still to its teachings. Sanctum is a colony made up primarily of same-sex couples, with a small heterosexual population among them."

I sucked in air audibly.

"As you are already thinking, Connor, the religious rhetoric is just an excuse to get their hands on the ATC. It works nicely into their plans."

I nodded.

"This is your mission," General Harding said suddenly.

I stood up. I could already guess.

"I can't stress how important this mission is. That's why we could think of no one else but you to lead it, Connor. You are the best we have."

"Thank you, sir," I said, recognising a brownnose job when I heard it.

"At 0600, you will brief your soldiers. A unit of five thousand will accompany you to Sanctum."

"Only five thousand?" I blinked.

"You will remain with the ground forces, commanding the air forces from that position. An army under Major Manson has been engaging the enemy on the south side of Deino for several months now. We believed that we would be able to contain the Deino within their borders, but we're losing the battle."

My heart felt heavy suddenly. I'd lost a lot of men and women on Jupiter6. I could only imagine how many were dying on Deino. "Send me in to fight with Manson," I said.

"No. Your job is to protect the ATC. This is of the utmost importance, Colonel. Nothing supersedes it; not your soldiers, not you, and not the population of Sanctum. If the protection of Sanctum *and* the protection of the compound is doable, fine, if not, protect the compound," Harding continued, meeting my eyes. "It's only a matter of time until Sanctum is invaded. You must be there to protect the ATC. Meanwhile, we have scientists working around the

clock to come up with an alternative compound. Is this clear?"

"I understand, Sir."

"Your craft will be ready to go on launch fifteen, at 0600 tomorrow."

"That soon, Sir?" I said without thinking.

"A problem?"

I shook my head. My heart sank. "No, Sir."

"Fine. All equipment and supplies are being loaded as we speak. I suggest you go home, say your good-byes to your young man and be back here in time to brief your soldiers in a few hours. The cultural archivist will give you all the documents we have on the Sanctum culture. A word of caution, MacMahon. Not everyone will welcome the UWD troops with open arms. I hear tell of an independence movement starting some stupidity. It could be a rumour. Sniff it out, and if it exists, squash it."

"Yes, Sir," I replied. I saluted each officer, and was ready to take my leave.

"Be careful out there," Devine said as I reached the door. I turned and nodded, then walked back to the car, which was waiting to take me home for a final goodbye.

* * * * *

Frankly, I was surprised to see Cliff waiting for me when I opened the door. I thought maybe he'd take off. We looked at each other for a minute, then, Cliff got up from where he was sitting on the sofa and threw his arms around me. "Tell me you're not going

away again," Cliff whispered, sticking his foot out to close the door behind me and beginning to undo the zip on my suit.

I put my hands over his, and shook my head. "We don't have time," I told him.

Cliff let his hands fall away from me, and took a step backwards. "So," he said, looking disappointed, "is it dangerous?" Then he laughed harshly. "What in hell is wrong with me? It's always fucking dangerous. Where are you going?"

"I can't...it's classified," I said softly.

Cliff nodded. "I see, so it's really bad." He was trembling.

"It will be okay, Cliff."

"It's easy for you to say that," Cliff protested, raising his eyes to me, "you're not me. I stand here, watching you put that uniform on, getting ready to go to hell knows where, and I know people are going to want to kill you."

"It may not come to that. I won't be in heavy action right away. Try not to worry."

"How long will you be gone?"

"I don't know," I said. "They didn't say."

Cliff nodded.

I hated this. I always felt so guilty, and yet what could I do? I knew it was dangerous. In fact, this time more was at stake than ever before. I couldn't fail.

I packed my suitcase, checked my watch. It was already five a.m. Cliff clung to me at the door, then, just before he let me go, he whispered, "I may not be here when you come back."

I bit my lip, but I didn't say anything.

Cliff pushed me away. "Can't you show one fucking sign of emotion? Can't you let me know that you care? Do you always have to play the soldier?"

I nodded, then with a lump in my throat, I said, "Sometimes it's the only way I can find the courage to walk out that door. Take care of yourself, Cliff."

I turned and left without looking back, trying to pretend I didn't hear him crying. If I gave in to my emotions, I would have left the military a long time ago, not to mention I couldn't have coped with the things I'd had to do, the horror I'd seen. Maybe it wasn't fair to Cliff.

We had met three years ago. I'd been out with some army buddies celebrating my twenty-third birthday. Cliff had been waiting tables, bringing us beer. I'd been loaded, and Cliff had been hitting on me all night. I'd ended up back at his place. After a night of sex I couldn't remember, I woke up and there he was. It was time to have someone in my life. Waking up with different men was beginning to feel old. I wanted someone I could talk to.

In the beginning, Cliff had been great. The sex was nice, kind of tame really, but warm and affectionate, and Cliff had become my best friend. There had been no problems until Cliff insisted on marriage. All his friends were tying the knot, and Cliff wanted the little house and the matching china. He also wanted me to quit the forces, but it was all I knew. I understood Cliff's concern. It was dangerous, what I did, but he knew I was military when we met. So, between the pressure to get hitched and the bitching over my career, we'd grown apart. It distressed me, especially

as I headed into this dangerous situation on an unfamiliar planet. It was hard to think that there was no one back there worrying about me.

My parents had been military. I'd lost them to the Deino wars. Cliff was all I had—if I still had him at all. Sure we fought, sure the sex was routine, but it was hard to let go. And no matter what, I'd always care about Cliff.

* * * * *

To stand there and look into the faces of my soldiers and tell them they were going out again was tough. I recognized so many of them from the last campaign on Jupiter6. I knew morale was low. "I'm sorry I can't tell you how long we'll be out this time," I said. "Our mission is to protect the natural resource of Sanctum."

Of course, none of them had heard of this place either. I could see them glancing at each other, hear the soft rumblings.

One of my best Lieutenants, Shirl Winston, braved a question. I had a hunch she would. "Excuse me, Colonel, Sir," she said, "but where in the fuck is Sanctum?" A roar of laughter washed over the soldiers like a wave.

I smirked, then sobered. "Okay, okay, quiet." I gave them a brief geography lesson, which probably didn't explain much. "Most of the information I have is classified, except to say that our job will be to patrol Sanctum, which is under threat of invasion, and protect their crops. Hopefully, the invasion won't ever happen, and we'll all come home without seeing

any combat. Now," I said, glancing at the file I had received a few minutes ago from the military archivist officer, "our greatest threat at the moment is from a homegrown anti-Earth group called the SIL, or The Sanctum Intrepid League. There is very little on this organization at the moment, although I'm expecting some last-minute information as we speak. What we do know is that they're in the process of developing their own military, and they frown on any intervention by our forces. This enemy might be hard to spot. Be friendly and helpful to the population, but be alert. Also, the cultural values on Sanctum are not the same as ours. They have a rather...well...more liberal sense of sexual expression."

There were some whoops and hollers, a few whistles.

I put up a hand. "Quiet," I said. They settled immediately, hiding their smiles. "Now, we're on a mission. We're not there to be expressing whatever sexual values we may hold. That means no passing judgment on their cultural values...remember they are not us, and this one is most important, keep your relationships with the people on a purely professional level. Is that understood?"

There was a round of "Yes, Sirs."

I dismissed them, watching out the window as many of them went to say heartfelt goodbyes to their families. I would do my best to bring them all back in one piece. But I said that every time I went on a mission and every time, no matter how hard I tried, some of them came back in boxes. That was the toughest part of the job.

* * * * *

It wasn't long before I was sitting beside Major Vanessa Collins and Captain Ted Frankel, preparing to take off for Sanctum. Collins and Frankel would fly the megasonic spacecraft. Major Collins was plotting the navigation radar as I heard the Captain start the engine. It would take us twenty-three Earth hours to reach Sanctum. I strapped myself into the seat.

Someone had passed me a file just as I stepped into the craft. The envelope had 'confidential' plastered across the front. I was hoping it was more information on the SIL. Unless things had changed since my last debriefing, the immediate threat on the ground was this clandestine anti-Earth movement. I had no problem facing the enemy, but I didn't want to face them blind.

I took out a photograph. It was of a young man, with long, wispy, ash-blond hair and green eyes. Across the lower bottom of the picture was written, Storm Varek, leader of SIL. I stared at the picture for the longest time. He looked like a kid. He couldn't have been more than twenty years old. This was the leader of the SIL? Maybe my apprehension had been for nothing. The rumblings under my seat grew.

"She's ready. Permission to lift off, Commander?" my Captain asked.

I nodded, holding the picture of Storm Varek in my hand. "Permission granted, let's do it."

* * * * *

The last part of the journey to Sanctum was the most stressful. Even with the shield, which prevented the ship from being detected by any radar, I was feeling a little on edge until I finally saw our destination. Directly behind it to the left, three times the size, was Deino, mostly water, like our earth, and illuminated by its double moon. Although we had mapped out the landing destination in consultation with Sanctum before leaving Earth, we would have to navigate in without any further assistance from them. I couldn't run the risk of our communication being intercepted by the Deino forces. They were surely on the alert for further reinforcements. I put on my helmet and brought up the map. The navigator and captain were studying the same map. To reach the designated landing area, we would have to manoeuvre the craft through treacherous mountains into what appeared to be a deep cavern. As we tenaciously moved forward, the turbulence grew, shaking the craft with a terrible force.

"Jesus," the captain said.

"Hold steady," I told him. "Slow, but constant."

I clutched both sides of my seat and made an announcement to the others, telling them to hold on. As quickly as the rumbling began, it stopped. We reached a clearing and began to descend, gliding through a starless night. We hovered, adjusted speed, and touched surface. As we landed, everything rotated to the side, including ourselves as the craft transferred all the weight to the right, and settled onto its side. The heavy equipment had already been

packed sideways so there was no possibility of damage.

"Good job," I said as a roar of cheers could be heard from the cargo part of the craft. I smiled. "Let's get the hell out of this thing, shall we?"

We had made it in one piece, and without the enemy detecting our presence. The first part of our mission was a success.

As soon as the door opened and I stepped out, followed by my captain and navigator, I was met by the leader of Sanctum and his three commissioners. Given their similarity to one another in looks, they could have easily been known as his three stooges. The president was a wiry little man called Handle Samson. He pumped my hand and insisted I call him Handle. His hair was ginger red and as wiry as he was. He had bright blue eyes, and just like the other three, beautiful skin the colour of ivory. It was impossible to tell how old they were, which was probably due to the fact that Sanctum got very little sunlight.

Handle addressed me in English, the language of the majority for the past fifty years on Sanctum. Their native language was Deinish, which I always thought resembled a mix of French and Russian. The two men and one woman accompanying Handle were all dressed alike, in beige pants and black shirts, whereas he wore black pants and a beige shirt.

"Colonel MacMahon," he said, "Welcome. We are so happy to see you've arrived safely. No problems, I presume?"

"Not so far," I said. "We received information from

our allied forces in enemy territory earlier, and they are still being contained within their borders for the time being."

He nodded, the three others nodded with him. "The citizens are concerned of course. We will all feel better now that you're here."

I nodded, not wanting to tell him that we weren't here to protect the citizens.

"All this land is for your use, of course," he was saying, leading me around the craft and pointing to the sea of grass that lay at least six miles north of the mountains. In the other direction, a few miles away, lay the beginning of the populated area.

"Thank you, we shall need most of this space to set up."

"This is amazing," Handle said suddenly, eyeing the craft and peering at the sea of soldiers now beginning to unload the equipment from the rear.

"Yes, it is quite something, isn't it?" I said, looking around me, clutching my helmet in my hand.

"You're invited to a supper this evening, Colonel, to meet some of the important citizens. I hope you will do us the honour to attend."

I checked my watch, set to Sanctum time. It was only three in the afternoon.

"There is very little light here, as you know."

"Yes, I am aware of that."

"The sun comes up at four a.m., and sets at around one in the afternoon."

"Yes."

"Fine, fine. The late meal is at six."

I nodded. "I will be there."

He bowed his head. "I'll send an escort. Later, you'll be given a tour of our beautiful planet."

"I would appreciate that," I said. "Now if you'll excuse me, I must set up my quarters."

"Of course." He motioned to the others, then trailed off.

It didn't take long to set up. Everything was easily transformed from its collapsible form to something of utility nowadays. Each soldier had his individual barracks connected row on row to his or her neighbour; suspended, climate-adjusted units with waste receptacles which emptied directly into outside containers with instantaneous disintegration. Attached to each sleeping unit was a two-foot interior tunnel leading to the associated hygiene chamber. Due to widespread water shortages, showers now consisted of mist rinses that felt exactly like water and destroyed all bacteria. After washing the body, you could switch the unit to dry clean to clean your clothing.

The eating hall was situated in another section, equipped with super-rapid, high-tech meal preparation equipment and self-cleaning utensils. Each place setting consisted of a choice of dehydrated food, which materialized itself into a delicious, well-balanced meal. The machine also swallowed up any leftovers, plates and all, when the person was finished.

My living quarters were located near the front barrier to the compound. It also served as the command post. It was a secure, self-sealed unit with a full bed, hygiene unit, makeshift kitchen and office.

The communication devices were insular, in that I could communicate with anyone, anywhere, and be assured that no outside source could access the conversation.

I had given the soldiers their orders and was busy inspecting the armoured vehicles and hovercrafts as well as the four-seat rocket ships when one of Handle's stooges arrived in a small gold hovercraft. He zoomed over my head, causing me to look up suddenly, and gave me a funny little wave. "Hallo, Colonel," he called out. "I'm Dutell. I'm here to escort you to the Hall. Are you ready?"

I squinted up at him against the glare of his all-element vehicle's headlights and waved, indicating that he should dim them.

He did, with a laugh. "Sorry, force of habit. Like to see where I'm going."

I nodded. "I'm ready," I said as he landed.

He reached over and opened the passenger door for me. "It's been a long time since I've had such a rugged, good-looking passenger." He practically leered at me.

One of the lieutenants standing nearby grinned. I scowled at him. He turned his head and coughed.

"Come on, Cutie Pie," Dutell insisted.

I cringed at the term, bit my tongue and headed over to his machine. I tossed my helmet at the soldier. "Secure it, and wipe that look off your face, Private." I knew he'd go back to the others and tell them that this buffoon had called the colonel 'cutie pie', and they'd all have a big laugh at my expense.

He caught my helmet in his hand, and saluted, still

having a hard time keeping a straight face. "Have fun, Colonel," he said.

I crawled into the craft, practically having to wind my knees around my neck, and closed the door.

"Oh," Dutell said, "I forgot what a big boy you are. You can adjust the seat by..." He paused, watching me searching around with my hand under the seat. He leaned over and put his hand between my thighs, then his entire head disappeared between my legs. He pressed something, and the seat slid back. He brought his head up, keeping his eyes even with my groin, and grinned. "Yep. You are a big boy. This is great work if you can get it." He winked.

I mentally rolled my eyes.

"It's a two-seater," he said, lingering there a little longer than was necessary.

I shifted a bit in the seat and cleared my throat. He sat back up. "Again, you'll have to forgive me, Colonel. It's not often I have a babe in my chassis." He giggled.

"Just drive," I said.

He pulled on the throttle, and up we went.

As we rose over the rocky terrain, he pointed out a few things to me. Without my helmet, which was equipped with night vision support, I could barely see a damned thing, except for twinkling lights here and there.

I had already studied a map of the residential and commercial districts of Sanctum, but seeing it in person was different. There were no actual bodies of water, just ground reservoirs. Buildings were constructed on hills, and sometimes right out of the

actual rock. I wondered how in hell they managed to carve into those rocks. There was a huge shopping facility where one could purchase everything, with a man-constructed landing pad where Earth craft brought in goods. A few miles to the north, Dutell pointed out what he called the 'natural expression outlet'.

"Entertainment," he said, "what you Earthlings call bars and restaurants."

I had read a few things about their culture before leaving Earth, and I knew that they were much less uptight about sexuality than we were. It was true that Earth had done away with much of its moral judgment of human coupling, but we were not overly demonstrative in public, physically or verbally, whereas the Sanctum were. They believed that sexual expression was as natural as eating and sleeping and therefore, was nothing to be shy about. In a way I envied this, but it would take some getting used to.

Dutell was now pointing to the south. "This is where the ATC is grown," he said. "Five hundred square miles are reserved for cultivation. The processing area is right there," he pointed, "although it's hard to see at night. And right there, a little off to the left, is the administrative center of Sanctum. We call it the Great Hall. Sanctum officials and dignitaries are waiting for us there. Shall we? "

"Of course," I said.

"After dinner, someone will give you a tour so that you may take a closer look."

"I would appreciate that."

The Hall was a massive structure built right into

the rock. As near as I could tell, anything of any importance took place here. Everything was painted alabaster white. There were chandeliers hanging in the halls, plush carpets on the floor. Many of the furnishings were definitely made on Earth; I recognized the craftsmanship and the materials. When Dutell led me into a huge dining room, there was a round of applause. Everyone was elegantly dressed, and here I was in my soldier garb. I recognized Handle Samson and the two other look-alikes. There were also two women sitting at the table, and several men, no more than twelve in all.

"Colonel," Handle stood up. "You know my two other advisors, Coran and Freedman." Both of them stood up, smiled at me and sat back down. "I would also like to introduce my head justice counsellor, Anna Varek, and her partner, Mony."

Varek? I shook both their hands.

"I would also like you to meet the person in charge of barter relations with the Earth and his counsellors." I was introduced to each one individually, but it was hard to keep the names straight. "Please sit down."

I was seated beside Handle, and across from Dutell and the two ladies. I tried not to stare at Anna Varek too much. I was trying to discern if she had any features resembling those in the photograph of Storm Varek. She did have dark blond hair, but I couldn't pick out anything else.

I turned my attention back to Handle as several people came around and poured drinks into our glasses. Handle lifted the glass to his lips. "Go on, Colonel. It's wine from your planet."

"I don't drink on duty," I said.

"That's perfectly understandable," Handle Samson nodded. "I hope you find your stay with us agreeable, Colonel, in spite of the circumstances. If we can do anything to help you, you will let us know. This is a stressful situation for all of us."

"I will do my best to keep you informed," I told him.

"Now, let's talk about more pleasant matters. Tell us about you, Colonel. You're a little young to be in such an exalted position, aren't you?"

I shrugged. "I'm good at what I do."

"And at home, is there, ah...someone?"

People seemed to lean forward around the table. I shifted, a little uncomfortable. I really didn't consider it an appropriate question, but I had to remember where I was. "Yes, I...I think so."

"Don't you know?" Handle raised an eyebrow.

"Yes...yes...I do have someone."

"Very lucky, ah...boy....or girl?" Handle insisted.

"Ah...man, actually," I said.

"And is he in the military too, Colonel?"

I laughed. Cliff in the military? "No."

"He's a very lucky young man," Dutell spoke up. "I was down between the Colonel's thighs earlier, and I must say...he's fully loaded."

Everyone laughed.

I just about fell off my chair. Instead, I reached over for the wine glass and took a gulp.

"Yes, we've noticed," Handle said without missing a beat, "what an attractive young man you are, Connor. You don't mind if I call you Connor?"

"No," I managed.

"Umm, well, and that uniform is very becoming. It shows off muscles and bulges—which I must say are all in the right places—to distraction."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I just smiled.

"Where will you be expressing yourself while you're here, Colonel?" Handle asked, his eyes intent.

"Yes," one of the ladies spoke up, "we wouldn't want you to fall ill while you're here. We need you, Colonel."

They'd lost me now. I blinked, and said something like, "I'll manage," and took another sip of the wine.

"You're welcome to use our facilities, of course," someone at the end of the table announced, "unless you designate soldiers for the task of relieving your cravings."

"Are you a submissive or a dominant, Colonel, or are you into variety? I know myself," Handle began, "that if I have a particularly stressful day, I prefer to be tied up."

I was speechless. I said something like, "I ah...couldn't say." Everyone seemed to be talking at once now. Handle was saying something about "threesomes being nice at times if your partner likes to share."

Then out of the blue, this voice behind me said, "Ah, some things are just too delicious to share." The voice caused the others at the table to stop chattering. I turned my body around and looked up.

Storm Varek.

There was total silence.

Then, "You weren't invited, Storm," Handle

Samson said, his expression cold.

Anna Varek stood up, and smiled at Storm. "Of course you're welcome, Storm," she said, casting a sideways glance at Handle. Handle cleared his throat and invited Storm to sit, and the tension dissipated.

He pulled a chair up beside me and sat down. I have to say that I was stunned to see him there.

"Colonel, how nice to meet you. I'm Storm Varek." He held out his hand.

I took it and shook it briefly. "Colonel Connor MacMahon," I said, trying not to show my surprise.

"I see you've met my parents, Anna and Mony."

"Yes, I've had the pleasure." The picture I'd seen didn't do him justice at all. His eyes were sea green and his skin creamy beige, beautiful like everyone's skin on this planet. He was dressed casually in a loose brown shirt. There were no buttons, just a drawstring at the neck rimmed with multi-coloured embroidery. The pants were equally casual, and dark brown. His hair hung to his shoulders in baby-fine silken strands of medium ash blond. He was quite stunning to look at, and I told myself to find something else to fixate on.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," he said, "I believe we were discussing Colonel MacMahon's preferences in terms of threesomes, or was it sexual positions?"

He was looking right at me now, and damn, I think I blushed.

"We were talking about threesomes..." Handle interjected.

"Ah, yes," he said, his voice a soft seduction, "and I believe I commented that some things can be too

good to share."

He smiled at me, waiting for my response. Luckily I was saved by the plates of food being brought around. "It looks delicious," I said to Handle, trying to ignore the presence at my elbow.

"Yes, well," Handle replied, "I don't believe you'll find anything too exotic here. Most of it comes from the Earth."

"Yes, we are dependent on your planet for almost everything," Storm said, his voice overly pleasant.

"Storm," his mother cautioned.

Mony looked at me. "Our son holds some pretty strong opinions."

Storm laughed and lifted food into his mouth.

"Yes," Handle said, "he's young and headstrong. What did finally convince you to join us, Storm? I thought you said you couldn't make it."

"I decided that I should do something for the cause." He looked at me. "I will give you the tour later, Colonel."

"How nice of you to volunteer," Anna Varek said suddenly, draining her glass.

"It's the least I can do," he said. "After all, the colonel is putting his life on the line, and the lives of his soldiers to protect..." He paused and met my eyes. "We will tour the ATC fields first, Colonel."

I got the message loud and clear.

"Storm is our technological engineer," Mony was saying to me now. "He's an inventor."

"Yes, I can be very inventive when I put my mind to it, Colonel," Storm almost purred.

I put some food in my mouth, but didn't really

taste it.

"We were just discussing the Colonel's personal expression plans. His boy is back on Earth, unfortunately, and not in the military." That was Dutell who finally decided to join the conversation.

I could have kicked his ass.

Storm leaned in towards me, his knee brushing mine. "You Earth men have great control, but you could be here for a very long time. I bet you miss your boy already. You're definitely a top, aren't you, Colonel?"

I lifted the glass of wine to my lips again instead of replying.

"Big, tough, military man," Storm laughed. "It's actually detrimental to deprive the body of sexual release, Colonel. Did you know that?"

The people around us all nodded in agreement. Damn, but these people were obsessed with sex. "Your concern for my well-being is heartwarming," I told him, "but soldiers are used to deprivation."

"Ah," he murmured, putting down his folk, "but we don't want you to get sick. After all," he put a hand to his chest and met my eyes again, "we need you to protect us. What would we do if you weren't here? I feel so safe now, don't you, Handle?" He looked over at the leader.

I recognized sarcasm when I heard it. He was pissing me off big time.

"The UWD is so benevolent to send forces here to protect us," Storm announced.

Handle Samson cleared his throat. "More food, Colonel?"

I'd hardly touched what I had. "No, thank you. I'm fine. It's delicious, by the way."

"So, what sexual positions does the UWD recommend for their soldiers?" Anna Varek asked me now.

"Ah, well, they really don't...." I began. Someone came around and refilled my wine glass. I think I was on my third.

"Mother," Storm said, "you forget, Earthlings are uptight about sexual expression, prudish. They prefer to suffer with their desires rather than express them. I believe you are embarrassing the Colonel."

"We are not prudish," I remarked, "just perhaps less preoccupied with sex."

"Oh, really?" He smiled at me.

I ignored him.

"So, how many forces did the benevolent masters send to defend Sanctum, Colonel?" Storm asked, pushing his plate away.

"Five thousand," I told him, drinking down the wine.

"Five thousand against the Deino," Storm remarked.

"It's sufficient as long as they are contained by our allied forces."

"Yes, but we both know, containment is temporary. Within weeks, the Deino forces will be at our doorstep and..."

"Storm," Handle cautioned, "let's talk of more optimistic matters."

I suddenly knocked my napkin to the floor, and bent down to retrieve it. On the way up, I leaned close

to his ear and said, "I know who you are."

I sat back in my place without anyone noticing the exchange. He gave me a faint smile.

After the meal, I made small talk with some of the other dignitaries. Storm disappeared for a little while, then returned to announce he was ready to take me on the tour. I had drunk a bit more than I'd intended. In fact, I hadn't intended to drink anything, and I was feeling a little high.

"Let's walk," I told him, after saying my goodbyes to the others.

I followed him out of the building, down the narrow passageway to the door. It was pitch black. We said nothing until we reached the street.

"This is basically the residential district. The Hall was put in the center to be near the people," Storm commented, "so as not to give the impression they are avoiding their duties. Of course we will have to take my vehicle if you want to..."

"Why did you volunteer to show me around?" I asked suddenly.

He stopped and looked at me. "I wanted to do my part for..."

"Don't give me that bullshit," I said. "What's the real reason? I know you're the leader of SIL."

"So you told me at the table." He smiled, his soft hair moving slightly in the breeze. "Did you know it is always seventy degrees here no matter what time of day or night, and that there are technically no seasons?"

"Yes," I said, "I know. And you only have a few hours of daylight and very little sunlight. You're

avoiding my question."

Storm continued to walk past round-shaped dwellings with vehicle hovels attached.

He stopped and looked at me. "We both know why you're here, Colonel." He met my eyes. "The Deino will invade, and these people will die. We have no military; in fact, military development is forbidden here."

"I warn you, Varek, if I detect any movement on the part of the SIL, I will do what I have to in order to..."

"There is no SIL, Colonel," Storm interjected. "It's a myth."

I laughed slightly.

He paused and looked at me. "You have a nice laugh, and kind eyes. In fact, you're not what I expected at all."

"What did you expect?" I asked.

"Some big, gruff bully with grey hair and..." He stopped. "Never mind. You took me off-guard. I find myself having a hard time keeping my hands off you."

My mouth fell open. I squared my jaw and decided it was best not to comment at all.

"There's not much else here to see, Colonel. I'll take you to the ATC fields and the recreational area."

"All right."

"My vehicle is down this street. I live here," he said.

"I'm surprised," I replied, walking beside him. "I thought you'd live in the Hall."

"I like my privacy," he said softly.

We climbed into the vehicle and zoomed up into the night sky. "Tell me more about your lover, Connor," he said, eyes straight ahead.

"Nothing to tell."

He glanced at me. "You don't love him."

"Yes, I..." I started, then shook my head. "It's outside the perimeter of what we need to discuss."

He laughed. "You sounded very army there, Colonel. He must miss you."

I remained quiet.

We touched down near the fields, got out and began to walk again. "Here's what it's all about," he said bitterly. "This is why we can never be independent. This is exploitation and death, if not by the Deino, then by the UWD."

"What are you talking about?" I snapped. "The UWD means you no harm."

"No, as long as we agree to supply the ATC," he said, meeting my eyes.

"You talk nonsense. It's a mutually beneficial arrangement." I felt myself sway a bit. The wine had gone to my head just a little.

"Is it?"

"It's a plant, isn't it?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Yes," he replied. "It has tiny red buds that would eventually turn into a flower, but of course it has to be harvested before that point."

He showed me the processing plant, and then we went back to the vehicle. Upon inspection of the site, I decided that the best way to protect this product was a combination of ground and air forces. Also, if we were attacked the Deino would not want to damage

the crop, so it would be a good idea to move the people closer to this area.

"You look deep in thought, Connor," Storm told me as we rose once again in the sky and headed toward the entertainment area. "Looks like you need a drink."

"I think I've had enough to drink, really. Maybe we should skip the..."

"Hey, if you want to know about a people, you must see how they party." Storm touched down on a specially designed landing space. The minute we got out, I heard music. "Do you dance, Colonel?" he asked.

"No," I replied.

"Well, it's time you learned," Storm told me. "Come on." He took my hand and led me to one of multitudes of buildings. As the door opened, the music became almost deafening, and his hold on my hand tightened. There were men dancing naked on podiums all around us, and other people in the crowds dancing and drinking, some of them half naked as well.

Storm moved up to the side of one of the bars. This one said 'Rum Drinks' in English and in Dienish. "Hi, Rud," he said to the man serving drinks, "this is the commander of the UWD."

The one called Rud ogled me thoroughly, then grinned. "He's an eyeful. Is he a mouthful, too?"

"I don't know yet," Storm said, winking. "I'll tell you later."

I sucked in a breath, nodding as he handed me a red drink with a green stick of something stuck in the

middle. "What in the hell is this?" I asked Storm, making a face, as I turned away from Rud.

"It's a strong drink, take it easy. You're a big, strapping guy so it shouldn't floor you. The green stick is a candy. You suck on it," he said, winking.

I took it out, and handed it to him. "Here, you can suck on it."

He shrugged, then met my eyes, letting the candy stick move into his mouth all the way, then slowly sliding it all the way out. I dragged my eyes away from him, and he laughed out loud. "Let's dance," he announced, grabbing the drink I hadn't tasted yet and placing it on the bar.

"No," I said, looking around to see the naked men now swaying together on the podium, moving their hands over each other's bodies, and the people on the dance floor being just as lewd. "I told you, I don't dance."

"Afraid?" he mocked.

"No, I just don't..."

He grabbed my wrist and tried to pull me forward. I stood fast. He turned around and moved up close to my chest. "Come on, Connor," he said softly. "I promise not to hurt you."

I laughed out loud then and allowed him to drag me to the center of the floor. Some men stopped and openly stared at me. Storm dragged me closer to him, and whispered against my cheek. "It's the uniform. It hugs every inch of you and your butt is sensational, not to mention your..."

I cleared my throat and put a few inches between us. His arms were around my waist, and I put my

hands awkwardly on his forearms. "The uniform is designed so that no loose material gets caught in..."

He laughed slightly, his hands moving over the small of my back. "It's okay, Connor, I know why the uniform is designed that way. It's just a fringe benefit, that's all. You have a great body."

The song playing was in Deinish, and it was obviously a love song. I recognized some of the words.

"Do you speak Deinish?" Storm asked.

"Only a few words. I picked some up when I was fighting them in 2076. It's a nice language."

"Yes," Storm said. "Do you know they have several words for love?"

"No, I didn't know that."

One of his hands slipped down over my ass. I felt him squeeze it. "Solid as rock," he said softly, moving his face against mine.

Our bodies were far too close. I swayed in such a way as to put a little distance between us, leaving my hands on his forearms.

"The word for brotherly love," he said, "it's lamoite. The word for a long-time love is lamime, and the word for sexual love," he paused and looked up at me, "is lamous. And in Deinish, it's the kind of sexual love that is equated with unstoppable passion."

"Really?" I said, clearing my throat. When in hell was this song ever going to end?

He reached up suddenly and pushed a stray strand of hair off my forehead. "Your hair is not regulation, Soldier," he said softly, *too* damned softly. "What's

the punishment for that?"

I gave him an uneasy smile. "Nothing, as long as they don't find out."

"Ah, a naughty boy," he whispered, letting his fingers trail down my cheek. The other hand moved up my back and he pressed his body closer again. My pulse began to race, my heart was thumping in my chest and I could feel my testicles tighten as his erection pressed against my thigh. The song ended and I almost pushed him away from me.

"We need to go," I said abruptly, trying to keep my eyes off the naked men on the little stages. "I think I get the picture."

I walked toward the door with him on my heels, several men brushing by me, smiling. I got outside and drew in fresh air. My head was spinning. Thank God I didn't drink that concoction, whatever it was. Once we were back in the air, Storm asked me if I was all right.

"Fine," I said.

"I will leave you at the barracks," he replied.

"You can leave me a half-mile from there. I'd appreciate a little walk." I don't know what the hell was wrong with me. The wine must have worn off by now but I still felt like I was intoxicated.

We touched down nearby. I said goodbye and got out. I couldn't look back at him. I began to walk, checking the time. It was late. I checked in with the gate watchman and headed for my unit. When I arrived, I locked myself in, looking forward to my bed. In front of the bed, I pressed my finger to the seam on the uniform and both sleeves began to open.

The material fell to my waist. I was just about to press the seam that would allow the rest of it to peel away from my body when I heard a voice say, "Fantastic, keep going."

I swirled around to see Storm sitting on my bed.

"How in the hell did you get in here?" I demanded.

"Looks like you have a security problem, Colonel," he said, getting up off my bed.

The way he was looking at me was wiping out any rational thought I might have had. He stood in front of me and sucked in a deep breath as he placed his palms on my chest, moving them down slowly over my nipples. "My God, if you're not one beautiful man. Now, how do we get the rest of that contraption off?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but he lifted one of his hands and put it over my lips. "Don't say anything. Just kiss me, and we'll worry about it later, okay?" The hand slipped back down to my chest again.

Almost against my own volition, I felt my head lower. He waited, his mouth so close to mine. I lowered further and captured his mouth, hearing a small moan that I wasn't sure came from him or me. I felt his thumbs circle both my nipples, then I reached down, grabbed his ass and yanked his body closer. My tongue moved sensuously around the velvet lining of his mouth, his lips grinding against my own, his jaw widening as if to deepen a kiss that probably couldn't have gotten much deeper. He pushed away from me suddenly, his eyes looking a bit dazed, his chest heaving. He pulled his shirt over his head,

leaving his silky hair as messy as if he'd just crawled out of bed. He gave me a lazy smile and came closer again. He placed his hands on either side of my face, raking them through my hair. "You're a rogue, Commander, a disgraceful rogue."

I smiled at him. "You think so?"

He laughed, letting his gaze run down over the lower part of my torso. "Take it off," he said. It was meant to be an order.

I looked down at the top of my pants and pressed the seams together. Just like the top half, the material fell away from my body. I busied myself with the boots because I needed time to think.

He wasn't about to let me think. He went down on his haunches and pulled the boots off, along with my uniform. I was trembling when his eyes worked up my leg to my cock. I was hard as rock and there was no way to hide it.

He wrapped his fist around it and gave it a gentle squeeze. "It's a big one, and quite beautiful." He pressed his lips to the shaft. I took a breath. "You've had this hard on for a while."

I let my fingers touch his hair. Like baby's hair, so soft and fine. I couldn't speak. I wanted him to suck my cock so bad, I didn't even dare breathe in case he changed his mind. He returned his lips to the shaft, closing his lips around it in the center.

"God," I groaned.

He looked up at me with soft green eyes, letting his tongue move around the head of my cock now. "You need it bad. You didn't fuck your boyfriend before you left home?"

"No time," I sighed.

"Um, there's always time. You didn't want him bad enough." Again his tongue moved around the head. "Do you want me bad enough, Colonel?" he whispered, then took my cock inside his mouth, moving the head around his teeth, scraping the skin ever so gently before letting it slide down to the back of his throat.

Again I groaned, putting out my hand on the wall so I wouldn't lose my balance. I felt him begin to fondle my balls as he sucked, increasing the pressure on my cock so that it felt as if it was in a vise. I leaned back against the wall, closing my eyes, letting the feelings of pleasure move up my spine and settle in my teeth. "Baby," I moaned, "I'm going to..."

He immediately released my balls and removed my swollen, hungry cock from his mouth. "Not yet," he breathed, stroking it ever so gently as he stood up and began to undo his pants.

I licked my lips as I watched him, trying my best not to cum as his own erection came into view. I immediately reached out for it and took it in my hand.

"Fuck me," he breathed against my shoulder. "Fuck me now."

I released his cock and watched as he went over and lay down on my bed. I didn't have lube. A cure for HIV had been discovered thirty years ago, so there was no need for condoms. As if reading my thoughts, he held his arms out to me and said, "Use your own lubricant. I want you so much, it won't be a problem, believe me."

My cock was leaking pre-cum, so I ran my fingers over the head, and rolled him over. He got up on his knees and spread his legs, looking behind him. "Now don't tell me, Colonel, you don't like this ass."

I was speechless and horny and ready to go. I leaned over him and kissed one rounded cheek, then gently spread his ass cheeks and dipped my jizz-covered fingers into his core. "Your ass is fine," I growled.

"Oooh," he said, "yes, go, baby. Come on, let loose. Do what you want, Connor. I want you so bad. I don't think I've even wanted a man this bad before. You're so gorgeous, and your cock...I want that cock. You wouldn't believe how much."

I pushed the finger deeper, then two, then three. His hips were swaying, enticing me even more. My cock was thumping. I could see it pulsing. I reached under him and played with his cock while I finger-fucked him. My attempt to be gentle had been confiscated by the sensations shooting through my cock, and the tightening of my balls. I fucked him harder. He cried out.

I pulled out my fingers and put my tongue there. He tasted salty and incredible, really. I teased his opening with my tongue and he began to shake, his hips bucking. Abruptly he turned around and pushed me onto my back. I was surprised. He straddled me and looked down into my face, his eyes wild and filled with desire. He bent his head and gave me a wet kiss, then moved his mouth to my nipples and bit them quite brutally. I winced. He laughed, then reached over and pulled the cord off my robe, which

had been thrown over the chair.

"Hey," I said, "what are you...?" I raised my eyes to his hands as he moved up further over my body and began to tie one wrist, then the other.

I laughed. That wouldn't hold me—or so I thought, until I tried to get loose. His cock was even with my mouth now. He held onto it and let the tip move over my lips slowly. I licked his cock head, moaning at the taste. I lifted my head and captured it with my mouth. He let me suck on it a minute, then pulled it out. "If you keep doing that, baby, I'll come," he said, looking into my eyes. Kissing me deeply on the mouth, his fingers pinched my left nipple. "I want to cum with your cock up my ass."

My cock lurched. No one had ever talked like that to me in bed. No one had ever tied me up before. I don't think I'd ever been this horny.

He moved down over my body now, playing with my nipples with his fingers, then gently slapping my cock back and forth a few times. I moaned, lifting my hips. He leaned down and licked the head of my cock, squeezing my balls. He straddled my groin and played with my nipples mercilessly. "When you buck your hips like that," he said softly, "you turn me on so much, I could cum right now. I want to ride that beautiful cock of yours, Colonel. Will you let me?"

I dug my head back into the mattress. "Do it," I said gruffly.

"I can use it any way I want, then?" he teased, his hair tickling my chest as he leaned forward and took one of my brutalized nipples between his teeth.

"Yes," I grunted.

He reared up a little, taking my cock in his hand and positioning it at his entrance. "I'm on fire for you, Connor," he whispered, "baby...baby..." he moaned, and I felt the head of my cock sink into his ass, slow at first, inch by inch, deeper and deeper until the shaft was encased and he bore down, taking me, using me, all the way...yes...yes, then sliding up again, down, then up, down, faster and harder, his head back, shouting, crying, moaning.

My body was his and he was using it, wringing out pleasure from my cock. I heard myself crying out as cum thundered up through my shaft. He collapsed on me, his lips on the flesh of my throat, moaning, whispering something unintelligible before crawling over to my side and lying on his back. "Fuck," he said, his chest heaving. "That was sweet."

I was covered in sweat and cum; my chest, my forehead. My eyes were burning. He turned on his side and looked at me. "You have some cock, soldier."

I laughed slightly. "You have some ass, civilian," I told him. He began to laugh, then I did too as he reached up and undid my hands.

"Well," he said, getting off the bed as I sat up and wiped the sweat from my eyes, "I have to go."

I watched him as he dressed. He gave me a salute.

"Storm," I said, standing up. "How are you going to...?"

"Same way I got in," he pointed behind my bed. "Your breach is behind you." He left by the flap he'd opened near my bed without giving me time to say anything else.

* * * * *

The next morning, I began patrols with my troops near and around the ATC fields. I took ground control while I put several soldiers in the air above and a few more on rotating air control of the perimeter. I had received no communications from the forces on Deino, or UWD command, but I left soldiers back at the base manning the radios.

When we lost the light, I was almost relieved. I put on my helmet, which adjusted immediately, allowing me to see clearly and continued to patrol my section. I tried hard not to think about what had happened last night, but it wasn't easy. It stayed with me all day. I could still taste him, still hear him moaning in pleasure, feel my cock in his ass, and I realised I had to get some control. I put the wide patrolling air brigade on alert for any suspicious activity. Last night's distraction had not put me off the trail of the SIL, no matter how deeply involved Storm was, and I just knew that he was in it up to his neck. He had made it clear that not only didn't he trust the UWD forces, but he was not in favour of the barter agreement Sanctum had with Earth. I couldn't forget that. I had a job to do here and no matter what, I intended to do it.

On the third day out, early in the morning when I sat down to rest and drink some water, I had a visitor. At first I thought he was just going to walk on by, then he saw me and stopped. "You're Colonel MacMahon, aren't you?"

He seemed a little clumsy on his feet, and I noticed that he had an artificial leg. He couldn't have been more than sixteen or so, pale blond hair, blue eyes. "My name is Ackin."

"Hello, Ackin," I said. "What can I do for you?"

"Nothing," he said. "Just wanted to meet you. Someone said you were out here. Whatcha doing?"

"Just patrolling," I said. I was a little distracted, hoping I could use this time to think. I received a report this morning of some suspicious activity in an area near the recreational district. I sent a group of soldiers out to survey the area. I suspected right away it was SIL activity. One of my men told me that he thought he'd spotted heavy artillery weapons being unloaded, but he couldn't be sure.

"It's my dream to be in the UWD," he said.

I was surprised. "Really?"

"Yeah, but it's forbidden here, and I'm told the UWD wouldn't accept me for a couple of reasons."

"What happened?" I asked.

"I had an accident. I tried to take my vehicle a little higher than it could go and pow, I crashed." He laughed.

I smiled. "I see."

"I hate this leg. The good one is being repaired, and this one makes me clumsy." He came closer and chose a small rock beside me to sit on.

I offered him some water. He shook his head. "I'm fine. So what's it like? Can you tell me? Did you fight the Deino?"

He was full of questions and I hated to put him off, but I really had to get back to work. He followed me

around off and on. Finally I received a communication from the group I'd sent off to investigate the sightings of weapon. At that point, I told him firmly that I had to go.

He left me with a wave. I waited until he was out of sight, then opened my communication device. Sergeant Diane Adams appeared on the screen.

"Colonel," she said. "We have made several arrests and confiscated an arsenal of weapons. We're bringing the prisoners back to the barracks now and will confine them."

I held my breath. I wanted to ask the names of the prisoners, but I couldn't. I just said, "I'll meet you back at the base."

When I saw the five men back at the base in the enclosure, I let out a sigh of relief. Storm wasn't among them. "Did you search the larger area?"

"We did. It was clear," the sergeant said.

"What about them, who are they?"

"We haven't been able to learn any information, Sir. We need to employ interrogative techniques."

"It's all right," I put up my hand. "I'd like a few minutes alone with the prisoners, please."

The Sergeant left me alone in the confinement area. They looked at me without expression, five men, rather dirty and tattered. "Do you care to tell me your names?"

No answer.

"Are you members of the Sanctum Intrepid League?"

Blank faces.

"Is Storm Varek your leader?" I gave them a

sinister smile. "We can do this the hard way, boys. You have twenty-four hours to decide what it is you would like to tell me, then, I will use every means I have at my disposal to gain the information. Is that clear?"

I saw fear in some of their eyes. I nodded. "Very well, twenty-four hours." I stepped out of the enclosure and locked it behind me. I went to take a look at the weapons. They were quite primitive, pre-microwave technology, enough to do damage, but no match for the high tech weaponry of the Deino.

* * * * *

Later, I found myself at the same place Storm had taken me for that odd drink. Naked men again manned the stages. I walked up to one of the little bars and this time was given a blue drink. It didn't look like something I wanted to swallow. I let my eyes move up to the naked men dancing. It didn't hold much appeal, and I soon became bored. Seconds later, two men sidled up to the bar beside me. One pressed me from the left side, the other one from the right.

"Can I help you?" I asked, feeling like a sandwich filling.

One of them put his hand on my thigh. "We sure hope so," he said.

I quickly removed his hand, while the other reached up and touched my hair. I was ready to sock him when Storm appeared and said, "He's taken. Fuck off."

They both walked away rather quickly.

I tilted my head at him and gave him a curious look. "That's the second time you've done that."

"The second time I've done what?" he asked coyly, taking the drink out of my hand and sipping it. He made a face.

"Shown up out of nowhere."

"Really. Did you miss me?"

My heart was thudding in my chest. The sight of him made my cock ache. I decided not to answer his question. "Did you have a tough week, by any chance?"

He lifted his eyes to me and took another swallow. "This tastes like shit, MacMahon."

"Then what are you drinking it for? It's mine, by the way." I grabbed it away from him. He was a professional at avoiding my questions.

He laughed. "Let's get out of here, shall we?"

"And go where?" I asked, setting the horrible-tasting stuff down on the bar.

"I'll show you where I live," he said, meeting my eyes.

I moistened my lips. I could taste him already. He was heading for the door, expecting me to follow, which I did, of course. Outside he stopped, turned around and gave me the once-over. "What were you doing in there anyway? It's a pick-up spot."

I laughed. "Maybe I was waiting to be picked up."

He made a face at me. "Fine. Consider yourself picked up, Colonel. So, want to take a ride in my chariot, handsome?"

My heart was doing flip-flops, and my head was

telling it to knock it off. "Are you going to take me to the new SIL headquarters?" That was definitely my head taking control...the big one.

He pointed to his vehicle ahead. "There she is."

"Are you just going to ignore my question?" I asked, following on his heels.

"You ignored mine a while ago."

"Did I?"

"Yes, you did," he said, meeting my eyes again. "I asked you if you missed me."

"What if I did?" I asked. I was being cocky.

He laughed, and got into his vehicle. "Come on, we'll discuss it later."

"Where are we going again, exactly?" I asked, jumping in beside him.

"You know where we're going, Colonel, and you know what we're going to do when we get there." It was his turn to give me a cocky grin. He hit the throttle and took us into the sky.

I looked straight ahead. My heart was racing, and my cock was hard already. I told myself that this was craziness. It was only a matter of time until I had Storm in custody, and here I was heading to his place.

He cast a look at me now, that silky blond hair blowing out behind him. He had an ethereal bone structure that along with the creamy texture of his skin made him look like an angel. I wanted to touch him. I wanted to rip off his damned clothes and fuck him, that's what I wanted to do, and he knew it.

"I know what you're thinking, Connor," he said softly.

"Do you, and what's that, lad?" I replied.

"God, that accent..." he murmured, "what is it? It drives me wild. It's so sexy."

I shook my head. "I would do anything to lose the damn thing. It's Irish."

"Don't lose it," he said. "Use it. You could seduce a holy man with that voice."

I made a face. "Really, now."

"Yep. Oh, baby, talk dirty to me."

I shook my head again.

"So, should I tell you what you were thinking about just now?"

I looked out at the starless night and sighed. "Do tell, Storm."

"You were thinking about ripping off my clothes, and..."

"Wrong," I lied. "I was thinking about your men, the ones I have imprisoned on the base, and how I might have to interrogate them tomorrow."

He looked straight ahead for a moment. Then he said, "I don't know what you're talking about, Colonel. Come again?"

"You heard me, and you know damn well what I'm talking about. Where did you get the guns?"

No answer.

"I hope you weren't intending to fight the Deino with those things. They're archaic."

He said nothing.

"We're watching your every move, Storm. You'll never get another shipment in without detection, so it's over."

I saw his muscles tighten under his shirt. We sat in relative silence until he began to bring the craft down.

"I live there." He pointed.

It was a small house made out of stone, near the great Hall. After we got out of the vehicle, he walked me around his property. "My lab is in back. Did you want to search it?" He stopped me midway on the path to his front door. "Or would you rather search me?" he asked, moving closer.

My heart began to beat in my chest. Damn it. His hands crawled up my chest and wound around my neck. "Come on, Colonel, it's not a difficult question, is it? You're used to making decisions. Make one."

He moaned as he tasted my lips, then ground his mouth against mine. My arms moved around his waist and I opened my mouth to his heated exploration. When we finally broke apart, we were both out of breath.

His eyes shone into mine in the dark, and he took my hand. "I'm sorry, Connor, I can't wait any more. I have to have you."

He had me pinned against the wall the moment he opened his door. Frantically he began to press at the seams of my uniform, swearing because he hadn't a clue how to get it off. I began to laugh. I had never seen such frustration.

"You'll pay for that, soldier," he threatened, a smile moving across his face. "Take that goddamn thing off before I get something to cut it off you."

I pressed the seams on the shoulders and let it move down my arms and over my chest. I narrowed my eyes at him as he stood there watching me. I paused before leaning down to take off my boots.

"You first," I said. "Take off your clothes."

He smiled at me, then began to undo his shirt. He threw it at me and I tossed it aside, leaning against the door, watching. He had a beautiful body; slender, well muscled, with all that creamy skin. His nipples were dark compared to his skin, and already hard with excitement. His dick was perfect, as was his ass, and I couldn't wait for him to completely take off his pants before I reached out for his wrist and pulled him forward. I took his mouth forcefully, pushing his body against the wall, lifting both hands above his head as I continued to ravish his mouth. I managed to pull away long enough to take off my boots and my pants.

I heard him moan, "Christ, you're a beautiful man," and I suddenly felt like the most potent fucking stud in the entire galaxy.

He went down on his knees and took my cock in his mouth, reaching around to grab my ass. I didn't want to let him take me to the edge tonight, at least not right away. I wanted to take him. I wanted to give him everything, pleasure like he'd never known; so much pleasure that he'd never remember any man before me, or any man after. I felt almost animalistic as I dragged him to his feet.

"Where's the bed?" I growled.

He staggered like a drunk in front of me and I couldn't take my eyes off his ass, swaying in invitation. In the bedroom, I pushed him facedown on the bed and began to slowly lick him from the nape of the neck to the crevice between his gorgeous ass cheeks. I did this several times until his soft sounds of pleasure grew louder, then I spread his cheeks and

found his quivering center. I never did this to Cliff, probably because he wouldn't let me, and he never did it to me. I was surprised how much I was enjoying it, enjoying the sensation of my tongue on his puckered skin and the sounds of euphoria coming from deep inside him. I flipped him over and began to kiss the inner sides of his thighs, his balls, his shaft and up to his chest, where I paused to bite at his nipples.

His hands were in my hair. He said my name several times, then I think he said, "oh, God," pulling at my hair as he dragged my mouth to his. We kissed deeply, and then I swooped down and lifted his legs over my shoulders. I thought of nothing but being inside of him, and he moved his hips down further so that I could penetrate him. I was leaking cum, and I massaged some of it off my cock head, inserting a coated finger inside him. As I did, he grunted, his entire body trembling. I had never in my life felt someone want me like this. I went into him, probably too hard, too fast. He cried out, but when I pulled back, he clutched my arm and shook his head.

"Oh God no, please, go on, deeper, Jesus, your cock was meant to be there. Go. Don't hold back."

I began to move, deeper, my entire body trembling. I looked down into those green eyes, and I felt as if I had no control over anything. I didn't know what in hell I was doing here anymore, and I didn't care. I began to move inside of him. Pleasure had me in its grip, and I threw back my head and rammed in and out of him as if it was the last time I'd ever fuck.

I don't know how long it went on for. The room

seemed to revolve around us, and there was no sound except for our loud breathing. I heard him whimper, then shout, and I howled as my balls pulled up against my cock and a powerful surge of cum shot through me like an electric current. I was panting, moving my hips forward, the current weakening, then pulling back. I went down on my side, trying to catch my breath, my heart pounding in my chest like I was having a heart attack.

His hands were on my skin. He moved his body up against my back and kissed my neck. I could hear his heartbeat, strong and loud. I reached behind me and took his hand. I squeezed it for a moment, then brought it to my lips. He lifted his leg up over my hip, wiggling closer, and we fell asleep.

When I awoke, the room was quiet and the sun was up. I shot up in bed and swore.

He came in the bedroom, holding a mug in his hand. "Are you all right?"

"What in hell time is it?" I said, throwing my legs over the side of the bed.

"Early. I'll take you back to the base if you like," he said.

I looked up at him, standing there wearing only his underwear and in spite of the fact that I wasn't where I was supposed to be, I wanted to rip those underwear off him and take him right here. I stood up, ignoring my hardon, pushing away every instinct in my body, and asked him where my uniform was.

He ran his eyes over me, stopping at my cock, and reached out to touch my arm. "Want me to take care of that for you?"

"You've already taken care of enough," I snapped.

He took a step back. "You Earth men. You are so into denial, denying your body what it really needs. Sex is always last on your list of priorities when it should be first."

I glared at him. "Goddamn you, Storm, what are you trying to do here? Do you think that fucking me will make me forget about...?"

"Forget about what, Connor, forget that I'm SIL?" He looked furious all of a sudden. "Forget that you're here to protect the fucking ATC, and not the people? What exactly is fucking supposed to make you forget, Connor?"

There was a silence. I walked past him and looked around the living room for my uniform. "You don't know what you're saying. You can't fight the Deino on your own with primitive equipment. You're going to get everyone killed."

He watched me quietly as I began to put it back on, leaning his head on the side of the wall. "What would you do in my place?"

I looked up at him, bringing my uniform up over my shoulders. "I can't answer that."

"Why not?"

"I'm not supposed to put myself in the enemy's place," I said, meeting his eyes.

"Enemy," he said softly. "Is that what I am, Connor?"

"Basically, yes. If you are SIL, then you are the enemy. Anything which gets in the way of me doing my job is..." I stopped, then, sighed. "Look, if there is no further activity. If you cease all this now, then I'll

let your men go, but you must give me your word." What I was offering was against all the rules. I could lose my command doing this.

He looked me in the face and laughed. "I don't know what you're talking about, Connor. Those are not my men."

"Fine," I said stiffly. "Be an asshole, but if you're caught doing anything connected with the SIL, I won't be able to save you."

"I never asked you to save me, Colonel," he replied, narrowing those green eyes at me. "Just do your job, and I'll do mine."

I sucked in a breath and left, walking the few miles back to the area where I'd left my vehicle. No one said anything to me as I arrived on base. Everyone went about their duties. I cleaned up, changed, got my gear together and was ready to head back out on patrol when the Captain approached me. "Colonel," he said. "A word?"

"Go ahead," I said.

"We received a communication at 0300 this morning from Brigadier General Mason, Sir."

I could see from his eyes that it wasn't good. "Go ahead."

"They have sent for reinforcements. They have many casualties. The enemy has advanced approximately three hundred miles."

This did not put me in a good mood. "Double the sky patrol, and send some soldiers out to question people about the SIL. Tonight I'll interrogate the prisoners."

"Should we bring in the suspected leader, Sir?"

The Captain asked.

I paused. "We can't be certain that he is the leader, Captain."

"But, Sir, we have his picture, and Ground Command says that..."

"Captain," I barked. "When it's time to bring him in, we will. Now go, and make sure my orders are carried out."

"Yes, Sir," he said, and left me standing at the entrance to our makeshift base.

What he said was logical, of course. Bring in the suspected leader. There was actually no suspicion involved. I knew Storm was the leader of the SIL. He knew that I knew, and so apparently did UWD know. The only thing the Captain didn't know is that I was fucking the leader of the SIL, and I didn't think providing that as an excuse to why I didn't arrest him was going to wash.

When that kid came clamouring after me up the road again, needless to say I was in no mood for his chatter. I was disappointed in myself for being weak, for letting Storm distract me, for giving into my sexual needs rather than concentrating on squashing the SIL. Not to mention Cliff. Shit, I hadn't even thought about Cliff at all.

I watched the skies as Ackin talked, telling me about his dreams of being a member of the UWD elite squad. I paused for a moment as I heard him speak. I'd been pretending to listen for the most part, then, something he said caused me to really pay attention. I heard the name 'Storm'.

"Storm?" I said. "Who's Storm?"

"My brother," he said, "he's the bravest man I know. He wants Sanctum to have its own military, except that it's against..."

"Storm Varek is your brother."

"Yeah. Do you know Storm?"

Yes, I thought. I know him. I shook my head. "Met him a few times, don't really know him. Tell me more about his ideas. I'm interested."

"Really?" Ackin walked up the road with me. He seemed to walk better today. "Well, he tried to get the council to see the need for a military on Sanctum. I don't think he trusts the UWD. I told him about the code of honour and...you see, I've read everything about the UWD," he said, his young voice filled with excitement. "I want to join up, Colonel, can you help me? I know I have this bum leg, but..."

"Son," I said, "I don't know about you joining up. It's pretty dangerous, and..."

"Storm says it's because you don't sign up people other than Earthlings, but it says it's the United Forces, you know..."

"I'll look into it for you, okay?"

He smiled at me. "Colonel, you're really handsome, you know, and if you didn't have a boyfriend, I..."

I hid a grin. "Where'd you hear I had a boyfriend?"

"From Handle and Dutell and..."

"Oh, so I'm a source of gossip, eh?"

He blushed a little. "Might say that. And the accent, well..."

I sighed. "Yes, the accent. Well, it seems I best hang onto it, since it's getting me so much attention."

"I'm a little young, but age is not so important, right, Colonel?" he asked, pausing on the side of the road.

"Well, I don't know about that," I said, realising that this was a delicate matter. "Anyway, I do have a boyfriend back home, so...guess we should just be friends, eh?"

He nodded, looking down at the ground. "Can't blame me for dreaming. Storm says dreams can come true if you believe them hard enough."

"Does he now, and what else does Storm say?"

"That we have to rely on ourselves, 'cause if it wasn't for the ATC, Earth wouldn't give a damn if we were wiped off the face of the planet."

I opened my mouth to speak, then stopped. My radio blared and I walked off to the side to answer. "Colonel," it was Air Command, "we got activity in the sky."

"Deino?"

"No, Sanctum. There's six spacecraft attempting to exit the Sanctum airspace."

"Have you tried making contact?" Every muscle in my body tensed.

"Yes, there is no response. Should we consider them hostile, Colonel? They might be SIL."

"Have they fired on you?"

"No, but one of our craft was forced out of its position. When we issued a warning, it backed off, but I think these craft are positioned in the direction of hostile territory. We are not sure of their intention, Sir."

"Hold your position, and keep trying to initiate

contact."

"Yes, sir," was the response.

"Fuck, fuck," I said aloud, smashing my communication device into my fist. "What in hell are they up to?"

"What's wrong, Colonel?" Ackin asked.

"Nothing you need to be worried about, son, go on home now."

He nodded, a little disappointed, and headed off down the road. I waved to some of the soldiers on the other side of the field, and checked in at the base. There had been no further communications from the war zone. I jumped into my vehicle and propelled myself into the air, settling down directly in front of Storm's house. I didn't expect him to be there. I walked down the path to where his lab was supposed to be and peered into the window. A man came walking around the building. He glanced at me curiously. "Can I help you, soldier?"

"Yes, I'm Colonel MacMahon. I'm looking for Storm Varek. Do you know where he is?"

He shook his head and moved on. I waited, then quickly took out my laser and burnt a hole through the lock on the door. It opened easily, and I walked in. There was all kinds of lab equipment, test tubes, microwave chambers where certain products could be tested. I recognized material which could easily put together to build explosives and bullets....and maybe even weapons.

The SIL didn't need to bring in guns; they were making them. They didn't have the latest technology for weapons, but the makeshift ones would do

damage. I had the impression now that the SIL was a far bigger organization than I'd suspected, but even if the entire planet was SIL, they'd never be able to fight off the soldiers in Commander Syit's army. I sighed, then, opened my communication device.

"Major," I said as Vanessa Collins appeared on the screen, "I want you over here with a unit of twenty soldiers." I immediately put the location coordinates on the screen in front of her. "This lab is now under UWD control. Clear out everything and classify it. I want a report on my desk at 0800 tomorrow morning."

"Yes, Sir," she said.

Immediately I contacted Captain Ted Frankel, who was still in command of the sky patrol. "Report on the situation," I barked into the device.

"The spacecrafts have retreated, Sir," he said. "We had to fire three warning shots."

I sighed. "Very well."

"And if they come back, Sir?"

I paused. "Continue to attempt communication, then contain them. If they fire on you, then," I paused, "fire back." We both knew what that meant. Our artillery would blow them out the sky. "You did good today, Ted. Over and out."

Ten minutes later, I was standing in front of Handle and his three commissioners. He listened attentively as I spoke, then nodded. "I understand, Colonel. Everyone knows how dangerous it is, and..."

"Well, apparently not," I snapped. "I can't allow anyone to interfere with us doing our job. It's a very

tense situation right now. No one can be allowed to leave the planet. It's a security risk."

"Of course, Colonel," he said. "I'll check into it —"

"Look, we both know it's SIL activity. I have just confiscated Storm Varek's lab, where weapons were being made. Were you aware of...?"

"No," he stood up. "The SIL, well, it's a myth, a —"

"Open your eyes, man," I said. "The SIL is very much alive. They want independence, and they want to fight the Deino. They are not equipped to do this. They will just get in the way, and —"

"Colonel, do what you have to do. You have our full cooperation," Handle said. "I will issue a bulletin warning the citizens to stay out of your way, and also that they are not to leave Sanctum. Is there anything else I can do?"

I sighed. "I'll let you know."

"I hear the fighting is fierce on our border, Colonel. What will happen if the Deino invade?" It was Dutell who asked the question, his expression tense.

"It's not a matter of if, but when," I said.

There was a strained silence.

"You have only five thousand men, Colonel, and..." Handle began.

"Our interior allies will come inside to fight," I said, but I was worried as well. I left them with a terse goodbye and went back to the base. When I arrived, I was told that I had an urgent message from the UWD. I was on the radio with Major General Devine for close to an hour.

"The ATC must not be damaged in any way, Connor," Devine was saying, appearing on a huge

collapsible screen that made him appear to be right in the room with me. "Our scientists have located another planet where ATC may be able to grow. They will bring some of the ATC to Mycom12, and begin to harvest it there."

I didn't like what I was hearing.

"Hopefully, it won't come to this. We have sent reinforcement troops to the battle zone, but if the Deino invade, we have no choice but to give the order to destroy Sanctum."

"Destroy Sanctum?"

"We have no choice. You must understand that..."

"I understand the logic behind it, Major General, but there has to be another way, surely."

"What other way, Connor?" He bit back. "If the Deino get their hands on ATC, we'll be their slaves."

"What if the scientists are able to harvest it on Mycom 12? Then it doesn't matter if..."

"We can't be sure of anything now. Swallow it like I taught you, MacMahon, these are extraordinary times. So, what about the SIL? Is it under control?"

I swallowed. "I'm working on it, Sir."

"Well, work harder. Colonel, carry on," he said, and disappeared off the screen.

I sighed, putting my face in my hands. Destroy a planet with a million people on it. This is not what I'd joined the UWD for. I was not in any mood to interrogate those prisoners we had in the hold, or to watch the unloading of confiscated materials from Storm's lab. But I did both.

After several hours of grilling, Storm Varek's men told me nothing, so I put them under hot lights, didn't

allow them to sleep and kept up the pressure all night and all the next day. By the following night, three confessed, and two lost consciousness. I sat in my office and wondered what in hell I was supposed to do now. The Captain told me twice that Storm Varek's name had been mentioned in the confessions. I fucking knew that. I finally told him to leave me alone, and give me time to think.

Later that night, around one in the morning, one of the soldiers came to my tent to tell me that Storm Varek was there to see me. I couldn't believe he'd have the balls to come to me.

"Bring him to me," I said.

Two soldiers, one of each side of him, pulled him up to my tent. Storm was swearing at them and struggling. I told them to let him go.

"Are you sure, Sir?" One of them asked.

I nodded.

They released him and Storm walked into my quarters. He was hopping mad.

"You have balls," I said.

"Yeah, and you have 'em, too. You cleaned out my lab? That's my job, in case you fucking don't know."

"Oh, I know all about your job. I know about your weapons, and your spacecraft. It's a wonder I didn't let my men blow you out of the sky the other day. Do you know how fucking close you are to getting arrested?" I leaned close to him, my eyes glaring into his.

"Well, arrest me, big tough guy," he growled at me. "Come on, baby, here I am." He put out his wrists.

"Storm," I said, lowering my voice, "do you know how hard it is to...I'm trying to save your life. I'm trying to...I've already got confessions from three of your men. I just have to give the order and..."

"Give it, then," he said, "because I've got nothing to lose. If the Deino don't destroy my planet, you will, and it's all we have. Do you realise what the Deino will do to us if they capture us? We are Deino. We are subject to the teachings of that extremist piece of shit Father Will. They'll cut my balls off."

I winced.

"That's the punishment, and we know...most of us know that all you care about is the ATC, and if the Deino control it, you'll be no better off than we will. In fact, sweetheart, if they find out what you really like to do in bed, they'll cut off your balls too."

I sighed. "I promise that I'll do my best to protect..."

"Well, that's not good enough."

"Fuck, Storm, and what in hell do you think you're going to do against...?"

"Nothing," he said. "We're going to lose too, but at least we'll go out fighting, with pride, with dignity, instead of sitting here like a bunch of lambs to the slaughter thinking the big macho soldiers of the UWD are going to save our asses."

I turned my back for a moment. I was shaking, in part with anger, in part with overall emotion. I knew what I had to do. I turned around. "I'm sorry, Storm, you're under arrest."

He gave me a look that made my heart sink. It was akin to hatred. I asked the outside guards to come in,

and again they took hold of him. I couldn't look at him. "It's for your own good," I said softly.

"Yeah, right. And do you think some of your big, rugged soldiers will be able to satisfy my sexual needs in here? I'm bound to get mighty lonely, Colonel, especially since..."

I turned around, not quite believing he would resort to blackmail. "Leave us," I said to the soldiers, who looked confused. "Out!" I shouted.

They left quickly, while Storm rubbed his arms.

"I can't believe," I began, coming closer, "you'd stoop that low as to..."

"I believe you engaged in behaviour unbecoming to..."

I wanted to sock him one. Instead, I tightened my jaw and nodded. "I asked for this, didn't I? I let myself be taken in by you, and now you have me right where you want me."

"No." He shook his head sadly. "this is not right where I want you, Connor. Where I'd want you is naked on the floor, making love to me the way you did the last time. God, it seems so long ago."

I rolled my eyes. "Try again."

He shrugged. "Don't believe me. There's something between us; some electricity, some sexual need so goddamned strong it transcends everything. You feel it too. Even now you want me, and I want you so bad, I can practically taste your cock in my mouth."

I let out a breath. It was true. I dreamt of him. I dreamt of making love to every inch of him, and yet, here we were, hopelessly divided. "You used me."

"No." He shook his head again. "It was against my better judgment to touch you, because I knew when I did, I wouldn't be able to stop, and that you would..." he paused, "break my heart, Connor."

There were tears in his eyes. I couldn't look at him anymore. "Get out," I said. "Let the chips fall where they may. The next time you're in my way, I give the order to shoot. And save your bullshit for the next sucker."

I had hardened my heart for the moment, transformed myself back into this soldier thing, which permitted me to survive this job. I clicked on the radio and called the soldiers back. "Escort Mr. Varek out," I said.

"But, Sir," one of them began.

I whirled around and shouted at him. "What the fuck is wrong with you, are you deaf? I said get him out of here!"

"Yes, Sir," they both said, and pulled Storm out of my quarters.

I spent some time pacing the floor after. I needed a drink. I needed a few drinks; purple, blue, red or sky blue, pink. It didn't matter. I reported in with the soldier at the gate and told him that the Major was in charge. I had stopped by and spoke to her for a few minutes before. She was busy classifying all the stuff we'd confiscated from Storm's lab. She showed me her computerized clipboard and began to list some of the substances, but at that moment, I didn't give a shit. I recognized some of the items as essential ingredients in explosives, and I tuned out.

"Keep working," I told her. "I need some down

time. You're in charge." I know it was irresponsible, but I left my communication device behind. If all hell broke loose by the time I returned, so be it.

I touched down in front of that place where the men danced naked and thundered into the joint, ignoring the looks I was getting from the bystanders. "Whatever that shit was you gave me last time," I told the guy behind the bar, "give me two and make them doubles."

He nodded and slid two blood-red drinks in my direction. I held my nose and drank down one, then the other. I began to get really interested in the naked men, and I ordered two more. The third and fourth went down quite easily. I became extremely interested in the naked men. In fact, I think I reached up and began touching one. When someone touched my elbow, I turned to see this big burly bugger. He said something to me about harassing the dancer. Everything swam around me.

"Why don't you...ah...fuck off," I said. My Irish accent sounded thick. The room spun. Damn, what in hell was in that stuff? I think I took a swing at whoever he was, and missed. Suddenly a man grabbed me from behind and turned me around.

"Calm down there, big boy," he said. "Come on, I know what you need." He led me to the back of the room and pushed me against the wall. "Now how in the hell do you get this thing off of you? I intend to suck your cock."

"Oh, it's not easy," a voice said, "even if it is well worth it."

I closed my eyes. My stomach heaved. Not a good

sign. Usually I could handle my liquor. What in fuck was that stuff? I heard some soft words which sounded quite threatening, then an arm around my waist.

"You're disgustingly drunk, Colonel. Come on, I've got just the thing."

I felt myself flop against the wall again, then something wet against my mouth. "Drink it," a voice said. "It will take the effects away in about five minutes."

"It tastes like bloody puke," I said, choking between gulps.

"Drink it," the voice growled, and the more I swallowed, the clearer my head became. I knew that voice. I opened my eyes and shoved the glass at him.

"Get away from me, Storm. I'm having a good time."

"Yeah, I can see that."

"Where's the guy who wanted to suck my cock?"

"I threatened his life," he said between clenched teeth.

I gave him a shove and stood up. Whatever that stuff was, it did the trick. "I want him," I said, pointing up at one of the naked dancers, "and him after." I pointed to another one.

"Would you like me to have them form a line?"

"Yeah, why not?" I said, heading to the bar.

"You're not going to drink four of those again, are you?" He sighed, leaning against the bar, watching as I signalled the guy.

"Mind your business. And how do you know how many of these I drank?" I took the red stuff and

gulped.

"Because," he said, reaching over and wiping some of it off my lips, "you're over six foot tall, one hundred and eighty, and it's a simple mathematical equation. I am a scientist, remember?"

"You're a goddamned mercenary," I said.

"That, too." He grinned.

"Leave me to hell alone, Storm," I warned him, trying to bite off that stupid accent.

"Or you'll do what?" He tilted his head. "Throw me in the brig? I'd rather you throw me in bed."

I smashed down the glass on the counter so hard, it shattered. Broken glass sprinkled over the bar and cut into my hand. Storm grabbed my hand. "Connor," he gasped. I tried to pull away, but he held fast. "Baby."

"Don't call me baby," I grunted as he pulled open my hand.

He brushed the glass away and leaned down and kissed it, blood and all. He looked up at me, my blood streaked across his cheek. "I can't help how I feel. If I hadn't threatened you like that, you would have put me in the jail, Connor. Do you think I really would have told anyone?"

He held my eyes. I saw pain in his. I made sure nothing showed in mine. "Stop fucking with my head." I jerked my hand away.

"I'd rather be fucking something else," he replied, letting his cheek brush against mine. "Connor," he whispered, "we can work this out. Come home with me."

I shoved him away and turned to the bar. The man was cleaning up the mess. I ordered another drink

and he went away to get it.

"What's really bothering you?" Storm asked me, standing next to me, too close.

"Nothing, okay?"

"You're a liar. Deep down you don't want to do this, Connor. You don't want to be responsible for the slaughter of all these people. You know I'm right. At least when the time comes, let me fight by your side. Don't you think you too will end up being a sacrifice here? They don't care about you. They don't care about any of us. They just want..."

"Stop," I said, turning to look at him. God, I was melting. I just wanted to take him into my arms, to forget about this place, to go somewhere where no one could find us. "Storm, take me somewhere."

He brightened. "Where? Where do you want to go, love?"

"A place where no one will find us tonight...a place where I don't have to think anymore...please."

He nodded.

We walked side by side, not touching, along darkened streets until we reached a clearing. I followed him deeper into the clearing until we reached a small body of water. I looked at him in surprise. "I didn't think there were lakes on Sanctum."

"It's a stream, actually," he said, laughing. "We'll have to wade through the water to get to the other side, but there's a cave there. I went there as a boy. I still go there when I want to be alone. Want to?"

I nodded silently. He took off his socks and shoes and rolled up his pants. My boots were waterproof, so

I had only to plod after him through the water, which was no more than six inches deep. When we rounded the rock, there it was. Storm laughed and scrambled up out of the water and into the darkened cave.

I walked in after him. It was pitch black and I couldn't see anything. "Is anything going to jump out of here and bite me?" I laughed.

I felt his body move up against me. "I might," he said softly. "I might just bite you, Colonel. God," he groaned as I pulled his body up against mine, "how good you feel...so hard and muscular and male. Damn. How could anyone ever think of this as wrong?"

I kissed his mouth, and he pulled away from me. "Come on," he said. "Let me show you my setup."

I narrowed my eyes and trailed after him, walking blindly in the dark. I think I stumbled once, and he reached out and took my hand. "Wait," he whispered. I heard scrambling, then the cave began to be illuminated. There was a blanket and pillows. He was lighting torches all around. "We could build a fire," he said, looking up at me from where he sat on the blanket.

"We're not going to need one," I said, wanting to get out of this damn uniform almost as much as I wanted him naked in my arms. I reached down and pulled off my boots, and then pressed the seams on my shoulders.

"Slowly," he said, leaning back on his elbows.

"Ah, you want me to be doing a strip tease, now do yea, lad?" I exaggerated that damned accent just for him, and I saw him throw back that fair head and

groan. "Oh, Christ, don't, Connor, I'll cream my pants."

"Then perhaps yea should be removing those trousers, boy, so you don't be a dirtying them."

"Stop it," he laughed. "Come on, let me see that beautiful muscular torso of yours, Colonel, and those big dark nipples that cry out for a good tongue lashing."

I grinned and let the top of the uniform fall down to my waist.

"Oh, yeah...hell, yeah," he cried out, cheering like a fan at a ball game. "Go, baby, let's see that great ass. Turn around."

I turned slowly, winking at him over my shoulder and whipped the rest of the uniform off.

"Christ," he breathed, "come here. Come here, Connor."

He didn't have to ask me twice. I walked naked over to him and knelt in front of him like he was a prince and I was his servant. He put his hand on my hair, and I felt the most alien feeling. My throat choked, my eyes felt moist. He stroked my hair some more, and said, "What's wrong, baby? What's wrong? We're here to forget."

I nodded, lifting my head and smiling at him. He got up on his knees now and pulled me against him. For a while he held me, just held me, and I closed my eyes. Then he took my face between his hands and told me I was beautiful. I undid his shirt and threw it aside. I laid him down on the blanket and kissed his throat, and his nipples. We kissed slowly and sensuously, and I kept kissing him until he moaned

my name into my mouth. I let my hand trail down over his body now, opening his pants, lifting out his hot, hard sex and fondling it in my hand. He lifted his hips off the blanket. I squeezed his sex. He moaned and bucked his hips again.

He looked into my eyes, and said, "I love you, Connor. God help me, but I love you."

I swallowed, then, abruptly I let his cock slip from my hand. I sat up, stunned. Overwhelmed, maybe.

I felt his hands move over my naked shoulders. "You don't have to love me back, just fuck me. That will be enough," he whispered beside my ear. "Fuck me. Please, Connor."

I turned around and met his eyes. He touched my hair, my cheek, then pressed his mouth to mine again, almost inhaling it. He moved his hand over my thigh and then circled the head of my erection with his thumb.

"You're ready. Come on."

I moaned and took him down on the blanket with me. We kissed again while I slipped my hand under his ass and caressed it. That was met by Storm turning around under me and grabbing my hand. He reached under the blanket for something, which he pressed into my hand before propelling it down to the sweet swell of his ass.

It was a medium-sized vibrating anal probe. I recognized it because I'd bought one last year to use with Cliff. He always complained of a lot of pain whenever he allowed me to fuck him, and I thought this would help. It was self-lubricating and designed to relax the inner muscle to make sex more

pleasurable for the receiver.

I reared upwards, took him around the waist and pulled him up on all fours. I turned on the toy and kissed the creamy skin of his ass cheeks. He let his head hang down, and moaned when he heard me switch on the toy. I parted his cheeks, and began to run my tongue over his quivering orifice. He spread his legs more, urging me to go deeper, and so I teased him without mercy for as long as I could.

My cock was already close to exploding. I put the vibrating head of the toy against his hole and began to press it lightly in and out of his entrance. I let it go deeper. I heard him cry out, and so I jerked the toy this way and that, then whirled it deeper, putting pressure on his prostrate until he thrashed his head and moaned deep in his throat. I licked my lips, watching the toy disappear inside him, my cock leaking pre-cum as I imagined my cock disappearing inside him as well.

"Are you ready for me, love?" I asked. "Tell me you want me, and..."

"God yes," he croaked. "Take me, Connor. Don't hold back. Please."

I placed one hand on his back, pulled out the toy and then positioned my hungry cock at his entrance. Slowly I pushed the head past the outer, then the inner muscles around his anus. He moaned, "Oh God, it's good, it's good, Connor. Go, go, baby!"

I let my cock sink the rest of the way, closing my eyes, lost inside of him, lost inside of me, and then I lost control. I fucked his ass hard and fast, the sweat sliding down my face and into my eyes. I heard him

cry out—howl, even—and I went faster, praying to hold on to it until I knew he'd remember always what my cock felt like inside of him. Then I roared my orgasm into his ass, and he pushed his hips hard against my groin as I grabbed his cock and pumped the last bit of cum from him.

He moaned back against me, pushing up, reaching behind him and grabbing my sex. His head came back against my chest, his eyes closed, all that silky hair spread over my skin. I clutched him around the middle, leaned down and bit him gently on the shoulder.

Breathless, he let his head fall to the side. "Fucking bastard," he whispered.

I stiffened a little and released him.

He turned around on his knees, his bottom lip trembling. "I never meant to love you."

"Then don't," I said, meeting his eyes.

"Fuck you," he whispered.

I swallowed. I was hurt, hurt that he would turn on me like this, but I understood. I was the last man he should have been fucking. He was the last man *I* should have been fucking.

He crawled away from me, as if he needed to put space between us. He curled up into a little ball, then picked his head up and looked at me. "Tell me about your boyfriend."

"Why?" I said, leaning back and sitting on my legs.

"Because obviously you don't love him."

"How in hell do you know?"

He tilted his head, his facial features contorting. "Do you?"

"It's none of your business," I said softly, looking at all the lights around the cave.

"It is my business. I've had your cock up my ass. I'd say it was my fucking business."

I closed my eyes. I didn't feel like talking about Cliff. "Let's talk about you, Storm, and the reason you seduced me in the first place." It was hard to keep the bitterness out of my voice.

"Are you saying I...?"

"Storm, I wasn't born yesterday. You volunteered to give me the tour. You showed up at my tent."

His mouth fell open. He looked at me as if I had hit him. "You're a fucking robot, Connor, a goddamned unfeeling UWD trained son of a bitch."

I shook my head. "Okay, it was because you found me so irresistible that you risked your ass to fuck me. It had nothing whatsoever to do with the fact that you wanted to distract me."

"And are you distracted, Connor, or are you just having yourself a little fun?"

My lips tightened. "Fun. I'm having fun, Storm. You have a great ass, and I'm enjoying fucking it. That's all it is." I stood up and bent over to pick up my uniform.

He sprang up from where he sat and tackled me from behind. I never saw it coming. He pushed me down on the blanket. I managed to turn onto my back and he straddled me. Piercing me with those green eyes, he showed me the sex toy. "It's your turn to get fucked, Colonel, so enjoy. You too have a great ass."

We struggled as he fought to roll me over. I was on the verge of overpowering him when he managed to

wedge the toy between my ass cheeks and turn it on. One push and the apparatus had moved past my outer sphincter muscle. The sensations shooting through me made me cry out. Storm left me on my back and pushed one of my legs up, while he held the other down by straddling it.

He leaned his head down to lick one of my nipples while he slid the toy in deeper, now past the second set of muscles which made less protest than I thought. Deeper still it went. My head crashed against the floor of the cave and I groaned. Storm sucked on my nipples, licking and teasing while he expertly moved that sex toy in my ass. My cock was standing at attention, my nuts tight.

"Baby, baby," Storm said, slapping my cock back and forth, circling my nipples with his thumb, "Damn, but you're a beautiful sight, so sexy, so needy, what a cock, it's so damn big and thick."

He began to thrust with that vibrating toy, in and out, and in and out until I thought I'd lose my mind. The pleasure shooting through my body was exquisite. I had no control; my cock, my balls, my nipples were completely at his mercy as he began to fuck me harder with that toy. I was thrashing and crying out incoherently when he yanked it out, heaved my legs up over his shoulders and drove his cock into me. I swore at him when he bore down on me, his eyes glinting dangerously into mine.

"You fucking..." I tried to spit at him but he just kept on fucking me, his eyes locked with mine, and my anger seemed to dissipate.

The pleasure was taking over and I closed my eyes,

licking my lips, as he moved his cock in a delicious dance of lust. My control was gone completely. I was his, and the moans of pleasure coming out of my body shook me to the core. I heard him sob, slam into me three or four times, then felt him shoot all over my belly and chest. He let my legs down, trailing a hand over my calf as he did.

I heard him crying softly, and suddenly I couldn't stand it. I reached for him and dragged him close to my heart.

"Storm...oh, Storm, don't...don't, baby," I said softly. "It's okay."

He looked up at me, eyes red and swollen. "Do you love him?"

I suddenly realised that he was crying because he thought I didn't care. I kissed the top of his head. "He wants to marry me. I can't, because...I can't imagine spending the rest of my life with him." I kissed his hair again, baby soft. "Not anymore."

He looked up at me, then, smiled. "I loved you the moment I saw you, do you know that, Colonel?"

I shook my head in wonder.

"I didn't show up in your tent because I wanted to distract you. I came to you because I wanted you so much. I couldn't resist not touching you. I knew you might reject me. I knew I could have ended up in jail, but nothing...nothing was more important than touching you."

I kissed him deeply, my heart close to exploding. I didn't know what I was going to do. I just knew I didn't want to leave this cave, ever.

"Tell me you don't love him, Connor," Storm said

suddenly, twirling some of my hair around his finger. "Say it."

"I don't love him," I said, looking into those eyes. "I don't think I ever loved him. I was just tired of being alone."

He hugged me, then settled down in my arms. "Have you ever loved any man, Connor?"

"No," I said, "not until now, and I don't think I like it much." I looked off into the distance, suddenly entranced by the way one of the lights was playing off the cave wall.

"Are you saying you love me?" Storm whispered against my cheek.

I couldn't talk. I could only watch that stupid light, and think about the fact that it would go out soon.

"Connor," he said softly, licking my neck, nibbling my ear, his hands moving down over my shoulders.

I snapped back to reality. I grinned at him. "Stop now, naughty fellow, you'll get me all raring to go again."

"Duh, that's the point, Connor," he teased.

"You Sanctum lads never get enough, now do yea?" I began to tickle him.

"Now stop it, stop it," he pleaded, giggling, "you know what that accent does to me...you..."

"What does it do to you?" I insisted, taking him down on his back and whispering dirty talk in his ear in the heaviest Irish brogue I could manage.

We laughed like boys, then quieted. He moaned against me as I let my hands move over his body. My eyes watched as his cock miraculously sprang to life again in my hand. I moved my mouth down to it and

gently kissed it. His fingers entwined in my hair. I took it into my mouth, and tasted it completely with my mouth and my tongue. I brought him to orgasm like that, suppressing my gag reflex and swallowing every inch of his sweetness.

I laid my head on his now flaccid cock and closed my eyes. "I love you, Storm. I love you."

.....

When I opened my eyes, Storm was shouting at me. I sprang to my feet and ran naked through the cave to where he stood at the opening. He pointed up into the sky. "Deino," he said. There was fear on his face.

"Shit," I cried out, "fucking Christly shit!" I tugged on my uniform as fast as I could and pulled on my boots. What fucking timing. Here I was in a goddamned cave without my communication device and the invasion had begun. I grabbed Storm suddenly by the arm and dragged him close to my face. "Go to the Hall, get Handle to issue an alert. Tell everyone to gather up what they can, and do it quickly. They have to head for the ATC fields now."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "Why?"

"Don't ask me why," I growled. I was a soldier again. "Just do it."

I went to move by him, and he grabbed me. "Let us help you, let the SIL help you, Connor. You are being left out to dry here just like we are."

I paused, then nodded. "You can help by getting as many people as you can to the ATC fields."

"I want to fight. I want to..."

"No," I grabbed him and held him to me, then released him. "What I ask of you is dangerous enough. Leave the fighting to us. That's what we're trained to do."

He sighed. "Be careful. If anything happened to you, I'd..."

"I have to do my job, Storm." I raced back to the entrance. I studied the sky, now being lit up by the exchange of firepower. "Okay, they're being engaged, most of those up there are ours. I need to get back to base. I need to know what in hell we're into here. I'll take your craft. You get to the Hall. You can get there by foot, can't you?"

He nodded solemnly.

I left without even a final kiss, which I regretted for as long as I had the luxury to; for about twenty seconds after I'd got into his vehicle.

* * * * *

I arrived at the base safely, flying low in the sky. I jumped out the vehicle even before it came to a standstill and raced past the guard at the gate who didn't have time to check who in hell I was. In my command quarters, the Major and Captain, along with several of our troop leaders, stood around. They saluted immediately upon seeing me. I suddenly felt as if I didn't deserve their sign of respect. I should have been here.

"At ease," I said, "what in the hell happened?"

"We received a communiqué around three hours ago," the Major began. "The Deino have broken

through Harding's forces. What's left of Harding's forces followed. The fighting is now being engaged in Sanctum territory. I took the liberty, Sir, in your absence of sending fresh troops to aid the allies and also sent more deeper into the Deino skies to stop the bleeding, but we're spreading thin."

"You did good, Major," I said, moving behind my desk, "what about reinforcements? Did any arrive?"

"We haven't had any word on that from headquarters, sir," the Captain replied.

"What is the situation right now above us?" I asked, taking a look at the screen in front of me, which was tracking the spacecrafts.

One of the men took out a long sheet of paper that had just spit out of the machine beside me. "We got seventeen enemy ships in the skies, Sir, twenty-three UWD."

I sighed. "Have we lost any?"

"Six, Sir, so far."

"Enemy casualties?"

"Four."

"Okay, I want every available soldier who has some air combat experience in the skies now. Dispatch a unit to the ATC fields, and another into the residential area, getting the people out and into the area of the fields."

The major looked confused. "But Sir, our orders are to protect the ATC fields, not the citizens, and..."

"Who do you take orders from, Major?"

"You, Sir, but..."

"Then do what I tell you. Get my ship ready. I'm going up."

The Captain nodded, and raced out of the tent.

"What about the command center, Sir?" One of the soldiers asked.

"Leave a unit of six to guard the command post, and ship the rest out to the skies, or to the residential areas. I want a minute to minute report on the situation, soldier, when I call for it."

"Your ship is ready, Sir," someone called from outside.

I hurried out of the tent. "Did you do a thorough weapons check?"

"Yes, Sir, you're armed and dangerous."

I nodded, marching over to the high-tech, two-seat spacecraft and jumping in.

"I'm coming with you," The Captain said, racing over to the passenger side.

"No," I told him. "I need you to supervise the evacuation of the people."

"Sir, it is more essential if...we're wasting human power on..."

"Do as I say, Captain," I snapped. "Go. Make sure the people get to the fields. Make sure they have water. They may have to be there a while."

He nodded, watching as I lifted the craft off the ground and drove it into the sky. As I headed for the flashing lights of the high-tech microwave weapons, I was in my element. Sure, I was tense. I could die up here, but damn, there was a part of me that loved it; this adrenaline rush, this feeling that one mistake, one tiny miscalculation could send me hurling down to the ground in a blazing inferno. I was on edge, but I was at my best. I knew that this might be my last

time.

Even if I survived this, I would probably be drummed out of the UWD. If they were feeling benevolent, grateful for the countless times I'd put my ass on the line, maybe they'd retire me quietly, my medals intact, but that wasn't their way. Maybe we'd all die here, but the UWD didn't give a shit. All they cared about was power, and the ATC.

I came face to face now with an enemy spacecraft. The Deino had one big gun strapped to the front and two in the back. The front gun was the most powerful and if you aimed properly, knocking that one out pretty well fried the other two...if you were lucky. The pilot was sneering at me, firing, and I ducked him and hit him on the left side. He skidded in the sky, righting himself, and it was just enough to distract him. I hit him right in front. His gun made a popping sound, the front falling off.

I didn't wait to see his reaction; I swerved around the back in a haze of smoke and destroyed one of the guns on the left side. The one on the right was inoperative. He shot off a round and it backfired. I laughed, looked the bastard right in the eye, and blew him out of the sky. I didn't have much time to celebrate, however, as I saw another one of those bastards splatter one of ours with artillery fire. They did that because our guns could be anywhere on the ship. We called them chameleon guns, because we could poke them through one of several outlets within a fraction of a second. The pilot had frozen in the spot, probably from shock. I fired a good one at the perpetrator, then picked up my radio and shouted

at the pilot in the craft.

"18porthole, get the hell out of there. Use your super lifting device and rise if you want to fuckin' live. This is your commander. *Move*," I barked at him.

It was enough to jog him into reality, and he zoomed away while the Deino craft took a whack at me. He got me on the right side. I swore. It was okay. I'd recover. He didn't hit the engine. I fired back. Smoke flew out the back of his craft, but I didn't do much damage, either. I saw another of ours go down.

"Command base," I shouted into the radio. "Report, report."

"We are down one more, Sir, and more Deino ships on the horizon."

"How many?"

"I see twenty, Sir, maybe twenty-five."

"Back up forces?"

"Negative, Sir."

Fuck, fuck and more fuck. We were fucked. I looked down at the ground to see hordes of people moving towards the ATC fields. Then I got an idea. "Attention, all spacecraft. Move south, radius sixteen miles, over ATC fields. Repeat, all craft will hover above ATC fields."

There was a series of acknowledgements and I headed with the others south. I watched the Deino ships pause, then congregate together in the sky, waiting. "Request communication with Deino sky commander," I switched to open-air communication.

There was no reply.

"Fine, you bastard, don't answer, but know this...I will fuckin' destroy the ATC fields. Do you hear me?"

Do you read?"

I didn't know if the scientists had collected their samples yet, and at the moment, I didn't give a shit. Let's hope this was all about the ATC because if it wasn't, we were screwed.

We waited, hovering, then static, then a voice. "Colonel MacMahon, I presume," the voice said. I knew everyone was listening.

"That's right. Commander Syit?"

"Yes. I'm sure, Colonel, that we can come to some arrangement here."

"You think?"

He laughed. "May I take this opportunity to congratulate you, MacMahon. You've been a formidable opponent. I am impressed with your skill."

"I'm flattered," I said, my voice laced with sarcasm.

"It's a shame the UWD doesn't value you more. With you here..."

"They know I'll protect it with my life. Now, the problem with the UWD is that they think I'm a wild man who will put himself in the line of fire just for fun. And you know that's true, I am a wild man, but I'm not a crazy man, Commander. Now, I'm looking down at this stuff and I'm saying to myself that you really want this bad, but if we bomb the hell out it... And I assure you if you fire on me here, I will do just that. Looks like your mission is for nothing."

"Ah, but you're wrong, Colonel. We want our defectors, our sinful little boys and girls who choose to run away rather than face punishment."

"Looks like you'll have to destroy the crops to get to them. Or, I can make things go much faster, I have a lot of soldiers down there who are pretty bored. I'll just tell them to burn it."

There was silence.

"My hand is on the radio now. I'll just switch to the other frequency and say two words. 'Burn it'."

"Then you'd die, too," he laughed. "The Earth needs..."

"Don't you think we've already harvested this shit, Commander, and have found an artificial means to grow it back home? Hell, we're even smoking it now."

"You lie. You tried that before, but..."

"Since we knew of your intended invasion, we've been working round the clock with the help of the Sanctum experts."

"Deception."

"Want to take the risk?"

There was no answer.

"If you want us, come down and get us. I'm ordering my ships out of the sky." I switched frequency. "Bring all craft to the ground in the ATC crop area. Repeat, land the craft in the ATC fields."

I headed in that direction. The others followed as I spotted several more Deino craft arrive, hovering back, waiting.

Our final count in the sky had been thirty-two. We lost seven, shot down six out of seventeen, now there were at least twenty or thirty more in the skies above us. As I got out, I came face to face with Major Manson. He was a tall, gaunt fellow with thinning

grey hair, and he looked ready to pounce. "Are you MacMahon?" He barked.

"That's me." I looked around to see the hordes of people. Where in hell was Storm?

"What in the name of God is going on? Why are all these people here? Why did you order us out of the skies?"

I started walking, checking to see if people had brought water and food with them. Some said hello to me, and I nodded.

"Colonel, are you intending to give me an answer? We are expected to protect the ATC."

"That's what I'm doing, Major," I replied.

Suddenly I felt a hand curl around my wrist. It was Ackin. "Colonel," he said. "Have you seen my brother?"

I turned around and searched his face. "No. Have you?"

"A while ago. Are we all going to die?"

I shook my head. "No. Just sit tight, okay?"

He nodded and hugged me.

The Major issued me an odd look, and I walked on. "You've grown attached to these people. They should be in their houses and we should be in the skies, not cowering behind the ATC."

"Look," I snapped, turning on him, "if you want to go up there in those skies and get killed, be my guest, but we're outnumbered now. You did your best to keep them at bay. They're here. We were supposed to get more UWD troops, and they haven't arrived. Personally, I don't think they will. Do you?"

He looked away.

"You know what I think?" I told him. "I think the UWD has dumped us. They found another way to harvest this shit, and they've just abandoned us here...as well as all these people. Do you understand what in fuck I'm saying?"

"I understand," a voice laced with humour said from behind me.

I turned around to see Storm standing there, his face dirty. I wanted to hug him, but of course I didn't. Manson stalked off without a word. "Your brother is over there."

"I know. I didn't know you knew him."

"We've met," I said.

"He has a wicked crush on you. I told him you were mine."

"Storm," I said, "you..."

"Come here," he said, pulling me down the road a bit and behind someone's abandoned vehicle. He checked around and when he saw no one, he kissed me full on the lips.

"Storm," I warned.

He smiled. "Have I told you how proud I am of you? Have I told you that I knew in the end you couldn't let all these people die?"

I sighed.

"I know it's cost you. I knew you were up there and I...my heart almost stopped every time I heard artillery fire. God, Connor, I love you so."

I nodded. "I got to go, Storm. Just take care of the people." Then I noticed the weapon he had under his arm. "Where in the hell did you...?"

"You didn't get them all," he grinned, then lifted a

hand as a soldier came up to speak to me, and walked back to help direct the people.

I watched as more and more came, settling down among the plants, finding a place in the field with their loved ones. "Not everyone brought water," the soldier was saying.

"Gather up all the supplies we have," I told her, "and begin to ration it to families who have nothing. Meanwhile go to the mega shopping facility and bring all the water and nonperishable items they have in stock out here."

"Yes, Sir," she said, and ran off to do my bidding.

"Sir," it was the Captain now, looking ragged and quite scruffy. "I've had the command post moved here, along with essential supplies and weapons."

"Good, direct me to the command post, so that I can communicate with the UWD."

A half hour later I was alone with Command. General Harding waited patiently for me to explain my actions. "It's only a matter of time until they engage you on the ground," he said stiffly.

"I know that, Sir. I know I'm buying time. I need more troops. If we have the troops, then..." I didn't tell him my suspicions, at least not right away.

"You do realise that if I send troops, this war will never end. Burn the fields, and get your soldiers out of there. We have what we need."

"Sir?" I knew it. I fucking knew it.

"We have managed to successfully harvest the ATC on another planet, one which is uninhabited. We are in the process of setting up the facility now."

"How in hell do you sleep at night?" I demanded;

my anger had completely taken hold now. "This was a bullshit mission all along. You sent us here just long enough to harvest the stuff somewhere else. You..."

He didn't even acknowledge what I was saying. His voice took on a hard edge. "You heard me, Colonel, abandon the mission. Burn the fields, and let Sanctum deal with their own problems. Get out of there." He disappeared from the screen.

I slumped forward in my chair. Storm had been right from the beginning. This was bullshit.

When I felt the arms slide around my shoulders, and the cheek press against mine, I closed my eyes. "Storm," I said.

He kissed my cheek, then my neck, clinging to me. I disengaged his arms and stood up. I went to stare out at all the people I'd brought here.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

I was completely defeated. I felt abandoned and betrayed. Everything I thought the UWD stood for, everything I'd fought for, it was a lie. Storm came around and placed a hand on my shoulder. He looked at me, demanding some kind of an answer with his eyes.

"We're all going to die here," I said.

"Why do you say that?"

"I've been ordered to abort mission, leave. Our job here is done. We have managed to cultivate ATC on another planet...one without complications," I said bitterly.

"No more troops," Storm said. He didn't look surprised.

"So you were right all along. Happy?"

"No, I'm not happy," he snapped. "So, when are you leaving?"

"Fuck you."

"Well, there is no reason for you to..."

I grabbed him and pulled him roughly into my arms. I kissed his mouth until it hurt, then practically threw him across the room. "I can't leave you now."

He licked blood off his lip. "Then, my love, I guess we fight these assholes together."

"How many SIL are there exactly?" I asked, narrowing my eyes.

"Around twenty thousand."

"Twenty thousand?" I was floored.

He shrugged.

"Armed?"

"Can be."

"Okay, get them ready. I'll put off the Deino. If they want to fight, they'll fight us on the ground."

Storm nodded.

It was late. The sky was dark, eerie. I could hear the people stirring outside. "Wait," I said, as Storm prepared to leave. I went outside and talked to the guards, then returned.

Storm gave me a curious look. "What?"

I grabbed him and dragged him further into the tent where a small cot had been set up for me, one I probably would never use. "Before you go," I ran my hand over his cheek, cupping his jaw, "I want to fuck you."

He put both hands in my hair and kissed my mouth ever so gently. "Please do," he moaned, beginning to fumble with his pants, as I backed off

and began to take down my uniform.

"We don't have long," I said softly, watching as he removed his pants, then his shirt. I let my uniform drag around my boots. I reached out and pulled his naked body into my arms. He was trembling. "Are you scared?"

"Yes, but not for the reason you think. I've been mentally preparing for this a long time." He ran his finger along my jaw. "I'm afraid to lose you."

I pressed him close. I was afraid to lose him, too. That's why I needed to connect with him this way. I began to kiss him, and he clung to my body until I lifted his ass in my hands and pressed him against the wall. He opened to me. There was no resistance. He let his head fall back and with his eyes closed, he urged me on. When I was in position, I lowered him down on my cock. We both came with a quiet groan within seconds. There was no thrusting, almost no movement, only a gradual connection that caused us both to lose control. Storm's entire body trembled with the aftermath of orgasm as I buried my face in his neck and he stroked my hair.

I held him, pinned against the wall, my arms around his waist, and he squeezed his thighs around my hips. I didn't want to let him go, but I knew I had to. There was a lot to do, and time was not on our side. I raised my head and he kissed my forehead, tenderly touching my face, smiling into my eyes.

"My love," he whispered. "We're going to come through this together."

I nodded. "And promise me something, Storm...if we make it."

"I'll promise you anything, Colonel," he whispered, "anything, baby, anything."

"...that you'll never leave me. I don't think I can live without you."

"Come on," he said softly, his lips pursed, "a big, macho soldier like you?"

I kissed him again, and then lowered him to the floor. I backed away, put my uniform together and waited for him to dress. "Go and prepare your militia. I've got to talk to my soldiers. They are free to do what they want now. I can't guarantee how many will stay."

"Do what you have to do," he said, doing up his shirt. "Give me a number where I can reach you."

I handed him a communication device. "Call me."

"Of course," he winked, and then walked out without another word.

As I addressed my soldiers, I tried to gauge their reaction to the news. I told them that they were free to go, but that I would stay. "When I joined the UWD, it was to help people. I can't leave these civilians to die. It's not what I stand for, not what I trained my soldiers to stand for. I won't hold it against any of you if you leave, but I would be grateful to you if you would stay and help me fight this war."

"We can't win, Colonel. There are too many of them," someone spoke up.

"We have twenty thousand SIL willing to fight with us."

There was an exchange of glances.

"Now, listen. You will be acting against direct orders. You could be court-martialed, but I'm sure the people of this planet would give you refuge should you decide to stay on. I understand that some of you have families, and..."

"You mean you intend to remain here, Colonel," someone said to me.

I smiled. Yes, if we survived this, I would stay, if Storm would have me. I had a feeling he might.

"The Colonel is in love," someone shouted out.

There was some applause and a few smart remarks.

I smiled again. Hell, I hadn't smiled so much in my entire lifetime. I put up a hand to quiet them. "Yes, I'm in love. I've broken the rules, but..." I paused, and smiled, "it was beyond my control. Now, enough teasing. Anyone wanting to leave should be ready to do so in one hour. The rest will report to duty to Captain..." I paused and looked at him, along with the Major, and got nods. I reached over and slapped them both on the back. They were staying, and as I looked around me, I knew that most of the others who'd come here with us would stay also. I was proud to fight side by side with these soldiers and I'd be proud to die with them, if that's what it came to.

It was beginning to look a little bit brighter. Three hours later as I was standing outside studying the night sky, Storm called and told me that he was gathering his army.

"My soldiers are staying," I told him.

"Good," he replied. "We may have a fighting

chance. Any word from the Deino?"

"No, but there are over three hundred craft in the sky, and I'm sure there are more on the way."

"I love you," he said. "We're heading to the fields now."

"Okay. Storm, I told my soldiers if they needed to stay here after that..."

"Of course. We'll be happy to have them, and if they are half as hunky as their Colonel, well..."

"Never mind," I chastised him teasingly. "I'm the only hunk you have to concern yourself with now."

"Ah, a jealous streak, Colonel. We are going to have fun!"

I laughed. "Hang up, Storm. See you soon."

The communication went dead. I looked up to see my Captain standing there. He was smiling. "I haven't seen you this happy since, hell, I've never seen you this happy, not even when we defeated the Deino at Steno8."

"Never been in love before."

"It shows. I'm glad he makes you happy, Connor."

"Did I say how proud I am to serve with you, Captain?" I asked him.

"No, but the feeling is mutual. You have my respect, and I'd follow you anywhere."

I nodded.

"Colonel," one of the soldiers came running over now. "We're receiving communication from the commander of the Deino."

I ran inside and saw him on the screen, staring at me from his craft. He was a gaunt man with long red hair and big veins in his forehead. "Syit," I said.

"MacMahon. I'd thought you'd be bigger."

"I'd thought you'd be better looking," I fired back, "so we're even."

He sneered at me. "Let's make a deal. Give us the traitors, and we'll leave. None of your soldiers or the ATC will be damaged."

I shook my head.

"You can't win. Are you on a suicide mission, MacMahon? Come on, even I have too much respect for you to allow you to just walk into a slaughter."

"I appreciate the respect, Commander, but save it. If you want the people, you'll have to come and get them. Fight us here on the ground."

"We won't fight near the fields."

"Then fight us in the streets," I said between clenched teeth.

"You're just like your parents, Colonel, defiant to the end. It was a shame I had to watch them both die like stuck pigs."

How I hated this bastard. I ground my teeth together and forced myself to stay calm. He was trying to make me lose it.

I jotted something on a piece of paper and pushed it at the captain. He nodded and went running out the door.

"Move the people out of the fields," Syit barked.

"No."

"Fine," he said, leering at me. "Die then, you asshole and believe me, I'll make sure your soldiers die nice and slow as well."

"Do me a favour; don't die before you get to me, Syit. I want to hear you pray for mercy to your fake,

greedy little prophet before I strangle the last breath out of you."

"Why in the hell would you want to save a lot of cocksucking sodomites, MacMahon, unless you are one yourself?"

"You got it, Syit. That's exactly what I am, a cocksucking sodomite. Come on down on the ground and find out just what this cocksucker is made of."

"Expect us," he said. The screen went blank.

I got on the phone to Storm. When he answered, I told him to turn his troops around.

"I know, that cute little captain of yours just hailed me," he laughed.

"Don't be getting any ideas."

"He just congratulated me. He said he couldn't believe I'd melted that cold heart of yours. He confessed to me that you always gave him a bit of a hardon."

I was surprised.

"You had no idea, did you, gorgeous? Well, that's cause you were too busy playing soldier. I told him he should have done like me. I just saw what I wanted, and took it."

"You're a special case."

"That I am."

"I wonder why he was..." I said, almost to myself.

"Probably the accent, not to mention that cute ass of yours, course he doesn't know that you have the biggest, most succulent cock in the..."

"Okay, okay," I said, grinning. "Just lead your troops, I'll do the same. And if you come across Syit, don't kill him, because he's mine."

"Connor..." he began, but I closed communication.

When the Captain came back, I asked him how the SIL was equipped for weapons.

"They seem well stocked, Sir," he said.

Damn, I thought, that Storm. Where in hell had he hidden all those? I hadn't been anywhere near infiltrating the SIL. At the moment, I was pretty happy about that.

"Are the soldiers ready?"

"They are, Sir," he replied, and we climbed into one of the vehicles and headed to the residential area.

.....

A caravan of vehicles followed us to the residential district of Sanctum, which thanks to Storm and the SIL was close to being deserted. When we arrived in front of the great hall, I surveyed the area. Armed SIL were already patrolling, and I asked them if there were any remaining citizens in the vicinity.

"There are a few diehards," one man told me. "We're doing our best to convince them to leave. Handle Manson insists on staying."

I sighed. The entire time he'd been talking, I'd been looking doubtfully at his gun. These primitive weapons they carried were worrisome, but there was nothing I could do about the situation. We didn't have enough weapons to arm all the SIL. "I'll take care of Handle Manson," I said. "Can you do me a favour? Go over to the ATC area and bring back any medical personnel you can find. The Hall will serve as an infirmary, as well as the central command post. It's

the only building solid enough to withstand explosives."

He nodded. "No problem."

I touched his arm. "Have you seen Storm?"

He shook his head. "Not lately." I watched him take off, then, gathered the troop leaders and officers together outside the Hall. The soldiers would be spread out to cover all vantage points, with snipers placed strategically among the rocks. We would move the Deino deeper into the core of the districts to the North where SIL would be hiding and waiting to ambush them. The Deino had no idea that SIL existed. It was our trump card.

I tried Storm again on the radio. No answer. The plan wouldn't work without him. Finally I gave up and sent the officers out to brief their troops. I didn't know exactly when the Deino would attack. They'd disappeared from the sky an hour ago, but I knew that was only a temporary move. They'd be back. It was still light out and the sun was buying us time.

I was trying to convince Handle to join his citizens in the ATC fields when Storm came sauntering in. I was so relieved to see him and so damned pissed off that he'd not responded to my calls, I lambasted him. "Where in fuck have you been? I've been trying to reach you for an hour. You need to place your..."

He held up his hand. "Whoa there, Colonel, calm down." He smiled at me. "I'm fine. I already know everything. That cute little Captain of yours told me. I was busy following your orders when you tried to reach me. I left my radio in the vehicle."

"Keep your radio on you at all times," I grumbled.

Handle looked from me to Storm, then grinned. "What's going on with you two?"

I raked my hand through my hair and mumbled, "Fuck-all nothing."

Storm laughed out loud. "You're just like an old grumpy bear. My God, but you're gorgeous when you're angry. You must give those soldiers of yours wet dreams."

I was not impressed.

Handle clapped his hands together and laughed out loud as Storm stood there smirking at me.

"Enough," I said. "Handle, you're going, and Storm, you're..."

"Staying," he said softly.

Handle noted the look exchanged between us and quickly left the room.

Storm walked over to me and put his hands on my shoulders. "I know you're tense, but everything is under control. You're a good leader, Connor, you're a good soldier."

I began to calm down.

"They're not expecting the SIL. They think we're a bunch of pussies."

"Those damn primitive weapons," I shook my head. "Might as well have clubs and stones."

"Stop it. We're trained. We know how to do damage and we know this planet."

I nodded.

"Do you trust me?"

"With my life."

"And you with mine," he replied, kissing me softly on the mouth. "Now, I have to go. Guard your life as

if it were mine, because I'll die without you."

I pressed my forehead against his, then he stepped away from me and was gone.

I can't tell you how lonely I felt standing there in that room alone just before all hell broke loose. I walked out into the other room where soldiers were stacking extra weapons, foodstuffs, portable cots, and medical supplies, and the thought that I didn't tell Storm how much I loved him struck me. What if it was the last time I saw him?

Christ, when in hell had I become so sentimental? Since I'd fallen in love, that's when. I pushed it away. I would see him again. I'd tell him and I'd show him. It would be all right.

I was helping some of the soldiers bring in supplies when I felt a tap on my back. I turned around to see Ackin. "Private Varek reporting for duty, Sir," he said, saluting.

"Ackin," I replied, taking him aside. "What are you doing here? Why aren't you in the fields with...?"

"Please don't send me there," he pleaded. "I want to help. Please, let me, Colonel."

I thought quickly. How could I make him feel as if he was really contributing and keep him safe at the same time? "Private," I said, stopping one of my men.

"Colonel," he replied.

"Get this man a UWD uniform, and a communication device. He's just joined up."

The soldier nodded, and marched off.

Ackin beamed. "You mean it?"

"Yes, but now that you're a member of the most elite military unit in the world, you must do exactly

as you're told. Is that clear, soldier?"

"Yes, Sir," he said, saluting again.

"At ease, soldier," I told him, hiding a smile. "You don't need to salute after everything I say. A simple "Yes, Sir," will do, young man."

"Yes, Sir," he said, going to salute, then putting his hand down when I shook my head at him.

The soldier brought the uniform, which adjusted automatically for size. Ackin ran off into the other room to put it on.

"Colonel," the soldier said tentatively, "isn't there an age requirement? He doesn't look more than..."

I put my fingers to my lips. "He's an honorary member."

He smiled. "Yes, Sir."

When Ackin came back, he looked as proud as a peacock. "Very becoming, soldier. Now your first order."

"Yes, Sir."

I handed him a radio. "Your mission is to patrol the ATC fields. If you spot a citizen who's sick, is without water, or in distress, you're to take care of that. If sick, you radio command so that we can send help. Water will be on site. You're only to ask your comrades, and if in distress, the orders are to give comfort and reassurance. Assure them we are there to help. Is that clear, soldier?"

"Yes, Sir."

"What was that, soldier?" I demanded gruffly.

"Yes, Sir!" he shouted.

I saluted him, and he saluted back.

On the way out, I caught the arm of one of my

men. "Make sure he gets to the fields safely," I said, indicating Ackin.

The soldier nodded, and followed him out.

Shortly after three in the morning, the sky lit up with Deino craft. I was in position near the great Hall when I looked up and there they were, like a great flash in the sky. A voice suddenly filled the night. It was Commander Syit. "Surrender the citizens of Sanctum. They are criminal fugitives, their lives forfeit by The Father of Will. Surrender the people, MacMahon, and save yourselves."

I adjusted the volume on my amplified microphone in my helmet and began to speak. "Commander, I have two words for you: fuck and you."

Loud cheers rang out into the night all around me, and as far away as the ATC fields. I laughed right into my microphone.

"Fine," Syit replied, "prepare to meet your doom. No more words."

The crafts descended one by one. The Deino warriors emerged, weapons blazing, and ready for combat.

We'd been fighting for hours. My soldiers had been dying and bleeding for hours as well. The infirmary filled and so did the body bags. We were moving the

Deino slowly into position right below the rocky hills where Storm's snipers were waiting. Damn, were these bastards ever in for a hell of a surprise.

I was just about to give Storm the go ahead to attack when two Deino warriors came up behind me, taking me by surprise. The soldier who'd been watching the opening while I was communicating with my platoon was lying with his throat cut. I knew that kid. He was twenty years old, and had a baby on the way back home.

I went ballistic. One had me around the throat. The other was ready to blow my brains out when I wrenched my throat to the left to take the pressure off, kicked out with the toe of my boot, which hid a micro laser knife, and sliced into the artery of his leg. At the same time, I grabbed the other one's nuts and squeezed while slamming my other arm into his chin, knocking him backwards, then swirled around and opened fire with my machine gun.

Hearing the weapon fire, three of my soldiers came running. I put up my hand, radioed Storm who was waiting for my call, and said, "Slaughter the fuckers."

"Why, Connor," he cooed, "you make me so hot when you talk like that."

I was breathing hard, staring down at the dead Deino. The other one was bleeding all over the place, and I indicated to my soldiers that they should take him away.

"Are you all right?" Storm's voice invaded my communication device.

"No," I said, "I'm pissed. Do it, okay. And Storm," I added hastily, "I love you."

There was a silence, then he said, "I know. I love you too." That was it.

Five minutes later, all hell broke loose. I took a breath, moved positions and began to fire. No more than an hour later, there were dead Deino warriors everywhere, and the commander gave the order to retreat. I was goddamned relieved to see that the casualties on our side were minimal, but extremely frustrated at the same time. As hard as I had tried to get a shot at Syit, I didn't. I wanted him. I wanted to kill him for every one of my soldiers who lay dead, or dying on the ground. I wanted him for his bigotry, and his greed. I wanted him for killing my parents, and reminding me of it.

"We've won, we've won, Colonel," my men were shouting now. I felt pats on my back. Everyone was hugging. "They're leaving, they're leaving." Cheers went up.

I wasn't paying any attention. I was moving away from the revelry, scanning the ground for Syit. I was hoping he wasn't lying dead somewhere, hoping he was in good enough shape for me to kick his ass.

The last of the Deino craft were leaving the ground now. When I thought I saw the back of Syit's head, I started to run. I heard someone call my name, but I kept running. Mere feet from the craft, I skidded to a stop on the sandy ground. I reached out and pulled on his red hair, yanking him backwards.

He wasn't expecting it. He landed hard on the ground at my feet, winded. I was ready, even willing to give him time to recover. I threw my weapon on the ground, motioning to him with my hands as he

got on his belly and looked up at me. He stumbled to his feet, took a breath, then rushed me. We struggled like two animals, enraged, teeth bared, the hatred seeming to seep out of us like pus-infected wounds.

We broke apart, allowing enough space between us to do some serious damage. He swung at me, hitting me in the lower jaw. I swung back, hitting him hard in the gut. He grunted, leaned over, then stood up and swung again. I gave him back blow for blow until the blood stung my eyes. Neither of us could hardly stand on our feet anymore.

He went to one knee and wiped his mouth, which was split and bloody, with the back of his skinned knuckles. I reached for my weapon, now taking all my remaining strength to lift it and point it between his eyes. I could see the soldiers gathered around us and to tell you the truth, it was the first time I noticed. They were dead silent. I thought I saw Storm being held back by Ted Frankel and two other soldiers, but I couldn't be sure. I could hardly see anything. They were all a blur.

Just before I was about to fire my weapon, I heard a shout, then someone tackled me and threw me on the ground. I went down hard, my weapon falling out of my hand. A shot rang out, then several, and I struggled frantically to crawl out from underneath the body on top of me, the body that had gone limp. Suddenly someone lifted the body off me, and when my vision cleared and I could finally sit up, I saw Syit lying dead a few feet away, and another Deino warrior slumped half out of the craft, his chest riddled with bullets.

Ted pulled me to my feet. He put his arm around my waist and asked me if I was all right. There was a crowd of people standing around something.

"He saved your life," Captain Frankel was saying as my eyes tried to focus on what was happening a few feet away. I tried to wipe the blood from my eyes.

"What happened?" I managed.

"There was a Deino warrior in the craft. He took a shot at you. None of us saw him. He jumped in front of you, and..."

I pushed past him suddenly. "No," I said, "Oh God, no, let me through," I shouted, elbowing my way into the small crowd of people gathered around. "Let me..." I stopped talking suddenly, and went down on my knees. "Storm," I said softly, my eyes filling with tears. I lifted his head up onto my lap and looked up at the others standing around. I felt for a pulse. He was still alive, but unconscious. "Get the medic," I shouted, "get the medic."

Someone said one was on the way. I waited, cradling him in my arms, rocking him like a baby when maybe I shouldn't have been moving him at all. A few minutes later they took him on a stretcher to the Great Hall, and I followed along as fast as I could go, but I was quickly losing speed. Finally, I collapsed at the door of the Hall. My last thoughts were of Storm, and I heard myself praying to someone--or something, "Please don't take him...please..."

When I opened my eyes, I was lying on a hospital cot

with a bunch of computerized equipment all around. I felt someone holding my hand, and when I focused, I saw those beautiful green eyes looking down at me. "Storm," I began, "I thought..."

He was sitting beside me and aside from his arm being in a sling, he looked pretty good. "Looks like you're in worse shape than I am, Colonel," he said softly, smiling. "Welcome back."

"I thought you were..." I squeezed his hand.

"I'm fine," he whispered. "You're the one with the cracked ribs and the ruptured whatever in hell they call it...spleen?"

I sighed. "What in hell possessed you to jump in front of me like that?"

"Well," he made a face, "to save your life, stupid. What do you think I did it for, because I like pain?"

I grinned.

"I might ask you what ever possessed you to chase after Syit like that. Someone should have told you that we'd won."

I laughed. Damn, it hurt. "Don't make me laugh."

"What a macho man you are. And you should see your face. Good thing the doctor tells me there won't be any scars. I was thinking I'd have to fuck you with your helmet on."

"Ha ha," I said.

He laughed like a boy, letting his fingers move over the inside of my hand. Then suddenly he sobered. He looked around the room, then brought his eyes back to me. "The only good thing about you being this messed up is that you won't be leaving right away. You'll need a couple of weeks."

I thought I heard a sob at the end of his words, but there were no tears in his eyes.

I squeezed his hand tighter. "I want to stay, Storm. I want to stay with you."

His mouth opened some. "You weren't bullshitting me? You really want...?"

"I love you, you moron," I said, grinning. "Ouch." Grinning hurt, too. "I think you need someone here to negotiate with Earth and help you build the SIL. I was thinking about forging an interstellar Security force, like the UWD, only with..."

He put a finger on my lip gently. "I was thinking the same thing, but not now, love. Rest. We'll have our whole lifetime to talk, and to do other things." There was a mischievous sparkle in his eyes.

* * * * *

Two months later....

I stroked his silky wayward hair as his lips tightened around the head of my cock, then gradually worked their way up the shaft where I felt the tip hit the back of his throat. Damn, he was good at that. I closed my eyes, settling down on the bed, straining my hips upwards as he squeezed the base with one hand and began to lazily move my cock in and out of his mouth, using his tongue to lick every inch as he went. I closed my eyes, bucking my hips when he remained still, fucking his mouth now as he planted his palms on the mattress and raised his eyes to me. When he let my cock plop out of his mouth, I groaned. He laughed seductively, straddling my hips.

"It's nice in my mouth, but it's a lot nicer in my ass. I'm so horny, Colonel," he cooed, reaching down and twisting my nipples.

I let my head go back, licking my lips as if I was about to taste the most succulent meal. Storm fondled my balls for a moment, then grabbed my cock again. God, I was hard. He slapped it around none too gently, and I cried out.

"Now, Connor," he said, "that's not nice."

I had no idea what I had said. He had his fist around the base now, and was guiding it up inside of him. Damn. His ass closed over my cock. Don't ever think that the one receiving is the passive one. The receiver controls everything. Storm had a hold of my cock, and his ass was swallowing it whole. Once he had all of it, he began to move up and down, side to side, his head thrown back, mouth open.

"Oh God, Connor," he shouted. "Fuck, yeah... yeah..."

I wasn't actually doing anything really, just supplying the cock. That's it. Ummm, but that was enough to pump the cum out of me like a fountain as Storm pulled almost all the way out and slammed back down on my cock again. He came too, several seconds after, throwing himself down beside me and breathing in a satisfied sigh. He took my hand, and we were lying there naked in the aftermath of orgasm when the door burst open, and Ackin stood there. I scrambled for the blanket. His eyes zeroed in on my cock like radar. Storm laughed out loud. "Ackin, you know you're not supposed to bust in on us like that."

I was grumbling.

"I'm sorry, Bro," he said, glancing at me, "I just wanted to tell you about my wonderful idea for the security force, and..."

"This isn't really the time, Ackin," Storm said, smiling.

"Tell us later," I said sternly.

He shrugged, then, headed for the door. He turned around and winked at me. "I knew you'd be hung. Storm sure knows how to pick 'em." He laughed and left, closing the door behind him.

Storm ran his hand over my chest. "I sure do know how to pick them, don't I?"

"We need to talk about that brother of yours, Storm," I said, "he..."

"He's a chip off the old block," Storm kissed me on the nose, "can't blame him for being jealous. You're the hottest guy on the planet, and you're mine. Eat your heart out, Ackin," he mumbled, crawling on top of me and smothering me with kisses.

How could I be angry?

How could I do anything but wrap him in my arms and love him?

The End.

DJ Manly

D.J. Manly is fast acquiring a reputation for pushing the boundaries of male/male erotic romance. A reviewer once said of Manly's work that it was enough to give the reader "...third degree burns in an air-conditioned room..." and that's putting it mildly. If you adore gorgeous men who can't get enough of each other's bodies...if you like rich plots laced with steamy sex, thick and rich with aching need and glorious adoration and love...Manly's books will satisfy the craving and leave you panting for more.

"If I wouldn't enjoy reading it, I wouldn't be writing it," says Manly. "I like to tease...but I always please..."

To check out books by D.J. Manly, you can visit the website at djmanly.com, and take a taste...if you dare.

"Fair warning, I've been told that it's highly addictive."

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