

THE EDGE OF DESPERATION

The image is a vertical composition. The top half features a close-up of a man's face, looking downwards with a somber expression. The bottom half shows a large, detailed spaceship with a complex structure, including a prominent tower-like section. The background is a vibrant space scene with various nebulae in shades of blue, green, and purple, and numerous stars.

JAMES BUCHANAN • JASON EDDING

The Edge of Desperation

MLR PRESS AUTHORS

Featuring a roll call of some of the best writers of gay erotica and mysteries today!

Maura Anderson

Victor J. Banis

Jeanne Barrack

Laura Baumbach

Alex Beecroft

Sarah Black

Ally Blue

J.P. Bowie

P.A. Brown

James Buchanan

Jordan Castillo Price

Kirby Crow

Dick D.

Jason Edding

Angela Fiddler

Dakota Flint

Kimberly Gardner

Storm Grant

Amber Green

LB Gregg

Drewey Wayne Gunn

Samantha Kane

Kiernan Kelly

JL Langley

Josh Lanyon

Clare London

William Maltese

Gary Martine

ZA Maxfield

Jet Mykles

L. Picaro

Neil Plakcy

Luisa Prieto

Rick R. Reed

AM Riley

George Seaton

Jardonn Smith

Caro Soles

Richard Stevenson

Claire Thompson

Kit Zheng

*Check out titles, both available and forthcoming, at
www.mlrpess.com*

The Edge of Desperation

JASON EDDING
JAMES BUCHANAN

mlrpress

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright 2009 by Jason Edding
Copyright 2009 James Buchanan

All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

Published by
MLR Press, LLC
3052 Gaines Waterport Rd.
Albion, NY 14411

Visit ManLoveRomance Press, LLC on the Internet:
www.mlrpress.com

Edited by Kris Jacen
Cover Art by Deana C. Jamroz
Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN# 978-1-60820-043-6

2009

Dark Robe Edges: Dark Robe Society 2 by Jason Edding

Beyond Duty by James Buchanan

DARK ROBE EDGES

DARK ROBE SOCIETY 2

JASON EDDING

PROLOGUE

On a rocky and frozen moon, blanketed with dark brown ice fields and orbiting a giant swirling ball of deadly radiation, a group of rebels planned a major offensive against the Dark Robe Society that even now tracked through the cold of space, en route to the Jovian System. An intrepid group, holed up in a secret base under the largest moon in the solar system.

Two of the five agents had survived the crash, and managed to crawl out of the ship in one piece. The other three were scattered across the barren and frozen dull brown landscape. One still lay half in the cockpit. The rest of him was thrown thirty feet from the crippled shuttle and looked like a macabre parody of humanity. His feet unceremoniously stuck in the ice in a standing position. The remains of the other two were splotches of red pulp across a wide area; no way to distinguish which splatter belonged to which killer.

The team of four killers and one pilot-diplomat had been put together quickly by the Hierarch himself, and sent as soon as the whereabouts of the rebel base was confirmed by the torpedo bombs that were dropped on the surface of Jupiter's largest moon. Radar images from the torpedoes had then been transmitted to a small satellite in orbit above Ganymede then relayed to Earth.

They had been given a ship the size of a train engine filled with explosives and weapons. What little room was left in the cramped voyager was sleeping quarters and a simple latrine, no larger than an old-fashioned telephone booth. The remaining three hundred feet of the vessel were three hastily built fuel pods, each twenty feet in diameter, welded together to run the four ion drives. They had been supplied with very little food and water. In fact, the crewmen realized they had only enough for a one way journey. They were not expected to return.

"The radar images that the torpedoes sent back show a definite cavern a klick from here," declared the one with the blue stripe on his left arm. One pointed in the direction of the cavern, due north. The other nodded, and pulled a neutazer from his holster. "Put that away. Canyons and rips in the fucking ground will swallow you up like the whale did Jonah." Damn novice clone, he thought. "Just follow my lead, you'll need both hands in case you lose your step." He raised his hand and gestured down quickly. "You step in one wide enough, you'll be dead before you hit the bottom."

The killer rubbed moon dust off his visor, looked around him, and replied, "Just show me the ones we're here for, and I'll do my fucking job. What do I look like anyway?"

The commander ignored him. He motioned for the new one to follow and started off, looking one last time at the remnants of their devastated ship. "We need to find it fast, there's probably an entryway of some sort."

The assassin clone nodded his helmeted head. "My sensor disperser is on full power. Yours?"

"Shit, it's been on since we reached orbit. Let's go, and no more talking." The leader trudged along, his helmet pointed down as he made sure he didn't step in a crevice. A twisted ankle or a broken leg would mean certain death on this frozen ball.

"It's fucking cold out here, did you look at your readout?" He tapped his arm pad. "It's 246 below freaking zero!"

"Shut it and move, or you'll be a frozen killer," the leader commanded in as loud a voice as his transmitter would allow.

"Do you think the transponder is still working?" the younger agent asked, still turning to look back at the demolished craft. He noted the center ion drive pod was still flaring, but had snapped off the hull and was pushing against the icy surface in some vain attempt to lift off by itself.

"No, the ship is toast. We lost the engine when we clipped that fucking ridge." He turned and grabbed the young clone by the shoulders. "No more talk, I'm here to do my job, you'd best do yours."

“What if our suit rips open out here? I didn’t get any space flight training.”

The leader groaned, shook his head, and vaguely wished the novice could see his face. “We’re in a vacuum, idiot. Here, I’ll spell it out for you, d-e-a-d.”

ON THE EDGE OF DECEPTION

One thousand feet below the surface, the air was warmed to a balmy sixty-five degrees, and the slow hum of dehumidifiers was mixed with the steady drone of the fusion core reactor below the base's main floor. Even with the rock, ice, the thermacrete mix just under the reinforced titanium floor ground structure, the ever pulsing vibration from the core was a constant reminder to Toren of where he was. It bothered some, this thrumming, fit to rattle nerves at times, but not him. In fact he had often let it ease him into a tranquil, if short, night's sleep.

Lieutenant Toren Mir walked the corridors and flinched each and every time someone saluted him. He was twenty years old. The only son of Major Simon Mir, the third in command of the base, and he was still not used to being an officer. Even if he was an officer in a rebellion against the Dark Robe oppression, it still seemed unreal to him. He had asked for this position, but he didn't know why. He still hadn't decided if it was out of duty to his father, a hatred of the Dark Robes, or just wanting to get off Europa and be someone important. He finally reached his destination. A quiet section of hallway where ultra sensitive motherboards and display readout panels were stored. Amongst other things.

He inspected a digital display for floor heating temperature control with keen interest. He hadn't been allocated to do this, but he had some spare time, and rather than spend it cooped up in his room staring at the walls, he would perform extra duty shifts to keep his boredom at a minimum. He knelt, pulled the control panel open and made sure the relays were all connected in their proper sockets before closing, then locked the access hatch. Tedious, sure, but at least he was a rebel, not some poor schmuck still stuck on Europa when all hell breaks loose, he thought, almost joyfully.

That done, he had nothing to do for the next four hours. He stood to leave, but paused a moment and examined his reflection in the mirror finish of the DDB. He had cut his hair just a week ago, keeping it to military requirements, per his father's order. He didn't mind. His light blond hair stood out in the rebellion. There were so many people walking about with dark hair, that he was, and he believed this, like a wet dream come true for some. Maybe it was his light blue eyes, the color of a turquoise sea with white sands below. The eyes on him at times were almost embarrassing. He only had eyes for one man, and that was Brekart Dobson.

He grinned, showing his teeth, and turned his head to catch the sparkle. The only thing that really bothered him was his height. At five foot eight, he had to be the shortest rebel on Ganymede, but there was nothing he could do about that. At least not without some extreme genetic engineering, which, of course, was out of the question. His father hated genetic manipulation and so did his father's mentor, Commander Tees.

Toren chewed on his lip a moment, then decided to return to the hub instead of taking a short nap. He would sleep eventually. Even he needed to sleep now and then.

Commander Alton Tees quietly scrutinized the latest repairs to the control center corridor, some simple rewiring of the light fixtures and the door lock mechanism. Much to his chagrin, the automatic doors tended to get stuck when they were only half open. Satisfied the work would progress whether he was present or not, he unobtrusively left the area and let the crew do what they do best.

He headed out down the passageway, turned left and passed the officer's section, where repairs had barely begun. At least the lighting restoration had been expedited, he thought. As he continued toward his rooms, he watched as each small incandescent globe that lined the walls flickered on as he came in close proximity to them.

It had been two months and six days since the unanticipated Dark Robe assault on Ganymede, and the rebels far below the surface had nearly repaired the lethal effects of the explosions that rocked the base. To help repair the damage, the rebel's black marketeer friends had stolen several reinforcement struts from a scrap yard on Europa's southern hemisphere and transported them aboard an ore refinery ship that still orbited the far side of the moon. Perpetual thrusting maneuvers kept it hidden there in the shadows of Ganymede's dark side, away from the light and radiation of Jupiter, and far from sensing equipment and the sight of the enemy.

He examined another set of relay switches along the wall. Without the stolen struts, these repairs wouldn't even be possible. Hopefully it would be months before they were even missed. The ship on the other hand could only stay hidden for so long, Tees thought. So their plan, if it were to work, would have to begin... soon.

They had already replaced the command crew of the Indio with rebel volunteers. Some of which had been black marketeers a day before. The current commander was prepared to hand the ship over to Admiral Dobson when the time was right.

Tees stood outside his new quarters, and he couldn't have been happier with them. Far more capacious than the last, closer to the control center and farther from the immutable thrumming of the fusion reactor core. Granted that sound could occasionally lull him to sleep, but other times, it drove away his calm like the raking of nails across a chalkboard. But now, he heard the sonance no longer.

His door closed with a gentle hiss, the globe-lights on the ceiling briefly flickered before sending a warm yellow glow around his room, and the heating system switched on just long enough to make him comfortable. His quarters were not of rock like the last. This time he had insisted on prefab with the reinforced roof beams put in. The doubly thick crisscrossed beams, banded with titanium, would at the least, if another strike occurred, give him time to get out of the room before the

ceiling collapsed on his head. He shuddered inwardly when he remembered the injuries the clone Jack Harrow had sustained when his ceiling fell upon him. Injuries that were still healing almost half an Earth year later. The other clone Edge Fland had somehow miraculously escaped all harm.

He passed his hand over the sensor, locking the door, then removed the polished insignia from his collar and placed them on the circular rock table near the entry. It was carved from a hunk of rock that had lain on the surface above for untold eons, but it was suitable for his needs nonetheless. He removed the podpad from his jumpsuit pocket and placed it beside his golden bars.

He walked across the soft mosaic carpet that covered a large portion of the stone floor, stopped before his small desk, which was seamlessly built into the prefabricated room, and noticed the steadily blinking comm light. He sighed impatiently, and pressed enter. "This had better be important." Yet his voice was soft, gentle. He didn't convey anger very well. He preferred to remain calm, composed.

The small screen on the comm changed from gray, blinked several times, then a clear high density image of Toren's handsome face came into view. The picture was so clear the short cut blond hair, thick eyebrows and blue eyes made it appear he was just inches from Tees. It was a visage that had on many occasions, like now, made him go weak in the knees. He steadied himself though, for now was not the time to let his lust take over his serenity. There was too much at stake to let his loins rule his psychology. Not to mention the unsubstantiated rumor that Toren was involved with the admiral.

"I'm sorry sir, I just wanted to inform you the temperature variance is nominal. I think it was just a hiccup in the system." His voice was soft, the sound of a hand brushing a silk curtain. Tees waited, knowing there had to be something more to warrant the interruption. "That's all, sir." He finally added.

Tees nodded and smiled. "Very good, Toren, log the variance for the next shift. I'll take a look at it in the morning." He pushed the comm button off so that he wouldn't be disturbed for the remainder of the night. He shook his head

and watched the image of Toren go grey. He needed to be completely alone. Things were going to get out of hand, he could feel it, and he needed to collect himself, the only way he knew how. The brushes were just there, in a cubbyhole built into the wall. The paints in small ceramic jars beside them.

“It’s time for my Picasso to come alive.” He began to think of something abstract that would calm him. Something that had absolutely nothing to do with death, destruction or war.

A makeshift dartboard and a glass of burgundy lay side by side on the floor next to his cast off shoes. They weren’t arranged in any specific pattern. The board was dropped, the glass was set down with eyes closed, and his shoes were flung off each foot with a short supplication that neither would strike the glass and spill the wine all over the mosaic carpet. Alton Tees examined them closely now, then began to paint a scene that neither resembled the board nor anything he had chosen to portray with fluid strokes. He rested his feet on the desk chair that was just within reach, settled more comfortably in the soft recliner, and nibbled on the end of his brush.

His painting was going nowhere. A glance at the clock beside him told him he’d done nothing but stare at the canvas for two hours. A dozen strokes, and two colors. The red of the burgundy, and the black of his shoes. The mural looked like a child’s attempt at creating the universe with a trembling hand. He put the brush into a small jar of tepid water that sat on the stool beside his chair and pushed the easel out of the way. He stared at the amateurish brush strokes, turned his head slightly, and thought he saw a rearing stallion somewhere within it. Still, it was better than his last attempt, which was hanging behind the door on the bathroom wall, unseen by anyone but him.

He got up and paced back and forth for a time, then returned to the painting. This artistic attempt wasn’t working, and it wasn’t what he was searching for. He removed it from the easel, placed it behind his chair and pulled a fresh canvas from beside his desk. He placed it on the easel, picked up the brush, dabbed a bit of yellow, and began to create a bright yellow sun in the top left hand corner. A little green, a touch of orange,

and a quick cleaning of the brush. Not far from the stellar display, his hand moved in short strokes. A dab of blue and white soon formed a planet. It was the Earth. It was his home. That was it, he thought. That is what had been on his mind, nagging at him, and now he sat back and looked. The nagging had been his desire to return to Earth and be done with this war.

He put the brush into the cup of water. He was satisfied with his effort, and it was getting late, perhaps a little sleep was necessary. In the back of his mind he almost wished he had told Toren to come with his report, at least then he would not be beating himself over his lack of artistic talent, but taking Toren from behind, which is what his little voice had been urging him to do for months. But then there was the admiral, and he really had no idea, for a certainty, that Toren was attracted to him at all.

Had he actually seen Toren staring at him from afar? Did he notice that twinkle in his eyes when their gazes met in passing along the many corridors of the base? Did Toren's own heart quicken, as his most certainly did when they casually brushed shoulders that one morning while he inspected his uniform? Toren's eyes had captured the light in such a remarkable fashion that it made him appear seraphic in nature and not a young human man at all. Of course the way he saw Toren then, and forever after, was his own silliness, his own passion and lust that had been buried for far too long, and now it was truly awakened. I am drawn to him, without a doubt, Tees thought.

He had too many doubts. There were vast uncertainties, and with Toren currently stuck to the admiral like the perfect sparkles on a polished diamond, there was also the danger of him losing his place in the rebel command. If he attempted to woo the young man. If he had the courage to finally release his hidden lust.

"Toren," he uttered softly. "Perhaps one day." He stifled a yawn, loosened his uniform, and scrunched down into his chair, pulling a thin blanket from a pocket on the side of it. A fitting design, he thought, putting a compartment in the chair, as he

turned on his side and let the image on his canvas mesmerize him into slumber.

The next morning, Tees stood in the control hub, staring intently at the display screen, a placid but interested expression on his smooth face. He never tired of watching the drama that the animated overlay exhibited on a day to day basis. Cameras and ultra sensitive scanning equipment were positioned all over the base, so everything that went on could be seen and recorded. It took up the entire north wall of the cavern, but it was as unobtrusive a thing as it could be. It was designed to blend into the wall, melding as one with the rock, in a seamless beatific creation. The right hand overlays, where he now directed his attention, showed various panoramas of the surface. Gray, brown and white. Beautiful yet bleak, fascinating, but at the same time as uninteresting as watching a still sand dune on a desert's windless day. All of these things, the surface cameras relayed to his watchful eyes.

The west and east walls were both occupied by air conditioning units and heat transfer pumps that kept the room from overheating, and transferred the excess heat to other parts of the base. They were hardly noticeable, cloaked in the shadowy overhang of rock, both natural and otherwise, and the sound of their mechanisms muffled by thick padding and insulation foam.

He looked up at the smooth ceiling, a blend of rock and titanium. Building it in its place had been the easiest part of this reinforced section of the base. The most difficult part had been getting the liquid titanium stable enough to be able to move it down the elevators without it exploding and killing everyone. The metal was mixed with nitroglycerin and an extremely rare radioactive mineral named zinconite, then given a massive jolt of high voltage electricity in a zero gravity environment, thereby changing its molecular structure to mimic the liquidity of mercury. It had all been very costly, but well worth every credit.

Tees walked to the far end of the cavern still looking up, never seeing the masterwork enough. The first layer of liquid titanium had been sprayed on the mortar covering, and within

an hour the second layer. Then on and on, layer after layer, until the titanium shield was two feet thick. The reinforcement struts, made of a steel and titanium composite, combined with the immense power of the metal, made their rebel base almost impenetrable.

Almost. There had been some minor damage to the overlying structure when the missiles had struck. Luckily, thought Tees, the projectiles had been off the mark. Repair teams had been sent up to reinforce the surface just above the installation, making sure it appeared as if nothing had changed. He still believed it had been a search only, ultimately confident that the base was still secret. Something in the back of his mind itched with doubt, but show that, he would not. There was too much at stake, too many lives to protect, for him to show anything but leadership.

“Sir?” A young aide had come up behind him without him noticing, but Tees could now hear him nervously tapping a finger on the pad in his hand. “Doctor Emanuel wishes to see you in the medical unit.”

He didn’t immediately respond. He thought it made him appear in control, thought it gave *them* confidence in him. The aide waited patiently at an untrained rebel’s idea of attention, standing still and not talking. Tees turned to him at last, casting an admiring gaze at him. He smiled at the young man, no more than twenty, full of confidence and bubbling over with fight in his puppy dog brown eyes. Tees had noticed this one before. He had so many aides, but he kept track of some of them the handsome ones, the ones that looked at him with awestruck obedience, and now and then, with burning lust.

“Very well,” Tees said curtly. He turned away from the aide. “Tell the *doctor* I will be there when I’m able.” He did not hop to it for anyone, not even Brekart, much to the Admiral’s chagrin. He listened as the aide ran off, full of youthful energy. He wasn’t old at forty-five, but sometimes he felt age creeping up on him, and even with the constant spaceflights, the thousands of hours he had spent with no gravity, his bones were in good shape. Still, there were days when he would look in the mirror and see his life slipping away. If he could only get to Earth, an

Earth with the Dark Robes no longer in power, he may have a chance to regain his youthfulness. Don't be a fool, Alton, he would sometimes think. Perhaps when the Dark Robes are gone, people will begin to lead normal lives, with normal aging, and not spend their lives and their livelihoods retaining their youthful vigor.

He observed the display intently once more, noting the lower left hand corner, where a digital display of the cargo hold showed up in a four by four picture. "Reactor core." The center overlay fizzled a moment before showing a close up view of the fusion generator. Cold steam rose up from the middle of the core, shrouding the upper segment in white mist. They'd be in the dark without the core, and probably sitting in an old freighter on the surface, pretending they had a chance against the Dark Robe Society's iron grip on the Earth. The core had taken more than fourteen years to build, and over one hundred lives had been lost. It was all worth it to Tees. Those men had sacrificed their lives, and they would be remembered with honor when the war was won.

Tees finally turned on his heel and looked around the room. Everything appeared to be in order. The control stations were all manned, three men to each station, all diligently keeping their eyes on their work. He walked to the fusion reactor core cooling station and bent low, his cheek almost touching that of Toren, who had for some reason begun to pay him some interest just a few days ago. He silently wondered if there was a rift beginning to form between the lieutenant and the admiral. Tees could smell him this close, and it made him quiver with excitement. But he was careful, and he had not let on that he was interested in him. It was too soon. The young rebel didn't bat an eye or move from his work, even with Tees literally breathing down his neck.

Toren tapped a blinking yellow button. "Core power relay six is still registering a minor fluctuation in its temperature readout," he said, calmly, but there was a slight nervousness about him, no doubt caused by the commander standing over his shoulder. He entered a new algorithm into the keypad, and cocked his head when the light continued blinking yellow. "Sir, I

think I know what's causing it." He shook his head, and his face paled noticeably. "If these numbers are accurate, there's an ionic disturbance radiating from Jupiter. I didn't realize it before, but this thing is the most powerful we've measured."

"A storm? Of what magnitude?" Tees understood the young man's fear, but expertly hid his own.

Toren lithely punched some numbers, his fingers effortlessly dancing along the key pad. "It's fluctuating slightly, but I can account for the variance and give a fairly accurate determination of one and a half to two million miles in diameter. The radiation level is off the charts... and the magnetic wave front..."

Tees wasn't hearing any more. This was going to delay their plans. He hoped the great depth of the base would be enough to occlude the most deadly rays, or the rebellion would be at an end without even firing a shot.

"Keep me informed." He put his hand on Toren's shoulder. He was pleased with his steadfast diligence. He nodded now. "I'm sure we'll be fine. Nothing to worry about."

"Yes, sir," Toren appeared to relax. "Sorry, sir, you're probably right. I shouldn't have even mentioned it." Tees could see the slight flush in his cheeks. "Still, we've never had a malfunction like this bef—" "

Tees cut him off, "you're doing fine, Toren." He pointed, then tapped the blinking light, "However, if that doesn't right itself by this evening, report to me immediately." Tees didn't wait for the reply, but headed for the elevator. He had made the *doctor* wait long enough. The elevator door swished shut. "Up one level." He straightened his uniform, knowing without being told this meeting was about the release of Jack Harrow from medical care. He just wondered if Emanuel had gotten enough blood samples from him to make the tests viable. For some reason the admiral wanted some of Jack Harrow's blood.

Tees didn't know what Admiral Dobson had in mind with regards to the blood samples, but he knew he wasn't about to share it with him. It was just a feeling. The secrecy of the admiral as of late had made him seethe at times, and he was

sure that was going to become a problem in the not so distant future. Brekart appeared calm, but since the clones had arrived, since the death of the old man, there had been a drastic shift in the admiral's mentality. To Tees, this only meant he was losing control.

He sighed now. He had already made the choice, but tried very hard to not think it pointedly. When the time was ripe, he would have to take control of the rebellion, it was inevitable. He let the thought of a coup d'état dwindle from his mind, focusing on peaceful matters. The water reclamation system was repaired and needed his approval to be turned on again. He would find that interesting, soothing and entirely mundane.

The lift wasn't as expeditious as he would have liked. The base itself hadn't had a major update since construction was deemed complete. Complete, Tees smirked to himself. It would never be complete as far as he was concerned. The constant hum, as the elevator moved up, was mesmerizing, strangely enough. It somehow reminded him of the soft sounds of waves gently whooshing along a timid coastline. He hadn't seen an ocean, or heard those waves, in fifteen years. He would hear them again, even if it killed him.

He stepped out of the elevator, just quick enough to be clear of the door as it rapidly closed. He looked left, then right, trying to remember in which direction the medical unit lay. He had only been to the infirmary three times since its completion. He didn't like hospitals. The smell of cleansers and medicinal alcohol made him feel ill. Then there was the ambiance that gave him an uneasy feeling. And that palpable and often overwhelming sense that he was beginning to thin, becoming an empty husk, taught skin over desiccated bone. It was hard for him to convey, this dark pit that being around illness took him to. He just knew it existed and he did all that he could to stay clear of circumstances that brought him to that point. He hadn't had as much as a cold for as long as he could remember.

Walking on, he counted his steps as his polished boots clapped methodically upon the rock floor, and he wished he could have sent someone else to this meeting, or at the least, delayed it long enough to have the venue changed. At last he

decided the medical unit was a left turn just up ahead, and he soon saw the teal blue lights which indicated health along the far wall. He stopped outside the door, chewed on his lip a moment, then clasped his hands behind his back, composed once more.

ON THE EDGE OF REMEMBRANCE

Jack had spent the better part of the past two months in a full body cast. They had first debrided his wounds with a powerful synthetic curative agent, then decided to wait for the deep lacerations to fully heal before encasing him in the regenerative bioplaster, which he was now literally itching to get out of. That day had finally arrived, and his clone lover Edge Fland, the assassin that had been sent to kill him months before, was on hand, along with Commander Tees and Admiral Dobson. Jack had only met him once before just after the missiles had struck over a large area of Ganymede's northern hemisphere. The meeting had him with one eye open, in a semi-conscious delirium, where he had been hooked up to an oxygen mask, with plastic tubing protruding from his arms and mouth, and wondering if he had finally met his doom. He eyed the admiral as soon as he had walked in, staring at him almost rudely, but Admiral Brekart Dobson wouldn't meet his gaze.

Jack peeled off the last tiny bits of adhesive plaster casting that Emanuel hadn't bothered to remove, and dropped them to the floor. He wiped at the white powdery residue that had formed on his arms and chest, keenly aware that everyone was staring at him, waiting for him to say something. He didn't look up. "Now, we have a war to win," he asserted, and then he directed his attention to Dobson and Tees. "We're out of time. If we're to win, we have to get out of here. When can plans be made for our return to Earth?" There was dread in his tone and it didn't go unnoticed amongst the group.

Edge, who stood complacently against the polished white wall and away from the group, chuckled softly. He knew his lover so well. He eyed Tees and Dobson and caught their exchanged, silent glances, before both men directed their attention to Jack, and nodded simultaneously. A barely discernible glare briefly etched Dobson's otherwise calm

expression, but it swiftly vanished. Tees, relaxed as ever, simply shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

Jack noticed it as well and felt there was something... familiar.

Finally, Dobson straightened his spotless white uniform, and spoke. "Plans are already in motion, but we must be careful how we proceed." He still did not meet Jack's eyes. He nodded to Tees, who then whispered something to him that neither Jack nor Edge could hear.

A side door opened then and the rebel doctor walked in, a much-used pad in his hand. He approached the group, nodded to Tees, then Dobson, whom he also gave a smile, which quickly vanished as he turned to Jack.

"You're going to be fine, but I would take it easy for the next couple of weeks; the laser surgery was precise and your bones are healed, but that doesn't take the place of old fashioned common sense rest." The doctor's peculiar hair style was still something to look at, at least for Jack. His black hair pulled into a ponytail, with the end looped into a silver ring attached to his pristine white collar.

Jack nodded slightly to the doctor, but said nothing. Emanuel's attitude had been less than amiable the entire time he had been laid up in the small confines of the infirmary, but today he appeared more congenial, due to others being present, Jack was certain. Just a few days before he had taken a blood sample from him, then quickly left without a word. Since then, and over the past couple of months, Jack had heard several of the orderlies whispering about Emanuel. It appeared the rumor that he had been stripped of his license to practice medicine eight years before for botching several transplant surgeries, which ultimately led to deaths, was true. That was probably why he was now part of the rebellion. He had only been a rebel for two years, however. Where he came from and how he joined, Jack had no idea.

Emanuel fingered his pad, then showed it to Jack. The ugly red scar that had been on his hand the first time Jack saw him was now almost gone. He turned away from Jack and the telltale

glare in his eyes melted away as he locked eyes with the admiral. "May I have a word with you sir, it's very important." His voice had become soft, measured, with a hint of melancholy.

The admiral nodded slowly at Emanuel, "One moment doctor." He turned to Tees. "Keep me informed, commander... tomorrow."

Tees acknowledged the admiral's order with a minimal head nod, but said nothing. More and more, the admiral was too busy to be bothered with day to day activities. His strange behavior had begun on his return from Earth more than two years ago, but didn't become noticeably strange until the clones entered their midst. He still couldn't figure out why his behavior had become so un-Dobson-like. It couldn't all be because of the death of his father. No, he thought. It's something else, something I'm missing, or something Dobson's doing a very good job of hiding.

"This way, sir." Emanuel urged, indicating a light blue door. His hand slightly touched the elbow of the admiral, which made him pause. Edge watched the interaction with quiet interest.

There was a fleeting glance between the two that would have gone unnoticed, had Jack not been so alert. Something between them, he thought. Some tightly guarded secret...

There's something between those two, Edge thought.

Yes, I see, Jack agreed.

Jack stretched out his legs and began to rub them vigorously, then focused on Tees, who seemed eager to say something important, but Jack spoke first. "You say we're out of time. Do you really think they know we're here?"

Tees was standing at attention and, apart from his hands clasped behind his back, he looked more like a common soldier than a commander in the rebellion. He shook his head dubiously when no one responded quickly enough. His hands shot out and came together. "I don't think they could possibly know we are here."

Dobson held up his hand to silence Tees. "As much as I trust our black market brothers, I'm sure there are those willing

to let slip enough information if the bribe is substantial.” He gave Tees a warning glance. “They aren’t going to attack every moon in the system, just to find our location.” He paused, making sure he had everyone’s attention. “Our reports show they’ve only focused their scouting on *this* moon.” At least that is as much as he’d tell them.

“Sir...” Emanuel appeared impatient. Once again, his fingers lightly brushed the arm of Dobson.

“Yes, very well, if you’ll all excuse me,” Dobson said, with a short quick nod.

Jack watched them leave, and finally stood up for the first time in two months. He waved off Edge, who approached to help him. “Pardon my lack of clothes, commander, but I can’t stay in this bed any longer,” Jack said, then looked him in the eye. “They may very well know we are here, on this moon. Then again...” He began to dress with clothes Edge had brought for him. “No black jumpsuit?”

Edge bit his lip. “Well there was one that didn’t look as bad as the other two, but I didn’t think you’d want to walk around in shredded clothes.” He bounced on his heels, and winked at Jack. *I’ll never let you forget our stage show, Jack.*

Jack only nodded, but directed his attention back to Tees. “I was saying... they may not know we’re here, but we can’t take that chance now can we? I think it’s time for us to leave.” *These fools, they’ve put all their eggs in one basket and it takes just one carefully aimed strike to destroy everything they’ve built here.*

Edge caught the thought from his lover and leaned against the wall, crossing his arms. He finally broke his silence with a snort. “If they knew we were here, that missile attack would have been followed by another...” He looked at Tees, keenly aware the commander didn’t hold much stock in anything he had to say. A lack of trust? Or something else... He locked eyes with Tees. “Or a full scale invasion. We aren’t dealing with rogue black marketeers here. We are dealing with the most highly trained military force the universe has *ever* known!” *I agree Jack, but I don’t think we’re in danger yet. Well not much. Maybe just a little.*

“Calm down.” Jack cautioned. “We, *all of us*, will fail if we don’t work together. If it’s one thing I know about our adversary, they are unyielding, they are bound to their edicts, and they will not backbite each other. If we fail to see that, we are doomed right here, right now.” *Edge, a caution for you as well. You are caught up in your disguise, my lover, you are an assassin and your military training is nonexistent.*

Jack...

Leave the military expertise to me, Edge.

Military expertise, Jack? Your file never mentioned anything of the sort. You were cloned from a diplomat and trained thus.

It also didn’t mention my being well-versed in biological sciences, did it?

There’s more to you than meets the eye, Jack, and neither of us know what it is.

It’s beginning to become clear.

I think our ability to hear each other is getting stronger too.

I agree. With you standing so close, my brain is tingling, but I think we still have to be relatively close, say twenty to thirty feet.

A young, bespectacled officer entered the room and handed Tees a steadily blinking pad. Tees perused it a moment, then quickly said, “If you’ll all excuse me, something needs my attention.” He quietly left the room, the young officer at his heels.

Jack and Edge exchanged glances, finally alone together. Edge leaned on the stark white counter, which was laden with shiny metal instruments and other miscellaneous medical supplies. He looked into Jack’s eyes and said, “I missed being alone with you, not that we haven’t been together the past two months, but you know, your body cast... the fluid drips...” *Not exactly the setting for a sexy tryst.*

“I missed—” Jack began, but the door hissed open once again.

Tees walked in, hands once more clasped calmly behind his back, and approached Jack, but he cast a sideways glance at Edge, at least acknowledging he was standing there. “Well then,

I see no need for you to be escorted around any longer..." He turned and started out, then stopped. "If you're able, I will be having dinner in my quarters this evening. You are *both* invited to join me." And with that, Jack and Edge were left unattended for the first time since arriving on the rebel base.

"Guess which one of them I don't trust," Edge said, sarcastically. He sat on the examination table and picked up the healing cylinder; the very same device that had healed himself and Jack months before. "I'm surprised they leave this thing just lying around." He was mindful not to turn it on, having no notion what would happen if it were improperly used.

Jack gave an agreeable shrug. "You don't trust anyone." He swung his legs off the cot and flexed his hands. "But let's see, that's a tough one, how about... Dobson?" He got up and went to Edge, placing his hands on his thighs. He leaned down and kissed his cheek. "I missed being alone with you, too."

Edge slowly rolled the smooth silver device between his fingers, being careful not to drop it. "Gee, Jack, how ever did you guess?" He returned Jack's kiss with one of his own. "I don't like him much," he added, matter-of-factly. "But I don't like Tees much either, probably because I don't think he likes *us* much."

Jack nuzzled Edge's neck. "Hmm, well I agree on both counts. But there's something familiar about Dobson, I just don't know what it is." He sat on the table next to Edge, almost pushing him off. "How much did you miss me?"

"Would a blowjob right here be enough of an answer?" Edge wasn't kidding in the least.

Jack didn't hesitate for a second. "I believe that would convince me."

Edge laughed. "It has been a long time, hasn't it, Jack?" He sighed, slid off the table and knelt before his lover. "Jack, I've been terribly lonely here." He reached up and pulled on Jack's cock. "Mmm, I really missed this." He took the slowly growing head into his mouth and didn't stop until the cock was fully hard and firmly planted at the back of his throat.

"I bet you'd like it if Emanuel walked in on us," Jack said, sighing. He didn't close his eyes, but stared down as Edge went up and down on his meat. "So good, you know I haven't come since we got here."

I hope you explode, in my mouth, Edge thought.

I think I will, Jack thought back.

Edge came all the way up on the cock and slurped the head, before taking it all again and holding it there, his nose buried in Jack's pubes. *Wanna fuck me, Jack?*

Not here, but later, yes, in our bed, which I have yet to see, and all night until I can't move a muscle.

That's my Jack. Wait, why not here? Don't tell me you would mind Emanuel walking in on us... Kidding, Jack.

Jack pushed Edge's head down on his cock. "Hush your thoughts, focus on the job at hand." He lay back and began to hump the mouth wrapped around his cock. His orgasm came sooner than he wished, but it wasn't surprising; he had been wanting this for weeks, and Edge took his shots like a trooper.

Edge licked his lips, swallowed and ran his hands up and down Jack's thighs before standing. He leaned over and buried his face in Jack's chest. "I really wish this was over now, Jack."

Jack sat up and Edge kissed him firmly on the lips. He waited for Jack to agree with him, but Jack gave a long sigh. "It won't be over until our mission is complete." He paused a moment. "Until my mission is complete."

Edge scoffed. "Your mission, Jack?" He started for the door, angry suddenly, then stopped and turned to face Jack. "We're in this together, and just because I want it over now, doesn't mean I would pull out and let you go alone." He passed his hand over the door sensor, and it opened. "I will never leave your side."

"You think I'd ever let you?" Jack put his arm around Edge. "Not bloody likely."

Edge put his arm behind Jack, slipping his hand under Jack's other arm. "No, Jack, I don't think you would. Oh, before I forget, our bathroom isn't finished yet. They say it'll be a few more days."

“You would think they would have finished it by now,” Jack complained.

Edge directed Jack to a lift located halfway down the dimly lit corridor. “The attack damaged a lot of areas, our bathroom is low on the list.”

“We’re lucky I suppose.” He leaned against the elevator wall as it began to descend. “How many were killed anyway?”

Edge didn’t respond immediately. “Stop at quarter’s section.” He tapped the intercom unit, then turned to Jack. “Um, seventeen, Jack, including the two guards that were outside our door.”

Jack nodded somberly. *Too many people are dying.*

It’s good to hear your thoughts again, Jack. Edge smiled at him, placing his now completely healed hand on his lover’s shoulder.

We can’t stay here any longer. Too many innocent people are dying because of my mistake.

Jack, you tried, where would we be if not for you? How could you know the Hierarch would survive?

“It doesn’t matter, Edge. We have to get to Earth as soon as possible. Before my dreams come true.” *If luck is with us, perhaps we can catch him on Earth’s moon.*

“So that’s the plan, then? Go back to Earth and then what?”

“Put an end to the Hierarch first. Destroy the island complex second, or both at the same time if we can...”

They finally arrived at their new quarters, these closer to the officers’ section and not far from the mess hall. Edge passed his hand over the sensor and the door slid open. “Welcome to our new home, Jack.”

Jack went inside, noting the lights went on as soon as he crossed the threshold. His eyes went to the bed first. It was much larger than the last one, but didn’t look as comfortable. The headboard looked hastily built out of a rough beam, but at least there were plenty of pillows. He looked around the room, noting the same chair that had been in the previous room, albeit a little beat up, but still usable. A jagged tear down one side just

made it ugly, but shouldn't take away its comfort. A door, which probably led to the unfinished bathroom, was closed.

Edge locked the door as soon as it closed. "Well, what do you think?" He walked to the bed, plopped himself down on it with a bounce, and pulled off his boots. He pointed to the chair. "I rubbed off all the scuffs, at least. They were going to dump it, but I wouldn't let them." He smiled at Jack. "The right leg has a crack in it, but it'll be fine as long as we don't fuck on it." He chuckled, sort of liked the idea of doing just that.

"Anything is better than that infirmary bed." Jack grinned at him. He was very glad to be alone with Edge. He went to his chair and sat down. They were silent for some time, neither wanting to break the quiet calm that slowly settled over them. Finally, as the grim thoughts faded away, Jack stood and cleared this throat. "By the way..."

Edge knowingly pointed to the cabinet beneath. "I had them find that counter just for you, and I even did a little manual labor while you were recovering and managed to procure your drink of choice, as payment. Unfortunately your favorite glass was broken and they're hard to come by, so you'll have to live with metal cups."

Jack grinned. "What would I do without you?" He went to the counter and poured himself a drink. "I can live with it." He took a drink, relishing how the rum burned a little as it went down his throat. "Okay, now where was I? Oh yes, I've been meaning to ask you something for the past two months."

Edge stifled a yawn, moved to Jack's chair and sat down. "What is it?"

Jack took a sip of his rum, practically pushing his nose into it, inhaling deeply its aromatics. "I missed this." He drained the remainder and set the glass down. "You've never shifted, not once that I can remember." He looked closely at Edge. "Was I wrong about your assassin ability?" He leaned against the counter, folding his arms.

Edge grimaced and shook his head. He put one foot over the armrest and drummed his fingers on the side of the chair. "It's painful, Jack."

“Oh?” Jack questioned.

Edge nodded. “To put it simply, it hurts like hell.” He covered his face, attempting to wipe the strain away. “It feels like... how I envision it would feel to have your face melted by molten iron and at the same time, every nerve receptor that signals pain in your body activates at once.” He put his hands behind his head and stretched out his legs.

Jack nodded with understanding. “I didn’t know. I’m sorry, Edge.”

“But that’s not the whole reason, Jack.” Edge stood up and paced about. “It reminds me of who... what I am. I didn’t even shift when I killed the assassin on Europa, but thankfully I didn’t really need to. It was just me and him... no witnesses, so no reason for me to disguise myself.” *It never even crossed my mind.* “Jack there’s something I wanted to ask you, but didn’t want to bring it up until you recovered. Is it true you’ve been telling people of your dreams?” He had thought that was something between them, or at least something that Jack wouldn’t openly share.

“Yes.” Jack replied. He swirled the rum in his cup. “I thought it might help spur them into action if they knew at least part of what I’ve seen in dreams.”

Edge nodded. “So you’ve had more dreams, then?”

“Not recently no.” He looked at Edge and smiled. “If I had, you would have been told before anyone else.”

Edge stifled a yawn, and nodded. “Good enough.”

Jack mulled that over a bit then polished off another cup of rum. He looked at Edge, who had lain back. He put his cup down and went to him. He sat beside him on the bed, noting, to his surprise, the bed was far softer than he had thought it would be. “Now,” Jack said.

Edge nodded. “Now, right now.”

“Oh, you’re reading my thoughts?” Jack leaned down and kissed Edge on the nose.

“Not really, but you’re telegraphing, you sexy hunk of man.” They both laughed.

Jack stood up and began removing his clothes. "Are you going to join me?"

"Well I was going to watch you strip first, Jack. I haven't seen you strip for months." Edge replied with a wink. He stood up anyway and pulled off his jumper, keeping his eyes on Jack. He wasn't wearing any briefs. He pulled his socks off next, and tossed them with not a care where they landed.

Jack was pretty spry, even after being in a cast for so long, and he was soon naked. Taking his time to watch Edge lay back on the bed, Jack shook his head, pointed at him and rolled his finger in circle. Edge grinned slowly, then rolled over, which is exactly what Jack wanted.

"You need it bad, don't you?" Edge asked, spreading his muscular legs until both feet dangled over either side of the mattress. He arched his back, raising his smooth firm ass in the air.

Jack didn't say a word for a moment, but just wanted to feast his eyes on his lover. He hadn't seen him fully open to him in a long while. His view was just as perfect as it had been the very first time they had fucked. "Yes, if you had been with me more often, you'd have read my thoughts over the past months," Jack said. He knelt on the bed between Edge's spread eagled legs. "I've been thinking of this very thing." Jack's cock was already stiff and ready.

"Lube?" Edge asked. "Or shall we dry fuck?" He laughed again. He was feeling so good he just couldn't help himself.

"I've got your lube right here," Jack replied, sliding his tongue over his lips.

"Ooh." Edge clenched and relaxed his buns, then raised his ass again. "Lick my asshole, Jack, you know I love that."

Jack lowered himself until his lips hovered just above his lover's ass-crack. "You want this, don't you?" He didn't really expect a reply, it was just part of the foreplay. He put his hands on the smooth cheeks, spread them a bit, and buried his face between them. His tongue began to dance up, down, and in circles.

“Oh, Jack, eat me.” Edge moaned, burying his face in one of the pillows.

Jack made sure his lover’s hole was properly lubed with his spit, then he reached down and stroked his cock. It didn’t need any help. Hard and pulsing with blood, a dab of pre-cum painted the slit and trickled down the shaft. Jack straightened up, moved a little closer and rubbed his cock head over the hole.

“Fuck me, Jack. Just give it to me the way I like it.”

Jack pushed the head in and when Edge didn’t gasp in pain, he shoved the whole cock in. He lay fully on him then, until his breath was on his lover’s neck. “No worries there,” Jack said, then he began to pump with a slow rhythm, which soon became a frenzied ramming that had the rough hewn headboard banging the prefab wall with a thud thud thud. “It’s going to break,” Jack said, gasping.

“Fuck it, just fuck me harder.” Edge, turned his head into the pillow, and his soft moans escaped nonetheless. Jack’s pounding cock didn’t slow. Each and every time he thrust in deep, and send a spasm of electric heat through his body. It started in his groin, shot up his chest, into his throat, which resulted in grunts of pure mad pleasure.

Jack pushed himself up until he was straddling Edge, he reached down and cupped his ass cheeks. He squeezed them both, thrust his cock in deep, held it, then pulled out almost fully. Then he held Edge’s hips firmly and began a new round of ass pounding fun, until the sweat began to pour down his body.

Edge turned his head to watch Jack fuck him. He knew he was getting close. He could see it, and he could feel his emotions at the same time. He wondered...

“Yes,” Jack said, out of breath. “It’s fucking amazing.” Then he thrust in deep again, and almost out of control, he began to fuck the hell out of Edge, almost as if he was fucking himself at the same time, or it was Edge fucking him. Then he gasped once and his orgasm exploded in a bright white light through his closed eyes. He could feel his cock pumping Edge’s ass full

of cum. At the same time, Edge's asshole was tightening, relaxing, tightening around his cock, and he felt both pleasures still.

"I can't believe that," Edge said.

Jack was sweating profusely and he rolled off Edge, onto his back, his chest heaving. "Me... either."

Edge lifted himself and looked down. A large pool of cum had been created just below his cock. "Fuck, Jack, you made me blow hard."

Jack chuckled, still heaving. "You think that's crazy? I feel like I just got my ass fucked too."

Edge's eyes widened. "Oh, Jack, you know what this means, don't you?"

Jack nodded. "We'll have to experiment more often."

"Yes."

ON THE EDGE OF DESTINY

The sleeper had dreams too. In his dreams he stood on an ivory white dais which was flanked by two imposing solid gold statues of himself, an adoring multitude below him, all chanting his name in perfect harmony. "Brekart, Brekart, Brekart." The cacophony grew louder and louder, until he finally awakened in a cold sweat, screaming his own name. He would sit up and frantically search for the light, then realize he need only to say the word. He would sit there panting, sweating profusely, with an insane smile that so creased his face he could not make it go away.

He knew what his destiny was after these dreams. It was as clear to him as anything he had ever seen in his waking state. He would remake the world in his own image. A perfect clone, the father of a world of identical copies of himself. If his makers had known he was already beginning to think and dream before he had even reached full maturity, they would have killed him and started over. That was their mistake. They would pay dearly for their error.

Once the Dark Robes were vanquished, it would be him. He would rule the cosmos. How could it be anyone else but him? But he had something he had to do before he met his future. And then there was the other mind within his own that nagged at him. Oh, he had an idea what it was, but he didn't listen. He knew they would come for him; he had already failed his mission, had he not? That is why he had begun to plan. That is why he would do as he wished. He had the ability to take it all for himself. If everything went according to his scheme, the universe would be *his* for the taking.

He was looking forward to making the voyage back to Earth. Once there, he would put his plans into motion. If everything went the way he had planned in his dreams. It had been more than eighteen months since he had left Earth. But

here he had begun to feel free, his own person, not a genetically engineered construct.

I must go. It has to be me, and once the Hierarch is dead... he thought.

He looked at himself in the mirror yet again. He had given in to his ego to have the plastic surgery, and it had been a complete success, just as the original Brekart had wanted.

“Who are *you* Brekart Dobson?” he asked himself, with a smirk. He turned his head slightly and smiled at his younger face. He brushed the dark brown hair from his gray eyes, then quickly removed his shirt. They had done masterful work. If only they had been able to wipe his mind to assuage the guilt that now plagued him... was it truly guilt that he was feeling? He didn’t know.

The strange sensations that traversed his thoughts the past few months were nothing but a chaos of images and the vaguest of intangible ideas. He did his best to ignore the conflicting ones, love, hate, and anger, but more often than not lately he failed miserably in this. Those three emotions were so intertwined it was nearly impossible to distinguish which of the three he was feeling at any given moment. He found it difficult to cope, to even make a command decision, with all of the erratic thoughts that were flooding his mind. It had all begun when he had first come into contact with the renegade diplomat Jack Harrow. Truly my enemy if I ever had one, he thought.

He admired his chiseled chest, his perky nipples. The only thing they hadn’t been able to do was take away his rounded belly, Earth security forces were instructed to chase him down, so his rebel friends wouldn’t be suspicious of him when he returned. They were, as a group, an organization, a suspicious lot. They had to be to survive as long as they had. The roots in their suspicious nature arose from their beginnings as an illegal gang of drug and weapon smugglers. It was only natural for them to continue with the one thing that had kept from getting caught. Don’t trust anyone. Be wary of everyone, even your own brother. If they, even for a moment, suspected that he was a clone replacement, all of his plans would be lost.

He had some measure of success trimming down by himself with strenuous daily workouts, here on *his* moon. He was technically forty-five but looked and felt more like he was just shy of twenty-five. In reality, which at times seemed to be slipping away from him, he was far younger. He was only a baby, like the killer.

He went to the door, remembering that he'd forgotten to lock it. He liked the manual door, as had the other. So much more satisfying to close it himself, and to lock it, which he now did. His bedroom was also his study and his office. The rooms could be more spacious, but these suited him. "Lights off." He moved to the center of the room and closed his eyes a moment. He found the quiet dark to be a soothing place. Not even the dimmest of light was there to distract his thoughts. Only for a moment though, he still had work to do.

"Lights on." He said it without feeling. The voice activation sensors didn't care how he felt. He opened his eyes and looked around his quarters. A large oak desk, an antique construction given to him by someone... he couldn't recall by whom. Lately his mind was a whirl of images flung together into such a puzzle that remembering even where he was had been a strain at times. He looked at the desk again. It was positioned into a rough hewn corner, where it was captured by shadows, and there he would sit in the dark and think about his plans. He appreciated the natural look to his room, more so than the prefab that most of the officers' quarters were constructed out of. A small computer sat in the center, stark white and covered with a translucent plastic to keep it dust free.

A persistent flashing red light on the left hand corner of his screen was annoying and obvious. He had no choice but to respond to it, since it would continue to blink until he did. It would only be a short time, no more than two or three days, before all the things he had grown tired of would no longer be his problem. Once he boarded the ore refinery ship bound for Earth, he would, in effect, be free of them forever. The whole charade he and the Dark Robes had perpetuated would come to an end. Sooner than his masters had predicted of course, but

they had not foreseen his rapid evolution. Soon, he would seize his best opportunity to bring his plan into fruition.

He ignored the blinking red irritation for a bit longer, pondering more important things. Like he still had not yet selected who to bring along with him on this, more than likely, suicide mission. Death for the one he chose. Do I care? I think I do. I must cherish that emotion and build more of them. But how much should I care? Perhaps I should go alone, he thought. Perhaps I should take the other clone and get him out of the way... No, I can't take him. It had to be someone he could trust. Someone who was under his dominion.

He removed his somewhat aged podpad from his pocket and scrolled down the list of names. He had to be sure that whoever he decided on would know beyond any doubt that this could very well be a one way trip. He put the pad away until it sank to the depths of his pocket. This too, the weight of the pad against his leg, was somehow soothing and it made him feel something more. What it was, he didn't know. The emotions were like crashing waves, each separate, but at the same time, smashing into each other to meld briefly, but for just long enough to cause him wild confusion.

He liked old things, things that made him remember how it was before he knew the Dark Robe Society was in fact controlling *everything*. Including the Earth Military Force. The very reason he had tendered his resignation. He was tired, he had told them; he wanted to raise a family. But that couldn't be further from the truth. They of course were distant memories, and not wholly his memories, but he clung to them as if they were close and real. What else do I have, he thought. When none of it is really mine.

His attention was drawn to the flashing light once more, and with an inward curse he tapped the screen and waited for the familiar face of his aide to appear. When it did, his sour mood lightened immediately, and he was once more enthralled by the young man's handsome features. There was something about him, this sprightly and fetching man that made his brain tingle like never before.

“Sir, the scout shuttle has just left orbit,” Lieutenant Toren Mir said. He looked down a moment and nodded. “A small window opened in the magnetic storm. It was just enough for them to be a safe distance from the radiation wave.” He tapped another series of keys. “They are on course for Amalthea and on schedule.” He was wearing a headset and a barely noticeable mic hovered just over his lips. His light blue eyes reminded Brekart of the ocean somewhere near a tropical island, as the sun bathed down upon it, the white sands below a sharp contrast to the blue. He hadn’t seen an ocean for nearly two years, and then it was by plane, flying from Indonesia.

Toren was reminiscent of himself at twenty, and he had begun to feel deeply passionate about him. Major Simon Mir was his father and he had insisted his son be allowed to join the rebellion. Brekart had acquiesced, only after seeing the young man’s image on his podpad one morning. Mir was at times a wolf, but he was a good man. He could have almost been his friend, if not for everything that stood in the way of him making such attachments a part of his life, but not for lack of trying.

Brekart nodded. “Is there any other reason you’ve contacted me?” He glanced at his watch. His young aide could be irritating at times, always a little too eager to please him. Sometimes a good thing, sometimes...

“Uh, no sir,” Toren said with a nervous grin. “But I wanted to wish you a good night and a safe voyage.” Toren realized from the very beginning he had to be careful to let no one ever find out about his relationship with the Admiral. If his father ever discovered the truth...

“Very well,” Brekart replied, sharply. He had known Toren was infatuated with him for some time, and it was only recently that he had begun to feel something. Once again, he suspected it had to do with his proximity to Jack Harrow. The very moment of his first encounter with the clone traitor had caused an odd sensation in his brain and in his belly. The feeling had been remarkable, and it had taken all of his will not to drop to his knees as euphoria struck him senseless.

It was indeed pain and pleasure, more so the latter, but just as quickly as it hit, it swiftly left him. Perhaps it had been something he had eaten, he had thought then. But upon their second meeting, the sensations returned, this time they were far stronger. In every succeeding encounter waves of emotions, yes, it had to be emotions, saturated his mind. So much so that he had felt drunk with them. His last meeting with Jack Harrow had left him reeling, but this time, the sensations that tingled inside his brain like an itch that couldn't be scratched followed him, and they had grown exponentially stronger too. Why or how, he didn't know. Now, when it came to Toren, he could not resist him. He was steel to Toren's magnetic charm.

A simple meeting was often all it took, sometimes even just the sound of his voice. But now, the rebellion was approaching fever point and there could be no mistakes. Passions may very well get in the way. He stood, staring at the overlay, mulling his young aide's positive qualities.

"Sir, did Commander Tees inform you of the magnetic storm?" Toren knew that such things were normally relayed by a higher officer, but lately the admiral had become somewhat reclusive, and what would it hurt to tell him himself?

Toren could sense an immediate reticence within his lover. "Is everything alright?" He looked deeply into his eyes, looking for a weakness in his demeanor that would tell him something. Toren was good at that. Reading people, especially his lovers, even though he had only had two of them. Well, three if he were to count the chance meetings with a young shuttle mechanic on Europa a year or so ago. But those were just spur of the moment, short-lived rendezvous that never amounted to anything.

Brekart looked away. "No, there's something I have to do before I leave."

Toren suspected what this something was. Since they began to see each other, the admiral had made his dislike for the clones quite evident to him. He blamed the clone Jack Harrow for the death of his father, Bigsly Dobson, the rebel leader and owner of the *Knife & Sprocket*. The very same man that had

made the deal with Jack for information on the rebels, and the rebellion.

"Please don't. It wasn't their fault that your father was killed by the Dark Robe assassins."

Brekart smirked, a look that seemed to etch his face for weeks. "You mean we all knew the risks. We all knew this would be dangerous and we could all very well die?" If you only knew that isn't the reason why, he thought. "I fully understand that, but those two made a show of themselves. And... they brought undue attention to my... father, and now he's dead."

"Your father asked them to. He demanded it. We know this," he offered, plaintively. Everyone had heard of the stage show fuck session Jack Harrow and Edge Fland had performed for the miners in the *Knife & Sprocket* bar. They were famous for it, at least in some circles. "You didn't even tell them, did you?" Toren ventured. "That Bigsly was your father?"

Brekart shook his head. "It has little to do with this, Toren. As much as you may think it does, it couldn't be further from the truth. They are clones. We are fighting against the clones. None of them can be trusted." He smiled thinly. What would you do if you knew everything? he thought.

"But, they've helped us so much already!" Toren offered emphatically.

Brekart turned from the screen and then back. "They were followed, or allowed themselves to be followed.... In any event, they weren't careful and now my father is dead and they may very well have led the Dark Robes here." Of course his reasons had nothing do with the death of Bigsly Dobson, but he couldn't admit that. Not now. Not yet. He was silent for a few moments, waiting for more rebuttal from Toren, but when it didn't come, "I know you're with me." There was a tinge of warning in his tone, and perhaps a little hope as well.

Toren's sigh was drawn out, resigned. He knew perfectly well the clones were formidable. He knew with even more conviction that this entire discussion was madness. He couldn't, he wouldn't, play any part in it. "They could kill you..."

"I am aware," Brekart affirmed. "But they suspect nothing and they won't see me coming." I am designed for stealth. If only I could tell you that to lessen your worry, dear Toren, that and everything else.

Finally, pulling out of his reverie, and gathering up some courage from somewhere deep inside himself, Toren said, "We need him, you know." He was afraid of speaking so openly to Brekart about the clones, but he was also suddenly angry. It was just the thought that all they had worked for was being put at a great risk of failing. Inasmuch as he had only been involved as a rebel for a short time, he had been *born* into this rebellion. He knew nothing else. He wanted nothing else. "If you kill Jack Harrow, the chances of our success are almost... nothing!" The clone's dreams were prophetic, he just knew it. "Jack has had visions, and whether you think he's delusional or crazy, a great many of us believe he has seen and sees the future."

"Us?" Brekart glared at his lover. "And you call him by his first name now... I see, so you are one of those believers in Harrow's nonsense dreams?" I will have to deal with him sooner rather than later. He wondered if the prophetic Harrow had seen his own end so close at hand.

Toren hesitated for several seconds, finally shrugging. He had let that slip, no sense on backtracking now. He replied with a soft and sadly resigned, "Yes." He had made his choice. His first loyalty was to the rebellion and then to his father. He wouldn't throw it all away for revenge. Especially when the revenge was misdirected. Jack Harrow wasn't responsible, and he wouldn't allow their only hope of winning the war to be killed without good reason.

Brekart's only response to that was to look away.

Toren slumped in his chair. "I won't help you with this... It can only lead to your destruction... and *our* doom."

Brekart deftly pulled the tazer from his belt, and measured the weight in his hand. He looked at Toren's image in the screen "If I fail, I don't want you to take the fall with me." He wanted to say I love you, but couldn't bring himself to do it. The pain would come, but it wasn't just the pain, something was stopping

him from vocalizing his emotions. And then there was the chance that he would fail, and if Toren knew he did indeed love him, that would only cause him pain as well. No, he didn't want that to happen.

Toren watched his lover caress the hilt of his weapon. Brekart was one thing, but a killer of an innocent he was not. "Take the fall with you? You're *our* leader! If you kill him, no one will oppose you, but you will destroy everything we've worked so hard for. I'm only twenty, but I've learned enough to know that much."

Brekart signed off, continuing to practice drawing the tazer from his belt to his hand until it felt like it was something he'd been trained to do for years. The weapon was now an extension of himself. Quickly becoming adept at things like this didn't take him long, since his synapses were perpetually on overdrive within his brain.

Toren rubbed at his eyes as the screen fizzled and went blank. He wondered then, if he would have the courage to do what he knew he must. He had an uneasy feeling that many eyes were on him. He must have raised his voice at some point during his discussion with the admiral, but hadn't realized it. He stared at the blank screen, seeing his own face etched with a grimace that would have frightened any small child, and tried to ignore the eyes burning into the back of his head.

He sat back in his chair, looked around, nervously fingering his keypad. Everyone else in the hub was busy doing their own work again. With a sigh of relief, he sat up straight and ran his fingers through his hair. He knew he couldn't allow himself to lose control over this. Too much was at stake and he wanted to play his part. He threw his shoulders back and took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. He had to put his feelings for his lover behind him, at least for a time. The only choice he had left now was to report to Commander Tees immediately and tell him of the admiral's odd behavior. Perhaps he still had time to stop this downward spiral from taking place. Maybe even save Brekart's life before he threw it away in a false act of vengeance.

Brekart put the tazer down and picked up a document, glancing at the first few lines, then sat in his desk chair, swiveling it around so he could stare at the image of space. It wasn't the same as looking out a window into the void, but so close, so close that sometimes he actually forgot it wasn't a real window. He closed his eyes and silently wished the clones had been successful in their attempt to assassinate the Hierarch, Ernst Venderhem. The detonation had killed nearly two hundred, but somehow Ernst had escaped the blast. Since that time, all-out war, a secret war, had been declared on the two renegade clones and the rising rebellion on Europa.

He knew that the only hope his plan had of succeeding was to use one of the clones. One of them may be able to get close to the main Dark Robe complex, and then if the information provided by the rebel inside man was correct, they would have their weapon to end the war in one explosive strike.

The small moon Phobos would be their next stop. That tiny, insignificant, and otherwise completely worthless chunk of rock was the linchpin that would end one dynasty and begin another. His destiny was coming into focus, and if the bomb did as the scientists proclaimed, there would be no more Ernst clones to rise like a phoenix from the ashes.

But first, he had one important mission to complete. He mulled his plan over for the umpteenth time. There in orbit around the blue planet, he would contact his superiors in the Dark Robe complex and confidently announce that he had seized the rebel's secret weapon and successfully planted a mole in their midst. Someone the rebels would never suspect. A man that was forever loyal only to him. His superiors would, of course, allow his shuttle to enter the atmosphere, descend to the Dark Robe island so that he could hand over the weapon. That would be their utter failure and his grand victory. The smile on his face lingered for some time.

His attention once more on the screen just as a small meteor whizzed by, glared brightly for the briefest of seconds, then was quickly absorbed by Jupiter's haze as if it had never existed. He scanned the first page of the document quickly. Phobos,

Stickney Crater. Abandoned munitions dump. N1b. Page two was blank. What more need be written? N1b might as well have been spelled out as v-i-c-t-o-r-y.

ON THE EDGE OF MADNESS

After managing to swipe some detailed schematics of the base, Edge was able to use them to reconnoiter the entire facility, and over the past several weeks had the place mapped out in his head with no further need of the blueprints. He had been roughly searched on two occasions, but not quite accused of the thefts. Nothing ever came of those incidents, because he had wiped the pads clean and dropped them in some obscure place, where they could have been carelessly dropped by anyone. A possibility he would make sure to mention, should the need arise.

He stood in the primary core now, looking at a fourth generation nuclear fusion cylinder. Scaffolding climbed up and out of sight, too far to see, even with his superior vision. He knew it must have taken years to build it, but he was more amazed they had succeeded at all. He put both hands on the ladder that strangely snaked its way up and around the forty foot thick silo shaped generator. The metal ladder was ice cold and a thin layer of snow like frost dusted each bar. He rubbed a few of them clear and dried his hands on his pant leg.

He was about to climb up when he heard two distinct voices coming closer, and he turned to see a narrow shaft of light bouncing along a darkened corridor. He let go and scampered back the way he had come. A quick duck into a ventilation shaft, and a pull on the grating, just as the voices entered the cavernous room. It was Commander Tees and the young, handsome lieutenant whose name he couldn't recall. He had met him once, briefly. He pricked up his ears, straining to hear every word.

Commander Tees appeared to be intently examining a blinking console, his back to the younger man.

"Sir, I'm only telling you this because—"

Tees about-faced, studying the younger man. He held up his hand, for a moment it looked as if he would slap him across the face. "You're speaking treason, be very careful, Lieutenant."

Toren shook his head. "Sir, my allegiance is first to the rebellion, and I wouldn't be telling you this unless I thought it important," he emphatically declared.

Tees turned away and went back to studying a reactor control panel. "Speak quickly, then," he advised.

"The admiral blames Jack for his father's death and—"

"We all blamed him, didn't we? But we all came to realize it was no direct fault of his or the other," Tees asserted.

Toren vehemently shook his head. "He doesn't realize, or he just doesn't care. I think he plans to kill him."

Tees stiffened. So his belief that the admiral was losing control was true then. He couldn't allow this to happen. But was he ready to assume the mantle of command? He didn't know. It would certainly test his mettle, but being in command of the rebellion was something he had thought about, albeit reluctantly. The untimely death of their first leader, and now his son putting all they had worked for in great jeopardy, couldn't have been predicted by anyone. Least of all him.

Edge's entire body tensed. *Kill Jack? Who? The old man has a son here... who could it be?* He wondered.

Tees turned back to face Toren, and placed his hands on his shoulders. "I trust you, but..." He paused a moment, squeezing him tightly. "Don't repeat this to anyone. I will look into your claims before we decide what's to be done about it."

Toren slowly shook his head and sighed. "Brekart only sees revenge." He inhaled quickly, held his breath a moment, then continued. "He is so filled with hate that I—I'm just so afraid he'll be killed."

Tees, who hadn't moved his hands from Toren's shoulders, slowly lowered them then. He moved them down to the middle of his back, caressing him with soft, gentle strokes. "Go back to

your station. I will try and speak with him before this gets out of hand.”

“Dobson! Brekart Dobson is the son of the old tavern owner!” And he’s going to try and kill my Jack. Edge clenched his teeth, hoping he had not raised his voice enough for the two men to hear him.

Edge couldn’t hear them anymore. His mind was in a whirl; his every muscle had grown taught and for a moment he felt on the verge of convulsing. I have to warn Jack, he thought, but being down as far as he was, his thoughts would not reach him. He turned around in the cramped air shaft and began to crawl as fast as he could. His objective a dim light ahead some two hundred feet. But did he have time? He strained his every sense to their limits to try and feel for Jack’s thoughts, but he could only hear his own. But they were a passive whisper, all but drowned out by his loudly thumping heart.

Jack had been sleeping quite a bit since he was released from the medical unit. He blinked at the clock beside his bed and rolled over, his hand searching for Edge. Unsurprised that he wasn’t there, he sat up and felt the mattress where his lover should have been. Cold, Edge had been gone for some time. He looked at the clock again, debating on whether to get up or lie back and let the quiet take him back, perhaps to dream. He hadn’t dreamed in weeks. He shook his head, pushed himself off the bed and made his way to the small bathroom. For the third night in a row he had slept in his clothes. He had just been too tired to bother stripping down. Now, he needed a shower. A long hot spritzing, then perhaps he would walk around the underground base in search of his missing lover.

The bathroom was still under construction, a heavy black cord, spliced in several places revealing an array of thin, multi-colored wires, hung from a not yet placed ceiling tile, a good ten feet above his head. Jack pushed it out of the way, only to have it swing back and smack him in the face. Unharmd, he took hold of it, careful to avoid touching the nail sharp, and possibly

live wires that protruded from it, and wound the frayed terminus over the empty towel bar.

He turned on the shower, surprised somewhat that it was a simple knob, not digital, and watched as the water began to steam. Jack stripped off his black jumpsuit. He looked in the mirror and traced a small but quickly healing scar on his chin. When the explosion sent shock waves through the thousand or so feet of rock and ice above them, rock chips and debris had nearly sliced his throat. He was lucky to get away with only small scars. Both of his legs had been broken in several places, and likewise, his arms. His feet had been caught under a falling wall and had been broken in a dozen places. He inhaled slowly, rubbing his chest. He still felt some tenderness from the broken ribs, but they were quick to heal. In part to his genetically engineered body and in part due to the mending device that sped the healing. He smiled at his reflection. Edge had come out of it unscathed.

He sat on the small stool beside the sink and thought a moment. Finally, he pulled off his briefs, dropped them to the floor, and stood up. The gauge on the shower wall told Jack he had only ten more minutes of usage, before it automatically shut off. Rationing had been in place since the attack. Jack understood it somewhat, but with a moon that was made up of ice and rock, liquid should be in abundance here, and was easily made potable. He stepped into the shower and let steaming water pour over his head and down his back.

Edge had reached the end of his long crawl and pushed on the grating, but it was jammed shut. Pressing his face against it, he could see several rebels moving crates of ammunition and other essentials to the cargo hold. He would have to wait anyway, or try his best to explain what he was doing in the shaft that led to the reactor core. *Jack can you hear me?* He knew it was futile. *We should have tested this, Jack,* Edge thought, as he stared at the rebels below, and attempted to *will* them to leave. He closed his eyes and concentrated; he attempted to visualize whatever it was that gave him the ability to focus his thoughts on Jack. Thought transfer, how does it *really* work?!

A voice startled Edge out of his meditation. "Is that the last one? Move it to the upper level, that's going on the shuttle with the Admiral." He strained to hear more, then looked to see the last of the men below moving off down a corridor. The last one out, a diminutive man about Edge's age dimmed the lights as he left. Good thing I can see like a cat in the dark, he thought. He pressed at the grating again, but it was stuck firmly, so he swiveled around until he was on his back and gave the grating a two boot kick that sent its now warped metal clanging to the floor below. "Fuck it if they hear it, I have to get to Jack!"

Jack stepped out of the shower, grabbed a towel from the rack on the wall, and wrapped it snugly around his waist. He knew one towel wouldn't do the job though, so he snatched Edge's from the lower bar and began to dry his hair. Unlikely that Edge would care, he thought, since we share everything now, anyway. He wiped the steam from the mirror with the palm of his hand, and looked at himself again. He was beginning to grow bored with his lack of facial hair; it would be interesting to grow a beard one day, he mused, but that kind of genetic manipulation didn't exist anywhere but Earth. He wiped his face dry, moving closer to the mirror, to look for any faults in his skin. There were none.

"Maybe when all of this is over, I'll change myself again." He leaned over the sink, turned the faucet on, and only a small stream flowed. The sink meter was on less than half ration, hence the small stream, but at least he could brush his teeth, perfect as they were. His genetics prevented cavities.

"You won't be changing anything."

Jack knew that voice. And he knew the sound of anger. He let the brush fall from his hand, and slowly turned around. He didn't expect to be facing a tazer pointed at his chest, or the hand that held it connected to the body of Admiral Dobson.

"Don't move a muscle, *clone*." Dobson passed his hand over the locking sensor. "Terminate lock operation two-two-five."

The light beside the door went red, but the door only made a short grinding sound, and didn't budge.

"The repairs haven't been finished..." Jack said, feeling somewhat confident that an escape route was still available. Thank you for being broken!

Dobson took a step closer to Jack. "Don't even twitch unless I tell you to."

"I don't see any need for this," Jack said. "I'm sure we can discuss it and come to some understanding." His diplomatic training was at the forefront of his thoughts now and every memory he'd ever had of his lives as a diplomat came sharply into focus.

Brekart sneered. "Aren't you going to ask me why?" He moved a little to his right to block the door completely.

Jack shook his head. "I know why, but you do realize I'm sure, that if I could have prevented your father's death, I would have."

"None of that matters now." This has nothing to do with that fool's death, Brekart wanted to say.

"Of course it matters. Your father had a choice. He chose to help us; you and I both know the amount of credit I gave him was a drop in a black hole compared to what the rebellion has access to." Jack slowly moved his hands to the sink and leaned against it.

"I said don't fucking move!" Brekart leveled the tazer at a spot between Jack's eyes.

Jack slowly lifted his hands from the sink. "Look, you've got me in a bad position, I'm not going anywhere... I just want to lean on this. I'm still recovering from my injuries... you can see my hands right?"

"Do you think I give a fuck about your pain?" His voice was seething with anger, and the tazer clutched in his hand began to shake. *What is happening to me?*

He's losing it, Jack thought. Just do what I know you'll do, you crazy sonafabitch. But Jack suddenly froze. He had heard his thoughts...

“Put your fucking hands over your head where I can see them, and leave them there,” the admiral commanded.

“You’re a—clone,” Jack stated, as he slowly raised his arms. He could see the power cord out of the corner of his eye, it was less than five inches from his right hand. He knew this clone was only here for one purpose, to kill him. But the burning question was, how and when had they replaced Brekart Dobson?

The Brekart clone smiled wide, and his hand became steady. He locked his eyes on Jack’s. “As you can see, this has nothing to do with *my* father, Mr. Harrow, diplomat and traitor.”

Jack didn’t bat an eyelash; he did attempt to hide most of his thoughts as best he could, unsure whether the Brekart clone had the ability to hear his thoughts as well. *Can you hear me?*

“Turn around now,” the Brekart clone intoned. “I’ve come a long way for this.”

“So in other words, you’re *alive* now because of me?” Jack met Brekart’s eyes, with a steely resolve. He had no intention of turning his back on the clone.

The Brekart clone cracked a smile. “I suppose that’s one way of looking at it.” His hand didn’t waiver.

“Before you kill me—and I assume that’s your mission—tell me, what are you feeling right *now*?” *I know you’re feeling something.*

Brekart hesitated, cocking his head to the side, and the tazer clutched in his hand moved down ever so slightly. Then, as if he had come to some important conclusion in his mind, he reaffirmed his grip on the small weapon. “What I feel has nothing to do—”

“Of course it has everything to do with this.” I can hear his thoughts plainly now, Jack thought, but he can’t hear mine. Jack didn’t know exactly how or why the thought transfer worked between him and Edge, and not this clone, but he had an inkling it had all to do with one particular and very strong emotion. Love, and this one hadn’t had the time to grasp it. Jack pressed on. “You’ve been in contact with me for months now,

me and Edge, very close.” Jack began to move his hand, imperceptibly slow. “You don’t know what that means, do you?”

“I know you’ve got something the Hierarch wants, but I don’t know what it is.” Brekart raised the tazer higher, straightening his arm completely. “That doesn’t matter either, now.” He moved his finger up and down over the trigger, his face expressionless, as blank as the deepest void of space.

He’s going against his mission, but he’s still going to kill me. The emotions have driven him mad, Jack thought. “You don’t have to do this, you know,” Jack offered, his eyes locking unblinkingly on the Brekart clone. “You’re feeling emotions, let me tell you what that means.”

“NO!” the Brekart clone screamed. His hand, shaking uncontrollably, leveled at Jack’s chest. Jack dove, his fingers grasping out for the power cord, then he twisted his body around completely, trying to bring the metal barbs on the end of the cable around like a whip, and then the shot came. Jack lost his balance, just as a loud *Zzzt* echoed through his ears, and he knew it was over, but he felt no pain. He heard a thud very close, and then the clone of Admiral Brekart Dobson crumpled over, to lay sprawled, and quite dead, across his legs. Jack opened his eyes, and turned his head, a smile deeply creasing his face. “I knew you’d come if you could.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t get here sooner, Jack,” Edge said softly. He looked down at the body, then at the weapon in his hand, the muzzle of which was still hot, wafts of thin gray smoke drifting up into the air, only to disperse after a moment. He dropped the weapon on the floor, half watching it bounce and clatter under the sink, then he knelt beside Jack and offered him his hand. In a moment, he had Jack on his feet and surrounded by a warm embrace. “I couldn’t lose you now, Jack.”

Jack held Edge for a moment, sliding his hands down his back. “You saved me. He was about to blast my head and give the shower wall a new color combo.”

Edge grinned into Jack’s neck. “Correction, Jack. I saved you *again*.” He looked at the stark white shower wall behind Jack.

“Besides, I didn’t think red would look very good in this bathroom.”

Jack smiled, let go of his lover, and looked down at the lifeless clone. There was a coconut-sized and badly charred black hole in the middle of his back. Some splintered bones protruded from it, their edges melted and ashen. There wasn’t even any blood.

Jack turned back to Edge. “So what took you so long?” Jack asked, wryly, leaning against Edge. He suddenly realized he was standing there naked, aware that his towel had fallen off at some point. He spotted it under Brekart’s right leg. He leaned down, tugged it out from under the dead weight, and covered himself, quickly.

Edge shrugged. He couldn’t take his eyes off the body. Killing wasn’t so easy, even if it was a clone. He finally tore his gaze away, and looked at Jack. “I had a wrestling match with a non compliant air vent and it took me awhile to get back up here.”

“Tell me about it later, but now, I’m sure that tazer fire has set off some alarm somewhere. We’ll probably have company soon.”

“He blamed you for his father’s death, Jack,” Edge suddenly admitted. He picked up the tazer and stuck it in his pocket. “I wouldn’t worry about it. According to Toren Mir, the admiral has been out for you since we got here.”

“No, he’s a clone sent to kill me, probably you as well, and bring down the rebellion, perhaps more, but... now that he’s dead, I suppose we’ll never know what his plans were.”

Edge’s eyes went wide. “What? How did you know? Did he admit it?”

“I could hear his thoughts. The emotions, being in close proximity to me, to you, it drove him mad.” Jack prodded the dead leg of Brekart with his foot, just to make sure he was really dead. *It probably would have happened to you as well, Edge, had we become separated for a long period of time after we first... met.*

“He’s really dead, Jack, I can see his lungs from here.” *You think? What causes that? Or don’t you know?*

I don’t know. “And don’t be glib, killing and death is not to be taken lightly, not even against our enemy.” He gave him a cautionary glance. “C’mon, I need to get dressed before security gets here.”

“He’s just a clone Jack, the real Brekart has most likely been dead for a while. It was either him or you, and I wasn’t madly in love with him.”

“I had a feeling about him, but I was never alone with him until today.” Jack turned his back on the lingering smell of death, and walked into the other room. He stooped over an iron trunk set against the wall, nearest the bathroom, where he kept his fresh clothes, and rummaged around for something clean.

Finally, he turned to Edge as he slipped into some silky black briefs that had no doubt been bound for an expensive European shop, but had been stolen by the black market. He pulled on a form fitting black jumpsuit, and stepped into some comfortable looking military boots that Edge had procured to replace the tight pair that had given him a few too many blisters. “I just want to know how long ago he was replaced. What information he passed on to his Dark Robe superiors?” Jack’s face was etched with worry, and try as he might, he was unable to hide it from Edge.

Edge sat on the bed, drew the tazer from his pants pocket, and clicked the safety on. He examined the weapon closely for a moment, then watched Jack secure the straps on his boots. “I’m not a fragile person, Jack, just like you’re not a teetotaler.” Edge testified. He put the tazer away, then snapped the pocket closed and patted it down, smoothing out the wrinkles it created, so it wouldn’t be so obvious.

“Right, you’re a killer, and you’re damn good at it.” Jack turned and looked at Edge. “Start packing, we’re getting out of here today... if we can.” Jack pointed at the bulge in Edge’s pant leg. “They’re going to find that, you know, and probably confiscate it.”

Edge stood, crossing his arms defiantly. “Let them try.”

No sooner had Jack finished dressing, the security arrived, consisting of Tees, Major Mir, and two guards who remained outside the door. This surprised Jack. He had fully expected a brigade to come rushing in. But Tees immediately explained. He handed Jack a podpad, and on it, a live image of Brekart Dobson, sitting with his wrists strapped to a solid white chair.

"He's dead in my bathroom, you can go look. Who the hell is this, the real one?" Jack said, staring at the small screen. *The Dark Robes must be getting desperate if they sent two of them, or... they sent another to replace the one that failed...* He thought. He handed the pad back to Tees, and waited for an answer.

Tees clasped his hands behind his back and nodded to Mir. "Go and confirm." Then he turned to Jack. "He's a clone as well. This one spoke freely, too freely, we think. He says there were four of them, but signs on the surface show two separate tracks. We think there is one more out there... or in here with us. We have located the remains of the others. What's left of them, that is."

He pointed to the bathroom. "The one in there is a clone as well, but I assume you know that already. He was replaced almost two years ago when Dobson went against all sanity and returned to Earth to satisfy his ego."

Edge sat in Jack's recliner, a noticeable smirk on his face. "His ego?"

"Explain."

"Cosmetic therapy." Tees frowned.

"He means plastic surgery." Jack translated, since he knew all about that. He went to the bar and poured himself a drink. He had no idea what more could be said about that. "Do we have any idea how much of your security was compromised?" He gulped down three fingers worth of rum, and the warmth of the drink as it flowed down his throat was just the ticket he needed.

"None, as far as we can tell," Tees replied, smugly. He tapped the pad. "Security is checking all communication logs

now, but so far they've found no messages sent to Earth, Europa, Mars or any ship, except authorized ones."

"Why would a clone of Brekart, the son of the rebel leader..." Jack began, then it dawned on him. "The Dark Robes planned this whole thing."

"Pardon?" Tees looked curiously at Jack.

"That's why they killed the old man, Bigsly. He was the rebel leader, his son next in line. That's why they cloned Brekart."

"But why didn't he destroy us all?" Tees didn't understand. "He could have easily set off a chain reaction in the fusion core and ended this rebellion when he was sent here."

"That, I don't know, but it's very curious," Jack admitted, with a scratch of his head.

Edge remained quiet, listening, letting Jack do all the talking, but he caught Tees staring at him several times. He found it unsettling to say the least.

Tees shook his head, then looked at Edge. "Your handy work, then?" He motioned toward the bathroom, where Mir had gone. Edge smiled, but remained silent.

"So, when did you catch this one?" Jack asked, pointing at the pad in Tees' hands. He leaned against the bar and crossed his arms. He didn't really care, but he had a strong feeling Tees would be assuming the role as rebel commander, and his ego would need to be stroked as well. *Stroke his ego, Jack. Stroke it like a hard cock until like confidence, it overflows and makes everybody happy.*

Tees arched a brow. "Shortly before this... incident, surprising how they coincided, and then the alarm sounded and it led us here."

Major Mir stepped out of the bathroom, gave Tees a nod of confirmation, then locked the bathroom door with a series of taps on his podpad. "The door is sealed until we can investigate this thoroughly," he announced, his blue eyes on Tees. He passed his hand over the sensor, and when the door didn't budge, he nodded confidently, then quickly left the room without another word. He was a man of few words.

Edge waited until Mir had left, then pointed at Tees. "You knew that Jack's life was in danger, but you did nothing," Edge accused. His hand wasn't far from the lump in his pocket. For all he knew, Tees was a clone as well.

Tees appeared perplexed by Edge's charge. "No..."

Edge shook his head, and didn't take his eyes off Tees. "Jack, I overheard him and that young lieutenant, Toren Mir, in the reactor core, Mir was telling him that the admiral was going to kill you."

Tees suddenly realized where Edge's accusation was coming from. "You've been following me then?"

Edge confidently crossed his arms. "No, I'm training myself to be a tour guide after the war is over."

Jack laughed a little inside, but showed no emotion. Edge was asserting himself more and more, and that could only be a good thing.

Tees, ever the calm one, simply turned to Edge and smiled. "Very well, whether you were stalking me or not, what you say is true, but I must reassure you, young Toren could have been wrong in his accusation of the admiral." He threw up his hands, then quickly placed them behind his back. He looked at Jack now, into his eyes. "I am sincerely happy that you are safe and if I had been able to get more information..."

Jack waved him off. "None of this matters now." He bowed his head a moment, thinking. "You've got to expedite the plan and get us on that refinery ship now; today."

Tees shook his head. "We're *not* ready," he said simply.

"No, you don't understand," Jack countered, his hands clenching into fists. "We're *out* of time."

Tees looked thoughtfully at Jack, and sighed deeply. He's going to find a way to go whether I allow it or not, he realized. He brought his fingers to his temples, nodded ever so slightly, then turned his back to Jack before striding to the door. He stopped at the threshold, bowed his head, and stared at the smooth gray rock floor, hoping that the stone would somehow, in its ancient flowing surface, provide an answer to his dilemma.

He had no notion of how long he stood there, but finally he tore his gaze away from it when Edge came up behind him.

"I saw some of your rebels loading a shuttle with supplies earlier," Edge asserted, suddenly placing his hand and arm in front of the door to bar Tees from going further.

Tees turned his head just enough to meet Edge's stare. "Yes, I'm sure you did, however..."

"What's the delay then? Why can't we use that one?" Jack questioned, and he moved close to Edge. *Settle down, we need him.* Jack rubbed at the back of his neck. A knot was beginning to form.

Fine, but it's high time we... never mind, Jack, I'll just trust you, Edge thought back, then he lowered his arm and resumed his seat in the chair.

Tees nodded to Edge slightly, then met Jack's stare. "It's true, the shuttle is prepared, but there is also a deadly magnetic radiation storm at least two million miles in diameter around Jupiter, and if that shuttle is caught in it, there would be no chance of survival."

"Why not use the Borgen? You've shown that its electrostatic shields can withstand that kind of radiation."

Tees shook his head at Jack. "The Borgen is on another mission at this time. It can't be used." He wasn't about to say anything more about their only battleship. He himself did his level best not to even think of it. He had no idea how powerful the clones' mind-reading ability really was. If the ability was more than a rumor, he thought.

Jack raised a brow, but said nothing. He looked at Edge, who only shrugged

Tees turned his gaze back to Jack. "I'm aware what some people say... you're *capable* of Mr. Harrow, and I'll do my best to get you to Earth..." He paused a moment, then locked his eyes on Jack's, measuring his steel. "But when I say we're not ready, I mean *we're not ready*. You will have to wait..." He turned, stepped out of the door, and held his hand in front of it so it wouldn't close. "A few days... two weeks at most," he paused briefly.

“There will be a safe launch window then.” And with that, he stepped out of the door and went about his business.

ON THE EDGE OF REVERENCE

Toren made his way down corridor B, where the officer's quarters were strategically placed not far from the central hub. He made a right turn where the bright blue-white lights denoting command lit up the sides of the walls and cast away all shadows, finally slowing his pace as he neared Admiral Tees' rooms. He slung the leather satchel off from over his shoulder, opened it, and rummaged inside, making sure everything that he was asked to bring was present. He didn't think he'd forgotten anything. Satisfied, he zipped it closed and slung it back over his left arm.

He still couldn't believe the man he had thought he had fallen in love with, even if it *had* been short lived, was a Dark Robe clone. Try as he might, he still couldn't wrap his mind around it. How could he have been fooled? He had slept with him more than once... and he hadn't even been remotely aware that Brekart wasn't fully human. But he was human, wasn't he? Toren thought. He was a perfect clone of Brekart Dobson, but other than that... he was *still* technically human, wasn't he? Fuck!

He couldn't allow himself to think about it any longer, and he wouldn't let it distract him from his duty. He was just relieved he had made the right choice to talk with Commander Tees about his suspicions of the admiral. He had in effect broken his ties with Brekart, and the pain he now felt was minimized to some extent. If I had joined in with his madness... I would probably be dead as well, he figured. Enough!

"I will put this behind me," he affirmed with a quick shrug of his shoulders, but he fervently hoped there was no record of his rendezvous with Brekart, especially now, since his father, now Commander Mir, was currently and meticulously going through all of the late admirals logs, files and belongings. Did Brekart save their many late night communications? He stood before the door and shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. I have a purpose and a mission, and dammit all to hell, he

thought with sublime resolution, I will do my fucking job even if it means the end of my life!

Upon Brekart's death he'd began assisting Admiral Tees. He hadn't been told, he hadn't even been asked, but he assumed since he had been Dobson's aide, he would become Tees' as well. It had been a natural transition assisting the new commander. Along with his position as Tees' aide, he'd been promoted to first officer of the day watch. Something he didn't think would ever happen.

It was evident that Tees wasn't much less of a taskmaster than Brekart had been. Tees was often off-duty at the same time each evening to 'relax.' In the week and a half since Brekart's death, he had been at Tees's beck and call except during the 'special hour' when Tees vanished to his quarters to be left undisturbed until further notice.

The new position and promotion kept Toren on his toes, and to keep his new duties secure, at least until he made his seriousness clear, sleep was a luxury for him. Who the fuck needs sleep in the middle of a goddamn war? That had become his mantra.

Toren adjusted his loose-fitting cloak and smoothed out the wrinkles. He passed his hand over the sensor beside the door, and when it swished open a moment later, he was somewhat surprised to see Admiral Tees standing there still dressed in full uniform. He was surprised because Tees had often spoken about the need to relax after work was done. Toren smiled nervously and nodded his head. It was then he noticed Tees was holding a full bottle of whiskey in one hand and an octagonal blue-tinted glass in the other.

Tees smiled softly, indicated his bottle, poured three fingers into his glass, then set the bottle down on the table beside the door. The sight of Toren made his chest tighten immediately. Having him this close to him, to his quarters, to his bed. His skin tingled with anticipation, and he knew he wanted more from him than to discuss war plans. The fact was, and he knew it, because of the rumbling of his stomach and his trembling hands, that he was nervous about Toren standing before him. The reason for him being here had changed. He must have

realized he'd be nervous, he'd picked up the bottle even before opening the door. He took a sip, swallowed, then drained the glass. He dabbed his mouth dry, and looked at Toren for a long moment.

"Ah Toren, good, I see you've brought what I asked for." Toren noticed the way Tees was looking at him, and for a brief moment he had a feeling this meeting was something more that would soon make itself apparent.

"Yes, sir." He slung the bag off his arm and held it out. "Are you planning to retire soon, sir?" Toren wasn't sure why, but he was feeling extremely excited suddenly. He surreptitiously eyed the admiral up and down. He noted an obvious bump in the admiral's pants and didn't have a second's doubt as to what it was. It made his skin tingle just thinking about it.

Tees finally took the bag and moved aside. "Soon, perhaps. Come in, would you?"

Toren's eyed widened. When had he ever been asked inside Tees' quarters? Never. He fidgeted a moment. "Sir, I think I should be getting back..."

"Don't be absurd, come in, there are some things I wish to discuss with you."

"Sir?" Toren still took a step back.

"Important things, come in," Tees urged, waving him inside.

"Sir, I think we should discuss whatever it is in the morning..." He wasn't sure, but he had a feeling that this was going to be less a talk about the war and more of something a little more personal. Whatever was about to happen, he wasn't certain he was prepared for it. Tees wasn't going to allow him to walk away though, he was sure of that.

"Lieutenant..."

"Yes, sir." He stepped inside, the door hissed shut, then locked automatically. "I've got some paperwork still left to take care of, but it can wait until morning..."

"Come, I want to discuss taking you to Earth with me." Tees looked at Toren's expression. It was one of complete

surprise, and for a moment, Tees was worried that the young man would faint from the shock.

“Si—sir?” That had been the last thing Toren had expected to hear from his new commander. He could feel blood rushing to his face, and the sound of his own heart was thumping in his ears.

Tees smiled. “Unless you’re going deaf, which would mean I’ve made a bad choice...” He turned and poured each of them a drink, and with his back to Toren still. “You heard me, now come and sit, please.”

Toren tried to swallow and found it was impossible. He took a quick moment for his knees to stop knocking, then had a seat. He sat back, his hands nestled between his knees, and looked at Tees. He was painfully aware that he was trembling, but couldn’t figure out why. This was what he had wanted. Perhaps it was just that. The excitement of the mission to Earth and nothing more.

Tees took the seat opposite Toren, then turned a dial beside his chair, increasing the lighting just enough for the men to be able to see each other’s faces without having to squint. Tees smiled at Toren warmly, handing him a drink. “First, I’m going to be blunt and tell you why I’ve chosen you for this mission.”

Toren sat up, pressing his hands together. “I—”

Tees held up his hand. “Please, don’t interrupt.” He took a sip, put it down, and leaned forward. “As I said, I’m going to be blunt.” He stared at the glass, then ran his finger along the rim of it. “We’re likely not going to come back from this mission.” He looked into Toren’s blue eyes. “We could die... or be captured.” The thought of Toren being killed hadn’t dawned on him until then, and for a moment, just a second, he thought perhaps he shouldn’t take him after all. He nodded. “It’s your decision to make.” He smiled thinly.

Toren nodded. He didn’t think he’d be able to speak anyway. His mouth had gone incredibly dry.

“I’ve...” Tees stood up and went to the door. He twisted the knob and pulled, making sure it was securely locked. Satisfied, he returned to his chair and fell into it. “Toren, I’ve been

attracted to you..." He paused a moment, waiting for that to sink in, and only after a moment did he meet Toren's gaze.

Toren's mouth twitched.

Tees smiled. "Well, you've not jumped up and run from the room at light speed." He chuckled. "You haven't taken a drink, not to your liking?"

Toren shook his head, putting the glass down. "No thank you, sir." He was surprised he'd been able to answer. He felt shocked, but more than shocked. He never could have anticipated this.

Tees reached for the bottle, but stopped, and pulled his hand back. He sat back. "I don't need another drink, what I need is an answer."

"To what sir?" Toren felt his face flush even hotter than before.

"Ah, yes, I didn't ask you anything yet." He stood, straightened his uniform, and clasped his hands behind his back. "Toren Mir, I would like you to volunteer for this most important mission."

Toren leaped to his feet. He hadn't moved that fast in awhile. He tensed his body, his arms and hands crisp at his sides, his feet together, standing at attention. He brought his right hand up and saluted Tees. "Sir, it would be my honor if you would allow me to join you on this mission to Earth, to end the Dark Robe threat once and for all." His heart threatened to rip through his chest. He only wished his father could have been here to see it. But he only thought that for a moment, since he had a feeling there was more to this meeting.

Tees nodded. "Be at ease. Sit." He reclaimed his seat, and waited as Toren did the same. Tees leaned forward, placing his hands on the table. "As I was saying. I've been attracted to you... for some time now." He smiled at Toren. "I have wanted, no that's not the word, not even close." He laughed. "I have desired more than anything to be closer to you, to hold you in my arms, just two men, no secrets, no darkness, just us together." He loosened his uniform jacket, popping the top three buttons. The room had suddenly gotten very warm.

Toren only smiled. He had thought for the briefest of seconds to obfuscate, but in all truth... He decided to voice it. "I have felt an attraction for you too, sir." His knees had finally stopped shaking, but now his hands had gone clammy and cold. He sat back and inhaled deeply, then let his breath out slowly. "I was—I was involved with Brekart, but even then..." He sighed, and looked at the floor. He shrugged, deciding to just tell the whole truth. "Even then I noticed you, and thought about being close to you, but I was afraid of what you'd think."

Tees laughed. "I wouldn't have cared." He shrugged now. "Maybe I would have, I don't know."

Toren smiled. "So, the mission to Earth?" He wanted to know more about that.

"Perhaps we can discuss it later," Tees said. He stood up. "I've learned what I wanted tonight." He moved into the center of the room, toned down the video display screen, which was showing a panorama of planet and moons, and a bit too bright for his mood. He walked over to Toren and crouched at his feet. "This may be presumptuous of me." He put his hand on Toren's knee. "It may even be... rude, but I swear to you, this is more than lust." He leaned forward quickly before he could change his mind. Before being proper took control of him again, and kissed Toren on the lips. It wasn't a tough kiss, but gentle, soft, and he held it. Toren didn't pull away. Toren closed his eyes, opened his mouth, and suddenly found his hand on the back of Tees' neck.

Toren sat back, dazed, and loosened his cloak around his neck. The room felt as though the temperature controls had gone completely haywire. "You could grow plants in here," he grinned, shaking his cloak so that he could breathe.

Tees smiled, stood and held out his hand to Toren.

Toren stood, removed his cloak, his eyes never leaving Tees. He noticed the bed for the first time since entering the room. The bedding had already been turned down for the night. All it would take was for the two of them to disrobe and lie in it...

And as if he had read his thoughts, Tees reached out and took the cloak from Toren. He placed the cloak on his chair,

then turned back to Toren. He moved behind him, sliding his hands up his arms, to his shoulders. Moved his hands down Toren's chest and popped the buttons of his shirt. One, two, three, the fourth played stubborn, but it too popped. He pulled the shirt open and off. It was tossed atop the cloak. He squeezed Toren's shoulders then, gently massaging the knots from his muscles. He'd wanted to do that more times than he could, at that moment, recall.

Toren was almost frozen. It was all so different than his past encounters. They had all been just lust. All a frenzy of uncontrolled passion, with the fear of being caught. This was, already, so much more.

"There," Tees said softly. The whiskey on his breath was slight, the scent barely noticeable, even this close. He turned Toren around. He smiled at him, trying his best to go slowly.

Toren knew what to do instinctively. He hadn't needed to be told. No prompting necessary. He reached forward and finished opening the shiny metal buttons from Tees' uniform. He pulled open his shirt, and his breath caught. Tees' chest was a sexy mass of short black hairs. Not overly so, but just perfect. He looked into Tees' eyes and smiled genuinely.

"Now," Tees said, his eyes roaming down Toren's muscled, mostly hairless chest. A ring of light brown hair circled each of his erect nipples, and a line of thin hair trailed down to his belly button, then spread out, thickening until it vanished below. Tees just knelt. No need to say more. He unbuckled Toren's thin leather belt, pulled it free and dropped it to the floor. He reached down and loosened his boots. He lifted one foot, and watched as Toren tried to keep his balance. One boot off, set down neatly. He removed the other, placing it next to its twin.

Is this what I want? Toren thought to himself. It only took a moment for him to decide. "Yes, I want this." He smiled down at Tees.

Tees grinned. "I want this too." He stood and took Toren's hand. "Come." He led him to the bed and he sat in front of Toren. He pulled his pants open, then down and let them fall to his ankles. Toren wore white briefs that hugged his shape

beautifully. They hid nothing, especially not the large erection behind the thin cloth. Tees slipped his fingers down them and pulled until Toren's cock popped free. Tees was so close, he could smell Toren and it sent waves of heat rising up and down his belly.

Toren stepped out of his briefs, kicking them behind him. He felt too exposed, but it was a feeling of freedom, not anything embarrassing. He spread his legs slightly, showing himself off to Tees. He reached down and cupped his hanging ball sac, then slid his fingers up his shaft. He gripped his cock and stroked it, all the while staring into Tees' dark eyes.

Tees nodded approvingly. "You are beautiful."

Toren smiled, then sat down beside Tees. He put his hand on Tees' shoulder, then slid it down his hairy chest. He kept going, tracing down his belly, then he circled the button holding his pants tight. He popped the button easily, opening his pants. Toren paused, catching Tees staring into his eyes.

"Go on." Tees lay back, placing one hand behind his head. "Please, I've dreamed of this moment for so many nights, Toren."

"If I'm nervous it's only because..." Toren paused. He could feel himself blushing and his hands were suddenly shaking. He'd certainly never been this nervous about sex.

"What is it?" Tees sat up and caressed the length of Toren's muscled arm.

Toren sighed. "This, I don't know. It feels like it's my—first time." He laughed, feeling so silly, since it was far from his first time.

"Don't worry," Tees said. "It is my first time." He smiled, and oddly enough, he felt great relief telling Toren that he was a virgin.

Toren was shocked again. "Your first? Me?" He couldn't believe it. As sexy and handsome as Alton Tees was, how could he have never... fucked another man?

Tees smiled. "I see you're doubting me." He chuckled softly.

Toren grinned. "You're kidding me... right?" He squinted at him.

Tees shook his head. "No, I'm a virgin. You are the first man I've ever been this close to." He held up his hands, palms down. They were trembling. "See? I'm probably more nervous than you are, Toren."

Toren stood up, fidgeted, shifting his weight from foot to foot. He didn't know what to do next. Then he bent over, suddenly remembering why he'd stood, and removed Tees' boots in nearly the same manner that his had been. He dropped the boots and pushed them under the bed, out of the way. He sat down on the bed beside Tees and no longer felt hesitant. He pulled his pants open and then down. Tees wasn't wearing underwear, and his already hard cock was fully exposed.

Feeling his tension, Tees took Toren's hands in his for a moment. "Why don't we lie down, listen to some music and let things happen?" He leaned over and put on some music. Classical. A slow concerto that filled the room, and his mind, with inspiration. Hopefully the soothing tones would relax Toren as well.

Toren appreciated the music. It was soothing and it made him feel at ease. He looked at Tees closely, allowing his eyes to take in his sexiness. He inspected his body as well as he could. Thick, dark chest hairs were a major turn on... He was seeing him in a different light suddenly. Not his commanding officer, but a man, a hot and sexy man.

Tees sat back. "Lay down. Relax." He lay back against the headboard, which was securely bolted to the rock wall, and made himself comfortable. He looked at Toren, fixing his eyes on his.

Toren's tension immediately ebbed away. Allowed himself to relax completely, he met Tees' smile with a genuine one of his own. It was at that moment a sudden flash of lust washed through him. His face felt on fire, his body began to feel hot and he started to sweat. The lust had taken him, and he was almost to the point of going out of control. A tingling shot

from his groin to his stomach and into his chest. His mouth had become completely dry.

Toren grinned, and on impulse from somewhere deep within him, he reached down, grasped his cock, and directed it toward Tees, who leaned down and took him into his mouth. Toren quivered as Tees' lips and tongue moved around his throbbing cock.

Tees let his mouth, his tongue, and his hands do his talking, for the latter was now cupping Toren's smooth and firm ass. He squeezed the tight cheeks, slipped one finger against the warm asshole, slowly pulled him closer, forcing the cock in his mouth to touch the back of his throat.

"Oh..." Toren moaned and he began to hump the tight mouth that was sucking and bobbing on his cock. He couldn't believe this was happening. Before this, he had no idea Tees loved men. Tees had kept it hidden very well, but he began to believe it now, as his mouth went wild on his cock, and the finger pressing against his asshole slowly slid inside him.

Tees let the cock slip from his lips and looked up at Toren. He pressed his lips to Toren's and slid his tongue between his teeth. A moan escaped him as Toren relaxed, opened wide and let his tongue explore. Tees slid away and pulled Toren to the bed. "Turn over..." Toren rolled over, turning his head to watch Tees.

"So beautiful." Tees spoke so softly, almost like a whisper on the wind, shifting to between the younger man's smooth legs. He caressed his thick thighs, moving his hand down over his hairier and nicely muscled calves, then both hands moved up to grasp the sweet tight ass cheeks. He spread them apart, bent low, and explored the crevice with his tongue. He took a nibbling bite of the right cheek, buried his face in the crack, pressing his tongue against the warm asshole.

Toren's mind raced, suddenly overwhelmed with pleasure. He arched his back and pushed his ass into Tees' face, wordlessly expressing his desire for him to suck his asshole faster and harder.

Tees stopped and crawled up Toren's back until he was sitting on his thighs, and began to massage his muscled shoulders. "Toren, I've wanted this ever since you came here."

"I had no idea..." Toren turned his head and looked into Tees' eyes. He sighed.

"It doesn't matter now," Tees said, adding a sigh of his own. "So many times I wondered what it would be like." He looked deeply into Toren's eyes. "What it would be like to be alone with you, like we are now." He grinned, feeling giddy. "To see all your beauty." He ran his fingers up Toren's smooth, muscled back. "To smell you, to have my arms wrapped around you, and to feel your warmth."

"I—"

"Shh, enough of that now. We'll have time to talk later, but for now..." Tees reached for the headboard, pushed a panel slightly, and a hidden compartment opened just enough for him to slide his hand in and pull something out. He rubbed a smooth, shiny black cylinder, and showed it to Toren with a grin. "I picked it up on my last trip to Europa..." Tees moved down slightly, reached for his cock, and aligned it with Toren's ass. "I hoped but never thought for a moment I would have a use for it."

He pressed an indentation on the side of the cylinder and a small amount of warm, clear liquid flowed into his palm. He held his cock, sliding his hand up and down the shaft, then rubbed the remaining cream onto Toren's puckered asshole. He moved his erection back and forth, found the warm center and pressed the head against the tight hole, then pushed it in. There was only a mild resistance, and he slid in deeply. He lay down, covering Toren's body with his own, and began to lose himself in the thrusting rhythm.

"Ahh." Toren moaned. "Fuck me, just fuck me hard." He wanted to add, make me forget that Brekart ever fucked me, but he kept that to himself. Instead he moaned again, and raised his ass to meet Tees' rhythmic thrusts.

Tees didn't even hear him. He was lost in a world he had only been able to dream about for the majority of his life. All he

could see was a blinding light that was nothing short of a rapturous pleasure. With his closed eyes, skyrocketed blazed against his lids and the only sound was his thumping heart. Finally, he thrust in once more and felt the first pulse, then another and another, until the surge finally ebbed. He pulled his cock out, gently squeezing it, and watched the translucent whiteness as it overflowed from deep within his lover, to slide down, coating his balls.

Toren lithely rolled over, his cock stiff and bouncing against his belly. He bent his knees, his legs out wide. "Is it too early for emotional attachments?" He chuckled. He was only partly kidding. He reached down to stroke his cock, and at the same time he began to pull on his balls, rubbing Tees' sticky cum all over them, while locking eyes with his lover.

Tees laughed. He leaned down and kissed Toren's chest, just below the left nipple. "I don't think I should answer that yet." He licked down Toren's chest, until he reached his cockhead. He kissed the head, licked the slit, tickling the inside with the tip of his tongue.

Toren closed his eyes a moment, bit his lower lip, his toes curled in ecstasy. "Fuck, I love that." He arched his back, trying to push his cock into the mouth so close. "I don't think he ever fucked me and made me feel as good as you just did," Toren said. He was serious now. "I mean it. You almost made me blow."

"I know." Tees rubbed his lips over Toren's slick shaft. "I could feel you tighten around my cock. I didn't think, well I didn't know if you were experienced enough to know about that."

Toren grinned. "I know about it, but how do you?"

"I've read." He licked the head some more. "I've seen, and I've imagined so much, so many times." He opened his mouth and took half of the cock until he felt himself start to gag. He pulled up on it, opened his mouth and took a deeper breath, then went down half way again. He'd have to practice some to take all of him in. Practice he wouldn't mind a bit. He didn't

stop until Toren arched his back, held it, and flooded Tees' mouth with his warm sweet cum.

Toren closed his eyes just as the tide of euphoria dissipated, then he opened them, blinking several times, smiling sleepily. He stretched his arms over his head, slid his hands under his neck, and let out a long breath. "That's not the end is it?" He lifted his head and looked down just as his semi-hard cock slipped from Tees' mouth. "I'm sure I could be coaxed to blow again, that is, if you're hungry for more..."

Tees, still resting on his elbows, cocked his head. "What do you think?" His lips and chin were still glistening. He gave a soft chuckle, wiped his brow and inhaled deeply. "Was it good for you? I would have liked if that had lasted longer."

Toren smiled, kissed Tees on the cheek, and licked his lips. "It was perfect."

Tees laughed. "I guess I'm better than I thought."

"You are. I'm exhausted, and all I did was get my ass fucked by a master."

Tees sat up, reached for the lamp and turned out the light. "Let's rest awhile and see what happens."

Toren lazily rested his head on his lover's chest. He stifled a yawn and said, "Sounds good." He was asleep in moments.

Toren sat up and wiped the sleep from his eyes. He leaned against the back of the bed. "Well." But he didn't know what to say. He felt the sheet crease on the left side of his cheek. Fuck, I fell asleep! His face was pained.

"You slept for a little while," Tees said with a smile. "It's understandable." He was already dressed. He held the steel handled brush and pulled it through his hair, looking at Toren's reflection in the mirror. "So, I guess you know now that I've wanted to do that for a long time." He grinned, suddenly feeling so much younger than he was.

“Fuck me?” Toren laughed, pulled a pillow over himself, and curled into a ball like a playful little kitten.

Tees winked. “Well, that too.”

Toren closed his eyes and opened them. “Oh, you mean...”

“Yeah.”

“Was it as good as you hoped?” Toren asked, finally stretching out fully.

“Better than I hoped. Your cock is fun to suck and the outcome is more than I could have ever imagined.”

A chuckle from Toren. “You mean the cum.”

Tees affixed his golden insignia to his collar, and nodded. “Yes, that.” He smoothed out the wrinkles in his uniform and turned to Toren. He stood at attention. “Does it look like I just had passionate sex with the hottest rebel in the universe?” He winked. Oh, my god. I feel so young now! he thought.

Toren chuckled. “I’m not quite sure how to answer that... If I say yes, you’ll not go about your rounds.” He snickered playfully and rolled onto his tummy, looking at Tees with one eye. “And... if I say no, you’ll have hurt feelings...”

Tees agreed. “Very well, answer it when I get ho—back.” He had almost said home. Get a hold of yourself Alton. “Duty,” he patted his chest. “Put duty first, and everything else will come.” He had no idea why he said that, but it was a good enough cue to leave and be about his work. He unlocked and opened the door and turned to Toren. “Will you be here when I return?” He smiled. “Would you stay and keep the bed warm for me?”

Toren lay back on the bed and smiled. “I’ll stay. Your bed is much more comfortable than mine.”

“I still don’t like it, Jack,” Edge said, shaking the podpad in his hand. He looked it over one more time. He was pacing from one wall to the next, slapping the pad against the palm of his other hand at the same time. He stared at the small screen. *I think we should stay together.*

"It's up to them, Edge." Jack was still packing the last of his clothes. "It's in our best interests not to piss them off too much."

"That doesn't mean I have to like it. They should send me first, then you, so I can..." He shrugged.

"Protect me?" Jack smiled, and stuffed some extra socks into his bag. He paused a moment and looked at his lover. "I'll be fine. You just stay out of trouble while we're separated." *Don't make me worry about you.*

Edge sighed. "Fuck, Jack, I don't like the idea of us being so far away from each other. Three hundred thousand miles is a lot... we've *never* been that far apart since we first *met*."

Jack pushed the bag down in the middle, then closed it with a firm zip. He sat on the bed. "It's settled. I'm going to the Indio first, you'll go a day or so later."

ON THE EDGE OF BETRAYAL

Garbage scow. At least, that was his first impression. That's the first image Jack saw in his head when the shuttle passed the lip of the moon and the Indio came into view. Alright, so it was the biggest and ugliest piece of junk he had ever seen. Truly colossal. It was so big he couldn't see the stern and the bow, even as he pushed his face against the shuttle window to see farther. The Indio made the Vespez cruiser, the ship he had traveled to Europa on, look like a child's plaything in comparison. He knew the details of the ship, from Tees, and to some extent, Edge, with his trivia.

What had Edge told him the day before they separated for this journey? "Six thousand one hundred and twenty-three feet from stem to stern. That's *big*, Jack!" Edge had done some research into the Indio, days before. It had taken some digging, but he finally managed to coax someone into giving him access to the Indio's schematics.

"It's big," Jack agreed. "It's also an eyesore, but I suppose it's built for its function." And when Jack finally saw it for himself...

The ship was so close now, and if it wasn't for the window and the vacuum of space, Jack could almost reach out and touch it. It looked like a small oblong metal moon, this close. To keep costs minimal, the immensity of the vessel was important. More ore per trip and the ships were usually designated for four year missions. That was a lot of fucking food and water to carry, Jack thought.

It was windowless, and black as a raven's wing, with long iron-like spikes jutting from its sides as if it had been stabbed and speared in some monstrous battle and now only limped through space, barely alive. He took a closer look, leaning against the sill of the small, round shuttle window, and watched it pass slowly by. The black wasn't paint, but likely the remnants of fire scorch, the atmospheric heating, when the ship

descended into hostile and probably corrosive planetary environments. Several small rectangular openings at the base of the ship, lit up in a dull white, were probably shuttle bays or some sort of cargo hold area, but he couldn't be sure. He craned his neck and tried to see the end of the vessel, but only perceived the telltale sign of engine flare in the far distance. Along the bottom of the ship, a small bluish-white vapor escaped large, oil drum-sized vents just below the shuttle bays. The *Indio* was powering down its triple ion-drives.

"That fucker even has gun ports," someone said behind him, and Jack turned to see a middle-aged mechanic standing there, trying to wipe away thick black gunk from his wrinkled hands.

"That it does," Jack replied, looking back in time to see the ship's name, barely visible under all the scorch.

"Good luck, glad I'm not the one going there."

Jack turned to reply to the man, but he had already moved to the back of the shuttle. He stood, gathered his belongings, and straightened his uniform. He looked the part, now he only need play the part and everything would go off without so much as a hiccup. The first thing he had to do was to find his quarters, per Admiral Tees' orders. Poor Edge, he thought. He hates taking orders from anyone, except me.

He wasted no time in the landing bay, which was filled with miners returning from Europa. He wasn't sure if it was all their voices that made his ears ring, or if he was hearing their thoughts as well. He hoped it wasn't the latter. In any event, he quickly took a lift to the officer's deck, and only then did the ringing finally cease.

His quarters were easy enough to find. The lift took him directly to the officer's section, and from there his room was just around the corner, where a passageway sloped downward and, according to the sign on the wall, led to the officers' mess. He had a mind to trek down and pick up something to eat, but the long shuttle ride had made him tired, and the last thing he wanted was to be in another crowded room filled with a bunch

of strangers, even if they were all men. Strange, that, he hadn't seen a woman in over a year.

He waved his identification card over the sensor, and the door whooshed open. The lights went on as soon as he stepped into the room, and the door closed by itself. His quarters weren't anything to write home about, if he had a home, but it would suit his needs. There was even a window into space, where he would most likely find himself propped frequently during the long voyage. As he began to unpack his bag, all he could see out the small port window was Jupiter's gaseous swirls taking center stage.

He closed the port screen, and finding the lighting controls next to the bed he lowered them until the room was almost completely dark. He lay on the bed, too tired to even remove his boots. He turned on his side facing the slate gray wall.

Sleep soon found him.

Jack sat bolt upright, his hand immediately groping around in the complete darkness for the light beside his bed. The dreams have returned, he thought grimly, as his fingers finally touched the small button sunk into the metal table. He squinted as the overhead globe flared into wicked brightness. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes as he got out of the bed, and slowly padded to the cramped latrine to splash his face and perhaps wash away the persistent nightmare.

And now he knew the end of everything was close, for his dreams were becoming extremely vivid. He quickly shook his head, turned the faucet until a steady stream sloshed against the polished metal bowl, and cupped the ice cold water.

Jack had been feeling disagreeable ever since he boarded the refinery ship, and he was worried. He had felt something was wrong, really wrong, since discovering Brekart Dobson was a clone, and he was almost certain there were more deadly surprises ahead of him. He didn't want to go back to Earth this way, but he knew he had no other choice. This was the only way to insure the success of his mission. On the bright side,

perhaps he would be able to touch the grass again, and to see the blue sky of home. But he wanted to touch that grass with Edge beside him.

He waited patiently for Edge to board the vessel. There had been a slight snag with his identification card and he was detained while it was checked again. Jack wasn't worried about that, though. The black market leader, the new owner of the Knife & Sprocket, had made them himself. The Indio was now controlled by the rebellion, using rebels and black marketeers as crew. However, they still had to make sure that the flight command's identification cards were coded properly to insure no suspicion when they were scanned entering Earth orbit, or even sooner, if boarded at some point by European Security forces when they reached the icy moon.

Jack still wasn't quite sure how the rebellion managed to take the ship, or what happened to the original crew. He was sure he'd rather skip those details, since it was apparent the rebellion did what they had to do to complete this mission.

Jack stood at the docking ramp of the Indio and spotted Edge in the crowd, a brown leather carryall, swinging back and forth, in his hand. To anyone but Jack, his killer looked like any other officer, eager to begin a new job, even on an ore ship where the work was long and hard, and often deadly, but the pay was good. Jack leaned against the corrugated bulk head and waited for Edge. When he passed him, he matched his gait, and walked beside him, touching hands briefly.

He walked beside his lover, casting a sideways glance at him several times. He looked so good in uniform, and he thought he'd look even better when he got him out of it as soon as possible. They'd both been given pristine company uniforms. Jack, a half black, half gray one piece jumpsuit, with the insignia of O.I.L. sewn onto the right breast. Edge was wearing a solid gray one piece officer's jumpsuit, with silver bars on the collar.

Did Tees mention private rooms for each of us?

Yes, and he also mentioned that we shouldn't appear together too often ... but fuck that.

Jack smiled inside, but his face was blank. *We'll just be cautious, my love. There could be Dark Robes' spies on this ship. I haven't felt anything, but keep your eyes open.*

Edge nodded. *When I'm not with you I feel so strange, Jack. Like I'm the only life in the universe. I love you, Jack.* Edge moved the carryall to his other hand, and purposely allowed the hand close to Jack's to brush it ever so slightly.

I love you, Edge, like no other.

They continued on through the crowd that was boarding the ship, making their way into the bowels of the vessel. Edge made careful note of access and escape hatches, and just about everything else that he thought might come in handy later. He smiled. Even though the rebellion controlled the ship, he thought the possibility of spies was high. He just slightly turned his head toward Jack, but quickly averted his gaze.

It's a good precaution to be on our toes. I think it's probable that there are Dark Robe spies. This is a vast ship... Jack smiled at nothing.

They could hide anywhere. Do you suspect? Edge watched his feet as they descended a steep ramp.

Jack shook his head. *I don't know, but just remember to be vigilant.*

The two finally stopped just outside the cargo section, where several corridors branched off. Jack watched the crowd a moment, noted a sign to the officer's deck, and motioned for Edge to follow. They soon made their way down a sloping passage which led them directly to the officer's deck.

"I don't see any real need for you to go to your own quarters now," Jack said, stopping outside his room. "But you should probably go there at some point and make it look as if you've been there."

Edge nodded, and grinned. "Later."

Jack opened the door, waited for Edge to duck inside, then closed and locked it. Edge looked around the room and nodded his approval. "I hope my quarters are as nice as yours." He dropped his carryall to the floor, kicked off his boots, and lay back. "Not that I'll be in there much, if at all. How long 'til Earth, Jack?"

“Hopefully in time,” Jack replied, but he refused to say more and for the next few days, he was more silent than he’d ever been since their first meeting.

Several days into the journey, Jack buzzed the door, giving Edge time to hide himself. Jack didn’t put it beyond Tees to show up unannounced just to make sure they weren’t together. He placed the tray of food before Edge.

“I brought you dinner since I didn’t see you at meal call.” Jack ran his fingers through his hair, and sighed. “You should see what the miners are eating.” He sighed again. “Even though we control the ship, things aren’t changing fast enough.” He realized it probably couldn’t be helped, since they’d only taken over the ship recently.

“Please don’t tell me, Jack, and I promise, I’ll make your kindness up to you right here.” Edge patted the mattress, and winked as he dug into the food.

“We’ll board a shuttle in a couple of days,” Jack said, watching Edge devour his dinner.

“What for?” Edge crossed his legs Indian style, and scooped up a spoonful of food.

“Didn’t I tell you?” Jack shrugged. “We have to make a stop on Europa. Tees is dotting every I and crossing every T. He wants to clear the bridge and officer I.D. cards with the European Mining Company, and they’ll clear it with European security, just to make sure there aren’t any snags when we reach Earth sector.”

Edge chuckled. “He’s paranoid.”

“He could very well be, but he’s cautious. There’s a lot at stake here.”

The flight to the icy blue moon Europa took a few extra days, as the Indio had to distance its shields from Jupiter’s erratic magnetic storm by at least five million miles. Jack and Edge stayed in their cabin as much as was possible, but each day Jack would go to the mess cafeteria and bring back food for

them. Edge had to be careful not to be spotted anywhere near Jack. If Tees found out, he'd have a stroke.

Water was available in their cabin, and so was a crate filled with six bottles of rum that Edge had somehow procured on one of his stealthy walkabouts. He was keeping himself primed for whatever came their way, and doing his level best to not start climbing the cabin walls. And the rum, after all, was Jack's favorite. To Edge, nothing was too good for Jack. Even if someone had to be pushed out an airlock to get it.

It may get rough very soon, Jack thought.

You've been thinking that so much, I'm beginning to believe it, Edge thought back. He was leaning on a shelf, looking out at the tiny yellow dot beyond. The ship was turned away from the giant planet, and the sun was all that could be seen against the blackness of space.

Just be prepared. Jack walked up behind him, placed his hands on his shoulders, kissed his freshly shaven neck, and stared with him.

Once the Indio reached the orbit of Europa, the officers, including Tees, Jack and Edge, quietly boarded a small shuttle. Edge took a seat furthest from Jack and paid him no attention for the entire hour long flight. An odd structure appeared at last, a white glint to it with odd oval openings at the base, where legs might spring forth, but were obviously cargo and landing bays of some sort. Europa turned in its orbit beneath them some two hundred miles below, the domed city of Ural could be seen, just barely, as the dim city lights marked the colony's night time.

The shuttle was cleared for landing and the occupants filed out one at a time. Jack was first to disembark, Edge last, behind Tees. He took his place at the front of the group and led them to a small office. Securing proper and legal looking ID was as easy as pie, and not a single eyebrow was raised. Their IDs were now validated. One more potential problem was out of their way. They soon returned to the shuttle and were cleared to leave immediately. This all took less than an hour.

You know, that station is only a quarter of its intended size, Edge thought to Jack at some point on their trip to rendezvous with the Indio.

Yeah? Jack thought back. He feigned interest for Edge's sake. He had to admit, the station, which looked more like a metallic octopus than a space station, was impressive.

Jack and Edge decided to stay apart for the first two days after arriving back on the Indio. Staying together would have brought too much attention to them, especially since Tees had warned again that he would be paying close attention. Jack went about his duties as engineering inspector, spending a lot of time in the bowels of the ship, and Edge burned away his duty time in the engine and fuel allocation sections. But staying away from each other didn't last more than a couple of days.

Jack looked out his cabin window and watched a communication satellite zip past on its high orbital dance around Europa. It more than likely had infrared cameras as well as orbital scanning sensors within its metal bulk. The small blue moon was getting smaller and dimmer as the Indio continued to power up their triple-ion drives, pushing the ship toward Earth.

Edge had snuck to his cabin again, and this time his intent was to stay. "Do you really think we'll get caught?" He turned his head to watch Jack maneuver between his legs. They hadn't wasted any time getting into bed.

Jack shrugged. "If we get caught, everything we've worked for may very well be for nothing," Jack replied, solemnly. He propped himself on his elbows. "But, neither of us really want to talk about that now, do we?" Jack lowered his head and kissed Edge's bare ass for emphasis.

Edge smiled. "Not really, but I'm worried." He sighed and raised his ass up to meet Jack's wet kisses. Jack didn't answer right away. He was too busy trying not to savagely maul his lover's ass. "Oh, Jack, eat me."

Jack laughed. "You make it sound so..."

“Savage, Jack?” Edge grinned ear to ear. “Your thoughts are transparent this evening.” Jack only smiled and did as he wanted, burying his face between Edge’s cheeks until his tongue danced across the moistened anus. “They had me running in circles for an hour,” he grunted and laid his head on the pillow. “They say I’m out of shape.”

Jack snorted. “We’ve been lazy. Especially on Ganymede.” Jack scraped his teeth across Edge’s right cheek. “As to your being worried, don’t, it’ll distract you, just do your job, be your job.” Jack pushed his tongue against the asshole and squeezed the firm cheeks.

“Jack you were in a body cast. You weren’t lazy. Me on the other hand... and I know all about that, Jack. It was my training, to blend in, to be someone else, but it’s you that I’m worried about.” Edge bent his knees and knelt, pushing his ass into his lover’s face. “Fuck, I swear I’ll never have enough of this.”

“Worried about me? Why in hell are you worried about me? I get out of scrapes just as well as you.” Jack curled his mouth in a tight grin.

A knock on the door brought Jack to his feet. He quickly grabbed a thin brown robe and slipped into it. He tied the robe, and went to the door. He took a deep breath, trying hard to look normal, but realized sweat was conspicuously dripping from his brow. Finally, having no other alternative, he opened the door.

The beguiling smile of Major Charis, the second in command of the Indio, met him. He was a black marketeer, handpicked by Tees. He was a short statured man with a shiny bald head, no eyebrows and thin lips. He reminded Jack of a clone he once met in Paris. He wasn’t the same man, but it was still enough to be unsettling.

“Come in, I was expecting you an...”

Charis’s smile vanished in an instant, and two men appeared from both sides of the corridor, tazer rifles leveled at Jack. Charis raised his hand and pointed a tazer pistol, its handle light blinking red, indicating the highest setting, at Jack’s chest. “You are under arrest Mister Harrow, you and the other clone.”

“...hour ago.” Jack decided to finish. He put his hands up, figuring that was the best reaction considering he had no plan in mind.

Charis looked past Jack. “We know he is with you. Where is he hiding? Under the bed? Behind the door?” He reached above the entry and groped around a moment, then brought his hand down. A small black disk was in his hand. “Amazing little device, they see and hear everything in their path, and once placed they change color to match their surroundings.” He showed it to Jack. “Almost impossible to see if you’re not looking for them.”

So we have been betrayed.

I’m coming.

No, Edge, wait!

But Edge was already bursting from the bathroom. He tumbled across the floor, rolling to the foot of the bed, where his pants lay, tazer within the leg pocket. He stretched out his hand, but just as he reached it, the taller of the two guards stormed in and put the muzzle of his tazer rifle flush against Edge’s cheek. “I have no problem killing you, clone,” the guard spat.

ON THE EDGE OF INTENT

Toren looked in the mirror and adjusted his crisp white uniform. The rank insignia on his collar, caught by brilliant white light overhead, gleamed silver, sending a shine dancing along the bathroom's dark ebony wall. He was as ready as he would ever be. Admiral Tees, called Alton Bayin for the remainder of their mission, had given him a few days to remain in their cabin to acquaint himself with the bridge protocol. He had specifically asked the admiral for a position that would allow them to remain close to each other. He needn't have bothered asking, however. Tees had already made the decision for him. He looked at himself once more, decided the uniform was a perfect fit for when he actually *had* to wear it, then carefully undressed and put on some walk around clothes. Thin grey pants and a matching shirt. He looked himself over. He was presentable, and then some.

Their cabin was large, fit for any visiting dignitary, should one wish to travel on a space-born factory. The walls were a polished steel and titanium mix, treated with a substance to keep them to a high sheen. On an ore ship as large as this one, even with the best air filtering system, dust particles from the refinery process still made their way throughout the ship, and tended to settle on just about everything. The furnishings in the luxury cabins were all of lacquered mahogany, with plush velvety cushions that even royalty would appreciate.

He stood waiting for Tees to finish his business far below deck. This was the third consecutive day that he had gone to the bowels of the ship. Toren had asked what could possibly be so important for him to descend into the depths of the vessel, so close to the engine core and the ore processing furnaces. He got no answer. Maybe that is what Tees wanted to discuss with him, he thought. Perhaps today he would get the answer to his question.

He looked out the stern side view port, still amazed that this one was so large. He had thought portholes had to be small to keep the vacuum outside from rupturing, and sucking everything within out into the deadly grip of space. He wasn't an engineer, but it was intriguing nonetheless. He decided to just enjoy the view that the overly large window gave him, instead of trying to figure out the whys of it all.

His view was only the blackness of space. He squinted now, moving just an inch from the glass, but still he couldn't discern the vaguest semblance of a planet, moon or even stars. The last clear view of Jupiter had been a day before, but since then there had been nothing but the vast emptiness.

He waited for his first view of Earth with great anticipation. He knew this wasn't a sightseeing vacation, but still... This was a voyage of war, and with everything at stake, all he held dear could either continue on or be destroyed if they failed in their mission.

At the sound of the door hissing open behind him, Toren straightened up, smoothed out his ensemble and turned to greet his lover. Tees passed his hand over the door sensor and tossed his podpad on a chair. He met Toren's gaze and smiled genuinely, and with a sigh held his arms out to him.

"Your face is all red..." Toren said. He went to him and offered the wanted embrace, but stopped short, remembering the black soot all over Tees' uniform. "Can I hug you later, when you get out of... those?" Toren grinned.

Tees laughed, nodded and took Toren's hands instead. "Yes, I know. The heat down there is like a miniature sun. By God, I don't know how anyone can work down there in fourteen hour shifts."

Toren kissed Tees' neck, inhaling his scent. "It's *almost* slavery. The only difference being they pay them."

"Worse," Tees retorted, with a somber expression. "Once they are assigned here, injury, retirement or death is their only way out." He scrubbed some of the grime from his hands. "But now that we control the ship, that's over with." He moved away and removed his now filthy jacket, which had been pristine and

white when he had left hours before. He grabbed a towel from a wall drawer and wiped himself down from head to waist. "That is one thing we're fighting for, my dear Toren."

"I suppose so." Toren watched Tees strip off his oily ore-dust smudged pants, which had several hand shaped streaks trailing down the legs. Toren walked to the sizable bathroom, opened the door, and turned to Tees. "Would you like me to start a shower for you?" He locked eyes with him. "Or would you like me to start one for both of us?"

Tees shook his head, smiled and dropped his pants. He was wearing only close fitting boxers and matching socks. "Not yet, there's something I need to tell you, since it's beginning to spread ship-wide anyway."

Toren sat down on their bed, placed his hands on his knees and leaned forward. "What is it? Not bad news I hope."

"Good news," Tees quickly said. He sat beside Toren. "Now, I realize how you feel about the two clones, especially Jack Harrow..."

"Has something happened to them?"

"No, they are being looked after."

"And?"

"I had them detained," Tees answered bluntly. He stood up and went to his trunk of clothes. His back to Toren still. "My orders were clear when this mission was laid out." He found a shirt and placed it on the chair, then grabbed a fresh towel from the wall drawer. "They were seen several times together. I can't allow that."

Toren shook his head, and stood. "That's not why you did it and you know it." He shot an angry glance at Tees. "You don't trust them because of Bre—Admiral Dobson."

Tees smiled. "Well there's no use hiding it now is there? No, I don't trust them. The fact that they are clones is enough for me." He found a pair of casuals, gray with a white band around one leg, and put them on the chair with the shirt. He turned to Toren. "We are too close to victory now." If victory is even close, he thought. It all hinged on the bomb, if it was there and

still functioning, but if it wasn't... they had as much of a chance of winning as a snowball had of staying frozen in the center of the ship's reactor core.

None.

Toren digested that in silence. "Where are they?" he finally asked.

"In the brig at the bottom of the ship," Tees replied. "Toren, let me make one thing clear. I did this because even the slightest doubt, the smallest lack of trust, could spell doom to our mission... now, I'm going to take a shower, unless you want to sleep with me smelling of burning ore and chemical solvents..."

Toren couldn't fathom sleeping with him at the moment. "How long will you keep them there, then?" He was angry he hadn't been told of Tees' plans to arrest the clones before it happened. Perhaps his voice could have added a reasoning balance to his order to have Jack and Edge arrested.

"Until we win this war," Tees said, pointedly.

"That could be years." Toren frowned, and sat down hard on the bed.

Tees went to the bathroom door, and turned to Toren. He paused a moment before going in. "I don't want to discuss this again. My decision is final." He closed the door behind him.

Toren removed his clothes, lowered the lighting to mimic twilight, and got into bed. He was naked under the soft tan sheet, but wasn't in the mood for anything more than sleep. He wasn't really angry at Tees. He understood up to a point, but it wouldn't do him or anyone else any good for him to be riled up. He had to remain focused. Still, all he could think of was Jack and Edge down in the stifling, oppressive heat and humidity of the brig, with no chance of escape. He knew Jack Harrow saw the future, and he was furious that the admiral couldn't see the same thing. He felt that Jack was their only hope.

Tees was taking longer than expected, and Toren couldn't sleep. He had to make sure they were safe. Perhaps reassure

them he'd do what he could to get them released... He got up, quickly threw on clothes, and slipped into his boots.

He went to the bathroom door and knocked softly. "I'm going to the galley and see if I can grab something." He didn't wait for a reply. He grabbed his identification and stuffed it into his pocket. He might need the access code on the back to get into the brig section. He had no idea what kind of protocol was needed for that, but it might help.

He made his way to the first lift he could find, and in less than a minute was on the lowest deck of the ship. Steam, soot and an acrid odor assaulted him as soon as the lift opened. The lighting may have been brighter, had it not been for the thick black and noxious smoke that belched from air vents and or processing furnaces. He couldn't make a guess at what some of the shit was. He didn't rightly care, but a grimy sign, blinking sporadically with the word BRIG, pointed the way.

The corridor, if that's what it was, was lined with thick piping covered with sticky insulation foam and years of dirt and who knows what else, but it didn't deviate from a straight line all the way to a heavy looking reinforced iron door. He barely got his hand to it when an access hatch opened.

"Whatcha want?" He was a scruffy looking guard, with several days' growth of beard. But he was protected from the grime of the area by an air shield, that Toren could now feel coming from the opened hatch.

Toren didn't hesitate. He tapped his rank. "I'm Lt. Toren Mir. I'm here to see the prisoners."



After the Indio's triple-ion drives flared at full power non-stop for two weeks, the ship finally slowed. A glint of dull red soon became a more visible, albeit fuzzy, smudge against the cold and dismal darkness of space. It was more the color of rusted iron, and the only other planet in the solar system capable of sustaining human life. It was Mars, or Ares, which is what the population now called the planet. The inhabitants... Tees thought, with a shudder. One half of the red planet was military dominated, with bases above and below the rusted

sands. The main military complex was located two hundred miles southeast of Olympus Mons, and eons extinct volcanoes dominated the skyline. The other half of the planet, the cooler and not completely terra-formed hemisphere, was where the Earth's dreaded penal colony was constructed. It was appropriately named *Tartarus*, after the Greek's version of a torturous afterlife, since that was the only future for those unfortunates that were sent to the prison.

Tees sat in his chair staring at the fuzzy red dot, and as they got closer a discernible but faint blue-green strip appeared along the equatorial plain. Terra-formed Mars looked quite different than he remembered. It had been sixteen years since he had seen it last. With him in the command of the *Indio*, it should be smooth sailing all the way to Earth. He reached to his breast pocket and felt the key there. Such a small thing, but so very important for this mission.

Toren emerged from the bathroom, still dripping wet, and a towel loosely wrapped around his slender waist. "Is that it?" he asked. He could tell Tees was looking at something interesting, so it had to be their destination that had his rapt attention. He put his hands on his lover's shoulders, leaned down, and kissed his freshly shaved neck. "Mmm, and no cologne. I like you better when you smell like you." He wasn't angry at Tees any more. Tees was only doing what he believed to be best for the rebellion. Toren knew Jack and Edge were safe, and even though they weren't in the lap of luxury, they were doing well enough. He was also taking extra food to them each and every night, having bribed the guard with bottles of whiskey procured from the officer's mess. He even managed to get the guard to allow a bottle or two to be passed for the clone's consumption.

Tees grinned. "Mmhm." He felt the same way about Toren. He leaned back until his lips met Toren's. The kiss tingled, even though it was only a brief brush. He pointed lazily out the porthole. "Mars." He sat up, then leaned back in his chair. He was feeling antsy, being so close to their first objective.

Toren frowned. "It looks so... small." It doesn't look much different than Europa, he wanted to say, but didn't. He pulled his fluffy towel loose and let it fall to the floor. Although he

couldn't see it, the air conditioning unit was on somewhere behind a wall in the corner. He could hear its soft hum, and the cool air was invigorating as it flowed over his still damp nakedness. The smallest hairs on his ball sac tickled as the air drifted teasingly between his legs. His cock quickly rose to the occasion. It was no different than blowing wind, and he was still young enough for even a little sensation like that to affect him. "Is it true there is an ocean on the southern pole?" He didn't know what else to say, since he had something far different in the forefront of his mind.

Tees nodded. "Well, it looks like someone is ready for action." He could see it out of the corner of his eye, and he swiveled his chair around to get a better view of his young lover's cock. He leaned back, putting his feet on the small table beside the bed. "Mars discussion can wait for another time."

Toren batted his eyes seductively, and grinned. "I'm always ready." He motioned out the window, toward the smudge against the black backdrop. "We're going to be there soon. We may not have time for another..." Fuck me dammit, don't make me ask. He wanted to be *taken*. Right then and there. Not brutally, but taken, by Alton.

Tees exhaled slowly, patted his thighs as if to entice his lover, then gazed up and down Toren's naked body. He finally stared into his turquoise eyes. He wore a generous and beguiling smile. "Sit here." He patted his lap, reached for his crotch, where his own sizable bulge was now obviously straining for release against the soft hugging fabric.

Toren didn't hesitate, but agilely straddled Tees' legs and positioned his ass over the obvious mound. He leaned forward, moving his ass over the hardness beneath, until the length of the hidden cock was ensconced between his cheeks. Then he kissed the waiting lips, sliding his tongue in as far as it would reach. Only then did he become aware of it. That swimming sensation in his head. A friend had told him about his own experience years ago. When he had first fallen in love. Toren had his eyes closed, but it was as if flashes of lightning were popping like miniature explosions within his closed lids. He

pressed his lips firmly against his lover's, and couldn't help but moan.

Tees opened his mouth just long enough to accept the warmth, then closed his lips around it with a soft, passionate moan. He reached down, unzipped his trousers, and released his cock as Toren's tongue explored him. He reached down and playfully pulled down on Toren's sagging ball sac, and then the heat of his young ass cheeks embraced his cock fully.

"You know," Tees began. He ran his fingertips along the muscles of his lover's moist chest. "We've done this nearly every night for the past three weeks." Not nearly enough if they failed their mission, he thought.

Toren grinned widely. He moved his smooth ass cheeks back and forth over the shaft of the cock and arched his back catlike. "Yes. I'm... loving it." He almost purred.

Tees laughed softly. "Yes, me too, but I don't want to stretch you out." He was mildly kidding, but as inexperienced as he was, he didn't know if that was even a possibility. He did know for certain that Toren made him feel like he was twenty years younger. He was almost tempted to undergo procedures to recapture his youth, if only for Toren's pleasure. *Wasn't that reason enough?* He thought it was.

Toren threw his head back and practically howled with laughter. "No, that won't happen!"

A touch of embarrassment reddened Tees' cheeks. He looked into Toren's eyes. Barely touching his skin, his hands wandered over Toren's chest and down to his lower belly. He grasped his hips firmly then, and humped the space between his cheeks. Toren was still moist from his shower and the sensation of his cock rubbing between his cheeks made Tees' heart quicken dramatically.

Toren leaned down and kissed him as if that should be answer enough. But if words were needed... "Fuck me now and make *me* the only man you'll *ever* have." If this isn't enough, he thought, I'll impale myself on your cock and ride it until it pumps me full of cum.

Tees slid his hands up Toren's back and pulled him close, sliding his tongue into his waiting mouth, then he reached down and lifted his cock up, urging Toren to raise his ass with a finger prod.

"Finally," Toren said, with a mock sigh. He grinned wildly and pressed his lips against Tees' teeth. He lifted himself up until the cock beneath him was pointed at its intended target and lowered himself onto the moist, swollen head. He nibbled on his lower lip as the fat tip pushed snugly against his anus.

"There, yes," Tees said. He felt his cock sliding into the tight hole. "How is that?" He thrust in deep, holding his cock all the way in for a moment. He flexed his cock once, twice, feeling the head expand. He closed his eyes, relishing the exquisite sensations pulsing through his groin as the tight hole tensed and relaxed around his cock. Then, with soft, slow strokes, he began to hump his lover's hot ass so fast the chair began to thud in rhythm with every stroke. He could barely restrain himself with his wild thrusts, which at times seemed to almost toss Toren off of him.

Toren breathed in deeply, exhaling in grunts as he experienced a pleasure that shot up from his ass all the way to his chest and back down again. The sensation wasn't unlike a volcanic orgasm, only without the spewing forth. "Uhh."

Tees pulled Toren closer, until their sweating chests were so firmly pressed together he could actually feel his lover's beating heart thumping rhythmically just inches from his own rapidly palpitating ticker. He softly slid his hands around Toren's muscular back and eased his fingers down along his spine until they trailed the crease of his ass. He went further, his fingertips brushing the shaft of his own cock as it moved in and out of the warm tight hole. He leaned forward then, until his soft kisses caressed Toren's supple neck. He opened his mouth and gently skimmed his teeth across his young lover's soft skin. Finally, an involuntary moan of pure bliss escaped him.

"Alton," Toren said, practically exhaling his name. He sharply flung his head back and grasped Tees' shoulders as the cock inside him pumped in and out. He arched his back then, and leaned back as far as he could without falling over and off

the cock. The position was excruciatingly erotic, and not just because he could feel the thick shaft of the cock twist around and push deeply inside of him.

“Shh,” Tees said softly. He scooted back in the chair, and looked down at Toren. He crossed his feet at the ankles, then took the base of his cock in his hand and watched Toren raise himself just a little. He pulled out of Toren’s ass half way, then slowly pushed in again, then withdrew it until only the swollen head was nestled in the hole’s embrace. He slid his hands up Toren’s thighs, held him firmly around the waist, then thrust his cock all the way in, just as Toren lowered himself once more. Tees spasmed once, twice, three times, then slumped in the chair, letting himself slide from the sweat that coated his ass. He pressed his lips against his lover’s, and greedily slid his tongue into his mouth, tasting him.

At the same moment, Toren could feel his lover’s release deep inside him like a jolt of liquid electricity filling him up.



The moon was devoid of any color but shades of gray. A dusty light gray rock just beneath a darker gray powder. It looked like sooty snow, but what it was, was simply pulverized surface strata from millions of impacts that had pounded the moon since the birth of the solar system. Stickney Crater, a monstrous hole punched into the surface of Phobos, formed when it was struck by a massive asteroidal body, eons ago.

The shuttle dipped suddenly, causing the occupants to lurch in their seats. The artificial gravity box whirled behind Tees as it worked to compensate for the sudden shift. The ship descended to just over thirty feet above the surface, while the radar scanners sent infrared beams back and forth along the uneven terrain that made up most of the landscape. The ship’s nav-computers would kick in automatically and activate the landing thrusters.

Tees checked his pressure suit once more. The suit was bulky and hard to maneuver in, but the insides clung to him like a second skin. He unbuckled himself and climbed out of his

seat. He turned to the pilot, a nondescript man that Tees had never met before until today.

"There." He pointed to a site which appeared much smoother than the surrounding plains. "Land there." He leaned over and watched the numbers click down as the shuttle descended, then turned. The ship's thrusters kicked in fifteen feet above the ground, sending up clouds of the pale powder that dusted the entire surface of Phobos. Like falling gray snow, the dust slowly sank back and settled to obscure other past landings.

Tees wasted no time, but opened the hatch door and took the steps to the powdery surface. The crater lay just ahead some forty feet, concealed by shadow and a ridge that was actually the cylindrical lip of the nine kilometer wide hole. Looking at his surroundings he could tell it had been a landing area for many ships in the past. The repeated landings here had shoveled great mounds of the powder into dreary dunes that were like faux mountains on either side of him. He reached to his belt and unhitched an LED light, and flipped it to full beam. Without it, the ground before him would be treacherous, if not outright deadly.

He looked up into the Phobos twilight, a dim blue fuzz ball pricked the sky just above the dull mud-colored horizon line. Earth was close in astronomical terms. Behind him the pale glow of a red-green Mars sent eerie shadows across the powdery landscape like a comforting blanket, a father to his son, against the chill of a frozen night. Somewhere out of his vision in the pitch black night sky was Deimos, the other satellite of Mars. He looked away and cast his gaze on the surface before him, and started toward the crest of the ridge where the abandoned munitions dump lay. He tapped the side of his helmet clearing up static. "Going in."

"Copy." The pilot's voice came back clear. "You sure you can get that thing yourself?" A soft laugh ensued.

Tees nodded to himself. "It weighs almost nothing out here." Besides, he thought, this bomb isn't very big, it doesn't need to be. He walked on, finally reaching the height of the ridge. Below him, the steep terrain turned into larger chunks of

rock which were swallowed up by the shadow of the craters depth. He looked beyond the crest to his right and spotted a glint against a dark shroud of a hillside. The dump was there. Our victory is there too. It's so close I can taste it.

The munitions lay there, with only a smattering of dust covering their surface. Ringlets of ion turbines, corroded and irradiated, lay in a circle around the entire site. Someone had gone to great lengths to arrange the site in this fashion. Lending some artistic touch to the utter destruction that lay dormant here. Within the circle, spent nuclear fuel casings, their fuel lines tinged with scorch, lay scattered about. Then he spotted it. Lying in the center of the refuse, on an old docking ramp. The N1b neutron bomb. His breath caught and a sudden heaviness in his chest almost made him fall to his knees. "So close," he said it almost reverently. "So close to victory at last."

"And yet so far."

Tees sighed. "I don't need your help." He said it with mild annoyance, but wasn't entirely certain if his tone was conveyed well via the communication transmitter. He wanted to retrieve the weapon by himself, and he didn't want the pilot to even get close to it. The fewer who even knew of its existence, the better, Tees thought. "The bomb weighs next to nothing. Go back and begin the shuttle launch preparations." He stepped over the ring of old engines, careful not to snag the fabric of his suit. One little tear and he'd be dead in seconds. He started toward his objective, which was almost within his reach.

"Stop." The pilot's tone of voice had changed and had grown strangely deeper. Even with a little static in his ear, Tees could discern that much.

Tees tapped his helmet. "Do you see something?" He looked around quickly, thinking he was about to step in a rut, but he saw nothing dangerous in his vicinity. He finally turned around, and for a brief moment all time seemed to slow to a crawl. The tazer leveled at his chest caught his attention immediately. "What do you think you're doing?"

The pilot laughed, and moved closer to Tees. His footsteps sent up tiny clouds of pale dust, which slowly settled to cover his boots. He moved close enough for Tees to see his face and recognition struck him like a shot to the head. "How did you get out of confinement? How did you get on my shuttle, Mister Fland?" But his eyes were now on the weapon pointed at him. He didn't wait for an answer. "I knew you clones couldn't be trusted!" It was now apparent that the rumor concerning the Dark Robe assassins' ability to shift their features was absolute truth. He had been totally deceived.

The pilot's laugh was garbled with static. He reaffirmed his grip on the tazer, but even with the bulky gloves, his finger was poised squarely on the trigger. "I'm not Edge. And since you'll be dead soon, I might as well tell you my name. It's Zachary." He shifted his weight slightly, causing a little powder cloud to billow up around his ankles. "I don't have a last name. I'm Edge's... brother if you prefer." He grinned wide in his helmet. In fact, he was identical to Edge, all the way to the molecular level.

Even from the distance between them, Tees could see deadly purpose in his eyes. He had been right. The Dobson clone had been lying. There had been at least two survivors of the Dark Robe ship that crashed on Ganymede. There had been no way of knowing if the other had made it into the base or had walked off in another direction only to run out of oxygen to die on the surface. "So you're here to kill me then?" He knew the answer already, but couldn't stop himself from asking it.

The clone assassin nodded. "That's right, and now that we know your plans, I think this little war is over, don't you?" He waved the tazer up ahead. "Turn around and walk. I'll let you see your little bomb. Maybe even let you touch it, before I blow a hole in your pathetic rebel head."

Tees turned, he even put his hands up for some silly reason that he couldn't fathom. He had no weapon on him to do anything to the assassin behind him, ready to blast a hole in his back, but he couldn't believe everything was all going to end like this. Perhaps he had a chance if he could talk. "Couldn't we

discuss this, perhaps there's something you want that your brotherhood can't offer you?"

"Just *walk*. I'm sick and tired of space travel, or didn't you know that about the assassin clones? We *hate* fucking space travel!"

Tees began to walk, measuring each of his footfalls as if they were his last. I can't die on this fucking moon. He came to within ten feet of the N1b and stopped when his flash light beam struck the side of it, glinting silver in the dimness.

The Zachary clone stopped just behind Tees. He raised the tazer and pointed it at the back of his head. "I lied. I won't let you touch it." His laugh sounded more like a cackle this time. "Just so you know, I'm killing you not because of an order to do so, but because of you I had to travel through fucking space!"

"Good. I'll be happy to end your space voyage ." Strong though the voice was, there was a definitive tremble in it, as it exhaled a static-filled huff of air.

Tees heard the familiar voice and began to turn around. But time appeared to have slowed to such a degree, it felt like it took him forever.

The blast wasn't heard in the cold, airless vacuum of space, but if it could have been, there would have been a series of loud *ZzzZaps*, punctuated by a sizzling hiss, in the ears of the shooter and anyone else in close proximity. The young lieutenant who held the tazer rifle watched, as if in slow motion, a crimson arc of lightning shoot out and smack dead on, boring a head-sized hole, and turned blood, flesh and spine into ash that eerily matched the surface soil beneath his feet. The weapon's muzzle glowed bright red hot for a split second in the cold grip of frozen space before returning to its normal dark steel, as if it had never been fired.

"Toren." Tees felt his heart skip a beat. He watched the clone's body slowly topple into the dusty surface. A small ring of smoke escaped the gape in the clone's back. The oxygen and other gases in his blood boiled away in the vacuum.

"I had to come. I felt left out," Toren said. He stepped over the body, slinging the rifle over his shoulder, then reached out for Tees.

Tees stepped up and hugged Toren. "How did you get on the shuttle?" If they were back aboard the Indio he'd have jumped on his young lover and kissed him to death. But since they weren't, the embrace would have to suffice for now.

Toren shrugged. "No one was guarding it. Why would they? So I climbed aboard and hid in the cargo section, behind the extra pressure suits." He flashed a wide grin, and even behind his helmet, and the dim light, his pearly teeth sparkled just a little. "Let's get the bomb and get the hell out of here."

He wanted to get away from the body more than get the bomb. He had never killed anyone before. But he would kill again if it meant it would save Alton's life. When he had seen him about to die, he was hit with a sudden rush. Blood to his face, a quickening heart, and then there was the extreme panic, and a *rage* unlike anything he had ever felt before. He knew why it was he had felt it. His feelings were becoming more and more evident lately. Now he was certain of them. He had fallen head over heels in love... with Alton Tees.

The N1b was shaped like an oversized silver ostrich egg, three feet tall and two feet wide in the middle. Tees knelt on one knee beside it. He didn't touch it immediately, but studied it for a moment. Then, he tentatively touched the pointed top, careful to avoid the raised surface in the center where the arming control mechanism was housed. It looked exactly like schematics he had seen of this type years ago. He had many opportunities to study all kinds of weapons.

"Fate?" Toren knelt too. His knees sunk into the powdery surface. He wondered if the imprints his knees left would last forever. A testimony to history. Indisputable proof that they had been here. Incontrovertible evidence of the destruction they were about to wage on the Dark Robe Society.

"Fate... I don't know anything about fate, but here it sits. The ultimate weapon, as if it were given to us by a mighty

hand.” He chuckled. “I don’t care why, or how, but we have it and now we can’t lose.”

“We have to go.” Toren stood. “Earth is only a few days away now.” And I want to get the hell away from that body, he thought grimly. He stood and looked across the desolate expanse that was Phobos. He hoped he never came back here again. His gaze invariably went to the body lying where it fell. He swallowed hard and looked away. “You don’t think he had time to tell the Dark Robes about the bomb, do you?”

Tees thought a moment, then shook his head. “No, I made sure all communications to Earth have to go through me before they’re sent.”

Toren breathed a sigh of relief. “Let’s go, then.”

“Yes,” Tees agreed. “I’m sick of being in this suit.”

“I don’t suppose I should mention that we should cut all communications to Earth...?”

Tees lifted the N1b, it weighed no more than say, a small cat on Earth would. It probably would have weighed close to twelve hundred pounds in a gravity environment. Tees cradled it in his arms, as if it were a small child, and nodded to Toren. “I think that’s a good idea. Communications go out from time to time.”

“We can just help it go out *now*, rather than later...” Toren grinned, and led the way back to the shuttle. He didn’t look at the body again.

Tees didn’t watch his steps, he couldn’t have torn his gaze from his prize even if he had wanted to.

ON THE EDGE OF HAVOC

Against a canvas of utter blackness, the minuscule dot in the distance shone like a tiny blue beacon. Tees leaned closer to the observation window to get a better view of the object that had his attention. Hearing footsteps behind him, he turned to see Toren approach. The young man placed his hand on his shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze as his greeting. This would be Toren's very first look at Earth, Tees thought, but hopefully not his last. He said nothing then, but smiled at him and motioned for him to look out the small view port.

"It will only get better." He watched Toren's expression a moment, then stared out into space, losing himself in its immensity.

"What will?" Toren asked, kneeling down beside Tees. He peered out the window, but only saw a dim spec of light, not wholly indistinguishable from a typical star.

Tees grinned widely, his calm composure suddenly slipping away. "Earth, the view, the majesty. I didn't think I would ever see it again." His throat tightened suddenly. "I'm glad you're here to see it with me."

Toren took his lover's hand and squeezed it. He was apparently unimpressed with the view though. Then he said, "It sorta looks like Europa from here..."

Tees gave his head a firm shake. "My dear Toren, Earth is nothing like that lifeless, frozen moon. There's twenty-five billion people out there on that blue dot, and another hundred million on its lonely moon."

"How many of them are our enemy, though?" Toren removed his hand from Tees' shoulder and stood up. He began to walk away, then stopped. He turned back to Tees. "I don't think we should think about the beauty or anything else right now, Alton."

Tees, his back to Toren still, nodded half-heartedly. He smiled slightly at Toren's use of his first name. He tore his gaze from the window, straightened his uniform and turned to see him off.

"When will we reach orbit?" Toren silently hoped it would be soon, being on the ship was beginning to make him feel claustrophobic, and he didn't have the cavernous control center that existed on Ganymede that he could spend time in. He had often stayed at his station hours longer than he had to fight off that closed in feeling that struck more times than he cared to admit. . Even though he had been born under a dome, and had never touched a blade of grass, or seen a blue sky when he looked up, he had always felt confined in the artificial environment. One day,, he thought. One day I will breathe real fresh air and walk on real grass.

Tees pulled up his sleeve, and looked at his timepiece. "Two days at most for moon orbit, but I don't think we'll be taking the lunar route." It had been five days since leaving the orbit of Mars, and so far they hadn't seen any sign of Dark Robe ships in the space between Earth and Mars. They could, of course, have missed them in the vastness of that space.

"Oh?" Toren moved closer to Tees, and looked around. The artificial lights in the Indio's habitat section had already been dimmed for the nocturnal shift, and they were alone on the deck. The quiet was deafening to him.

"I don't think we'll have much chance on getting through security. It's pretty tight on the moon, and there's no way we'd get through Earth Security." Tees stifled a yawn, and put his hands on the young man's shoulders. "We still aren't certain the Brekart or Edge clone didn't report back to the Dark Robes." He cast a worried glance out the view port. "It's entirely possible they have our images already," he reflected sourly.

"Have you come to a decision yet?" Toren had asked him several times already. He wanted Jack and Edge released from the brig, but Tees would only shake his head.

"I am still considering," Tees stated, then went silent for a time as he listened to his own heart beating a rhythmic thump

in his ear. He yawned, attempted to stifle it and failed. "But as of now I don't think the Dark Robes know we're coming and we can't allow them to discover us."

"You look exhausted," Toren noted. "Go to bed, get some sleep, sir." He didn't normally attempt to give orders to his superior, but the way things had turned for him and Tees the past few weeks, their relationship had completely shifted to far more than commander and subordinate. He was getting more comfortable with this change.

Tees smiled, he was indeed beyond tired and in that instant, he was glad Toren had come with him. He had saved his life after all. What would have happened if Toren hadn't come on the mission? It would be his body lying dead and frozen on the feared moon for all time.

Finally, he said, "I am." He stretched and went back to the porthole to look out. "I suppose a little rest wouldn't hurt, but I don't trust anyone on this ship except you, and something is liable to happen as soon as I close my eyes." He had an ill feeling, but he figured that was just nervous jitters. He hoped that's all it was.

"As long as I'm here you can sleep without worry," Toren replied. He pulled the blankets down for him and patted the mattress. He sat in the chair beside the bed and watched Tees climb into bed. "I'll stay right here."

"Jack?" Edge sat in the darkest corner, his face lay against the cool portal window. It was the size of a baseball, but the glow of Earth's moon lit up the dark of space. Jack cried out a second time, but said nothing in his sleep. Edge couldn't even see him in the gloom of their prison.

"Doom," Jack said. He laughed at his utterance of the word. Surely he could have thought of something else, but doom fit the description to such an exactness that it made his body shiver, even in the oppressive heat of their dungeon. He rolled over and sat up, but didn't try to shake the dream from his

mind. He held onto the vision as long as he could. "They are bringing the end to us all."

Edge got up, and only when he got within a couple feet of Jack could he actually make out his shape. Even his genetically enhanced vision couldn't cut through the deep blackness of the brig without the dimmest light to aid him. "Jack, another dream?" He sat on the cot, pulling Jack's bare feet onto his lap. "Jack, tell me."

"They think they've got it won, but they're only going to make it a thousand fold worse." Jack said it in a monotone. It didn't even sound much like him.

"Tees?" Edge caressed Jack's sweating feet. "It's the heat, Jack, you're hallucinating." He hadn't had a dream for weeks, as far as Edge could tell. Then again, their discussions had become far less frequent the last couple of weeks. Jack had pulled within himself, sleeping most of the time, tossing and turning in his cot, and pacing the floor from hot wall to somewhat cooler bulkhead wall. Perhaps he was dreaming, Edge thought. And keeping his prophetic nightmares to himself.

Then Jack swung his legs off of Edge and stood. He went to the portal to look out. "I can feel them all now, Edge."

"The clones?" Edge went to him, and from over Jack's shoulder, all he could see was the blackness of space.

"Yes, the *other* clones. The twisted concept of Ernst's depraved new world." Jack sat back, leaning on his lover. "They've awakened and the black ships will come."

"Let them scatter the Earth to the winds of space" Jack said, but Edge didn't understand it.

"That's Earth." Toren crossed his arms defiantly. "It still doesn't look like much." His tone may have been irreverent, but it wasn't his feeling about the planet. He just wasn't about to allow himself to get attached to seeing it, or let his emotion of actually being this close to it cloud his mind or his judgment.

Too close to victory. How many times had Alton spoken those words, even in his sleep?

He pulled a chair closer to the view port and sat down, trying to ignore the loud chatter that pervaded the ship's cafeteria. A sideswiper came to the table and sat down next to him then, slamming his platter down hard.

"You look like you've never seen it," the miner said. "It gets old, even if you haven't seen it for awhile. Me," he patted his chest, "I'd give a year's pay never to see it again." He rubbed some of the grime off his hands onto his jumper, just over his name sewn on the left pocket, obscuring it even further than it had already been. "I was watching you from over there." He jacked his thumb toward the chow line. "You looked like you could use some company."

Toren raised a brow, only now, with the last comment, did he barely glance at the grizzled man. He was about fifty, deep wrinkles creased his face, as if he'd been in the sun every day of ever year of his life. Toren turned back to the view of Earth, now the size of a basketball in space. "I haven't," he finally replied. He wrinkled his nose. It wasn't the bad food. He could smell the guy's stink over the odor of cafeteria grub. He turned and stared at the miner. "And thanks, but I don't *need* any company." He tried to say it without being rude, but he wasn't sure if he had succeeded at that.

"Figured." The old man sprinkled copious amounts of salt over his food, and began stuffing his face with the viscous white glob. Whatever it was, Toren was glad he had skipped the meal for once. The old miner tapped his fork on the table, ting ting, obviously wanting attention. "You know, this isn't too bad." Toren turned and smiled. The miner's meal, any meal, was probably a welcome respite from being down below twenty-one hours a day.

Toren pushed his chair away from the portal and glanced at the miner again. The old man had probably been an asteroid digger all of his adult life. There was a cloth sideswiper badge on his left shoulder with five black hash marks sewn onto it that showed Toren at least that much. Each diagonal mark denoted five years of service. The sideswipers were the unlucky bastards

that had to climb into the one hundred foot long and thirty foot tall slag furnaces once every two days to sweep the sides clear of ash and dross. If it wasn't done, the debris would accumulate into thick cakes of rough ore and cause the furnaces to overheat, crack, and have a good chance of blowing a house-sized hole in the side of the ship. That would literally suck, Toren thought, and he didn't envy him in any way.

Toren rose. "Enjoy your meal." He took another look at the guy's plate. If you can, he wanted to add, but thought better of it.

The sideswiper shrugged. "But you didn't eat anything, gotta eat, slim guy like yourself." He plowed into another pile of whatever it was he was eating, seeming to have already forgotten Toren was even there.

Toren wanted to say, 'But I have to get the fuck away from you'. Instead he said, "I have duty on the bridge, excuse me."

"My name is Emque, if you wondered,," the old guy said before Toren had taken a step. He stuck out his sooty hand and offered it. The look in his dark eyes was genuine, his smile seemed to melt the wrinkles off his face.

Toren met Emque's gaze, then looked down at his hand. He returned the smile. "I'm Toren Mir," he replied and shook the hand. He was suddenly thankful he had not been assigned a cover name or he would have just blown it.

Emque held on for a moment, gazing into Toren's eyes. "Good luck on Earth." Then he got up, and like one who had traversed the cafeteria a thousand times, he quickly melded into the crowd. Toren wondered if he would ever see the man again, but he doubted it.

Tees was standing at the wheel when Toren walked onto the bridge. He watched his young lover take the three steps that made up the command center area and come to stand beside him.

"I'm sorry if I'm late."

“Did you eat?” Tees didn’t take his eyes off the blue planet ahead of them. They were only a day away now, traveling with one ion drive at half power. He had spent the last few weeks planning, but had come up with nothing good. How were they going to get close enough to Earth to use the bomb? The answer was somewhere and he vowed to find it, but they were running out of time. Each day, Earth loomed closer. Destiny was a hands-breadth away.

Toren shook his head. “No, it wasn’t anything I wanted to eat.” He touched the wheel and traced it from ten to two. “I wish we could go faster.” He sighed and clasped his hands behind his back, much like Tees had his. As he always had his.

Tees shook his head slowly. “If we go any faster it will draw attention to us. This is nominal speed for Earth system. A ship as large as this one could cause a great deal of damage if it were to hit something.” They both looked at each other at once, then a smile crossed their faces, as if they were psychically connected. “Say nothing,” Tees finally said, and he looked around the bridge. No eyes were on them. Of course, he realized how simple it was, and he wondered why it hadn’t come to him sooner. Use the Indio as a missile directed at the moon’s largest spaceport. It would be a very large distraction. Possibly enough for a small shuttle to escape notice and enter Earth’s atmosphere. He wanted to laugh at its devious simplicity, but he remained stoic and composed.

“Let me get them out of the brig,” Toren said imploringly. “If we’re going to do what I think you’re thinking, shouldn’t we ev—”

Tees held up his hand to silence him, and quickly locked the wheel with a hard left turn. “Do it quietly, take them to my shuttle and make sure...” Tees gripped Toren’s arm like a vice. “Make absolutely sure they are restrained, or I will personally toss them into space.”

Toren didn’t doubt it for a moment. He turned to leave. “And the N1?”

Tees smiled. “Arm it. No,” he thought better. “Leave it for me, and I’ll take care of the rest here.” He withdrew a key from

his pocket and inserted it into the control port. With a simple turn he locked the bridge controls. "Without the key the fail-safes to unlock the wheel will be impossible to bypass." He whispered to Toren. "Go. Get them, and get on the shuttle. I'll sound the order to abandon ship."

"Hurry," Toren said. He had a long way to go.

Tees didn't need a reason to do anything. He was in command, and the crew would do as he instructed. He just had to think of something fast. Give the crew time to get off the ship. He wasn't going to be responsible for deaths that could be prevented. Not on the cusp of their victory over the Dark Robes. "Attention, there has been an accident in the engine core, clear the bridge, this is not a drill." He said it calmly, but forcefully. "You." He pointed at a young ensign, whose face was pale with fear, just as he reached the lift. "Sound the klaxon, everyone to the escape shuttles, then get yourself on one of them!" Tees realized that would be his last order as captain of the Indio. He stepped onto the lift and watched the moon come into view as the ship's course aligned itself per his programming. He had turned engines two and three to full power, to match drive one, for maximum effect.

As the lift descended, he could almost see a clear view of the shining dome of Vestine Station. It was much larger than he had remembered. To the right of it was the smaller dome of Dead End Pike, a city buried deep beneath the lunar surface. The Indio would be the last thing any of inhabitants of the moon saw if they happened to be looking up. He stepped back and leaned against the wall as the klaxon peeled. The whirl of flashing red was the last he saw of the Indio's bridge. He was hopeful that everyone would have enough time to get off the ship before it struck the moon like the deadly missile that it was.

But what about all the innocent people on the moon, he thought, as he reached the shuttle launch bay. There would always be collateral damage in war, and there was really no other choice, was there? The shuttle was on the launch platform, its door opened wide. So close to victory, echoed in his mind. Too close to let a chance like this be passed up, he thought soberly.

The shuttle was empty, except for the N1. “Where the hell is Toren?” He couldn’t think about him right now. He had to gather what he could while he still had time. A quick run to their quarters and he had a small bag with survival essentials. In the bottom of the bag, he lifted a hidden flap and withdrew the silver device. He clicked it on and listened to the hum, then clicked it off and slid it into his pocket. It was the only one the rebellion had. He hadn’t hesitated taking it from Emanuel’s office at the first opportunity.

“It’s just black,” Edge said, looking out the port. “With a slight silver glow, but that’s it.”

“Then we’re going to the moon, not Earth,” Jack said from behind him. He was standing bare chested, his body soaked. He had long ago torn the top of his jumpsuit into strips, one of which he wrapped around his head to keep the sweat out of his eyes, the other he used as wash rags, so he could at least pretend to be a civilized human. *Human*, Jack thought. I’m as close to human as I’ll ever be. He went to his cot, but quickly turned toward the cell door.

“I see moon glow, but I can’t see the lovely Luna.” Edge had kept his fond memories of the moon close in his thoughts. Stalking Jack, finally meeting him. Attempting to assassinate him with a dose of poison on his seafood entrée. And failing miserably at that, because Jack just so happened to hate the taste of fish. His whole world changing in, what seemed to him, the blink of an eye. He chuckled to himself for just a moment.

“Did you notice it? Do you hear it?” Jack went to the door, putting his ear to it. He placed his sweating palm on the hot metal, as if to see with his hand what was beyond it, on the other side. A hum, which was ever present, had increased tenfold, and now its nauseating thrum reverberated throughout the small confines of the brig, making even the corrugated aluminum floor vibrate.

“Yes,” Edge replied. He gripped the sill of the port window and could feel it shake beneath his fingers. “We’ve increased speed. I can feel the fucking vibrations rattling my bones.” The

floor beneath his feet was making the hairs on his calves tickle, as if a thousand tiny spiders were crawling up his legs to get away from the ceaseless rattle.

“Shh, someone’s coming. Someone’s running.” Jack couldn’t exactly hear the footfalls coming closer, but his other senses were far stronger than any normal man. It was more akin to a subtle vibration in his brain, one that he’d not felt before. Whoever was coming, they were thinking strongly of him. Edge didn’t hear a thing, couldn’t see a thing, it, but he felt Jack move past him to the side of the door. Edge moved through the darkness and joined him, shoulder to shoulder. He held his breath. He was mentally primed to do what he did best. Every killing muscle in his body tensed like a highly-compressed spring, set to react in a fraction of a heartbeat.

They both heard the grinding clank of metal on metal as the door lock mechanism was shifted over, then pushed up. Then nothing, no sound at all but the constant buzz in the air as the engine thrust tried to shake the ship to pieces. A full minute passed, and still the door didn’t open. Edge released his held breath, and inhaled deeply, waited a few seconds more, then lowered his stance, letting his body relax just a little. Jack hadn’t moved a muscle in all that time.

“Mister Harrow.” The voice was muffled by the three inch thick steel. The small opening for food and water was near the bottom of the door. “Jack? Edge?” The voice was familiar, but neither knew who it was. “I’m opening the cell now, we’re getting off the ship.”

“Wait...” Jack said to Edge in a hushed tone. He moved away from the door, with Edge beside him. As the heavy metal swung opened, the first crack of light blinded them, so much so they both covered their eyes after only a second. A month in the almost complete darkness had done a number on their vision.

Toren stepped in, obviously out of breath. He doubled over, held up his hand, the tazer in it lowered and pointed at the floor. “We’re using the ship as a diversion,” he panted, sweat pouring down his face. “It’s the only way to get our weapon to Earth without being noticed.” He didn’t waste any time with

pleasantries. "The ship is going to hit the moon, we've got to get out of here. Come, quickly!" He ushered them both out and pointed to the right. "Just run, follow the right wall. When you get to the first lift hit the cargo bay floor button. I'm right behind you."

Jack and Edge made it to the lift first, followed by a sprinting Toren, but as he entered the elevator, he realized they would be of no help to him. Not for awhile at least, as both of them were squinting to such a degree, in what was to them a blinding light, which made them as useless as a blind horse in a derby. He hit the cargo bay level button and leaned back, hoping they still had time.

"Whose bright idea was it to use the ship as a missile?" Jack asked. He had his eyes covered with his headband strip.

"Well mine sort of... and the admiral's..." Toren said. "We both thought it at once. It's a good plan if you ask me." Toren liked Jack, but he detected the sarcasm in his tone and didn't appreciate it. He hit the button again, just because.

"And all those people on the moon?" Jack again, now rubbing at his eyes. Open, close, open, close.

"Dark Robe sympathizers and criminals, Jack," Edge piped in. He didn't give a lick about them. He had his eyes half open now, and the stinging had lessened.

Toren nodded. "We don't have any choice. We'd have no way of getting past Earth security."

Edge rocked back and forth, his eyes were red and watery but now wide open. "At least we have a chance, eh?"

Jack sighed. "I'm tired of all the deaths." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "It's got to stop. Someone has got to know when enough is enough."

Toren smiled. "We know." The lift came to a bumping halt and the door opened. "We'll be the ones to end it." He stepped out, but Jack grabbed his arm.

"You're more right than you realize," Jack said, but he wouldn't elaborate further.

Tees saw them coming from the lift. Only two shuttles remained on in this bay, and according to the control deck display monitor, all the other escape ships had rocketed off to safety. Where they'd go, he didn't have any idea. That was one thing he hadn't thought about. But he realized all those shuttles and smaller cone-shaped escape ships would just add to the diversion.

Toren and Edge had Jack between them, guiding him to the shuttle. The last thing any of them needed was for someone to trip over one of the hundreds of ankle thick cables that lay snake-like all over the bay floor, and break a leg.

"I told you to restrain them," Tees said, putting his hand on Toren's shoulder. "Never mind, just prepare for launch."

Toren sighed. "I didn't exactly have time." He let go of Jack, and let Edge take him up the ramp, and he turned to Tees, his eyes downcast for a moment. "You didn't already?" He hugged him. He couldn't help himself.

Tees allowed his minute anger to ebb. "I wasn't about to get jumpy and decide to take off without you." He gave Toren a grinning wink. "Get inside, we don't have much time." When Toren was halfway up the ramp, Tees added, "Try and keep an eye on them until I get in."

The shuttle's exterior was dull black, about twenty-five feet long and eight feet wide. The interior wasn't exactly cramped, but it wasn't spacious by any means. Four space suits hung from hooks, two on each pale gray wall, boots and other space survival equipment dangled from small translucent polystyrene bags below them. Each wall was also lined with a long narrow bench, padded with foam cushions. Digital readout displays and environmental control panels were located on one wall, while the other had ramp and airlock control settings. A blinking display next to the ramp was the gravity junction box, which was tied into the engine. Gravity simulation was a power sucker. A small blue door led to the cockpit section, where Toren was no doubt already preparing the shuttle for launch. It was closed.

Edge stared at it a moment. *Toren has probably locked it too*, he thought to Jack.

"There it is, Jack," Edge said, turning his attention to the device on the floor. It was the N1b. It looked more like an oversized holiday ornament, with one blinking light on the top. Edge went to a control station and lowered the shuttle lights manually. He looked at the bomb again. It couldn't have been anything else. It was pushed into a corner and strapped down with strong nylon cording, looking almost like a haphazardly wound ball of twine. "I guess they don't want it breaking free and blowing up."

"Ah, that's better," Jack said, squinting. "I can see again." He looked around and his breath caught when he saw the bomb. He went to it, knelt. "This is the end of everything." He touched the smooth silver surface that wasn't strapped with cording.

"Don't touch that!" Tees came from behind Jack, a tazer pointed at Jack's head. "Toren, come back here." Tees stepped back, pointed the weapon at Edge. "Don't think about it. We're too close to victory now, and I'll put you both down if I must."

"A little busy up here!" Toren's voice echoed with static from the comm unit on the wall behind Tees.

Edge gave his cockiest smile, and put his hands up. "I'm with you, buddy." He looked at Jack, who finally looked up from the egg shaped destroyer. "Sorry, Jack, but if we're ever going to have that life together, we have to make the big play." He sat down, and put his hands behind his head.

The shuttle ramp raised the outer and inner doors shut with a vacuum pop, then locked, and the ship began to hum as the engine thrusters kicked in. The shuttle shuddered momentarily as it lifted off the deck. Tees leaned against the wall, aiming the weapon in his hand at Jack, then at Edge. He caught Edge staring at him.

Edge shrugged. "You did tell him to prepare for launch." He grinned, and put his feet up on a trunk.

Tees looked out the port window and watched the bay stream by, then nothing but the black of space. He hit the

comm button behind him. "Full thrust, send us away from the Indio. If there are any shuttles moving toward Earth, follow them."

"Roger, doing just that," Toren's voice squawked back.

Tees hit the button again. Then he waved the weapon at Edge. "Stand up, open the trunk and take the shackles out."

Toren hoped Jack and Edge would behave themselves. He didn't have time to keep an eye on them if they were going to get off and safely away from the Indio. He strapped himself into the seat, then hit the cabin door lock key. He powered up the ship and hit the landing thrusters. The shuttle thumped once, then rose slowly off the bay floor. It would be a smooth glide across the bay and then they'd be through the invisible wall of electromagnetic netting that stretched across the wide opening that kept the vacuum of space outside.

Toren heard a faint sizzle as the ship's minuscule shields contacted the EN, then the shuttle drifted out. Toren hit the main aft thrusters, sending the shuttle zipping away from the doomed refinery ship. Several smaller shuttles and one large cargo ship had formed into a wing. Three in front, two in the middle, three to the right and left and one behind. The last ship looked similar to a medical shuttle, but he couldn't be sure from a distance. He turned the half-moon shaped wheel, made a course change, and slipped in under the long wing of the last ship. "Just keep it steady," he said to himself. He looked out the cockpit window and saw the dark wing above him. "I hope you're not going to do any showboating," he said, staring at the wing. It was no more than five feet away from the shuttle.

"Let them scatter the Earth to the winds of space and devour what is left of humanity," Jack said in a monotone. He barely moved as Edge was forced to restrain his hands behind his back. He said nothing in protest as his shackled hands were attached tightly to the wall behind him, and out of reach of the N1b.

Tees looked curiously at Jack. "What's that, Mister Harrow?"

Edge sat back and said nothing. He just stared at Jack.

“Let them scatter the Earth to the winds of space and devour what is left of humanity,” Jack said again.

Edge reached out to Jack. “What did you see?” He knew whatever he had seen had to be bad if he was mumbling the same thing repeatedly.

It caught them by surprise. As if they had all forgotten the missile of destruction they had just vacated was hurtling toward the moon. The first blast shook the shuttle so violently it knocked Tees into the opposite wall, and then back against the outer ramp door. He momentarily lost his grip on his tazer, but he snatched it quickly, and held it tightly against his chest. Jack, the only one not tossed about, was still staring vacantly at the floor. Edge had been thrown against the cockpit door. He was out cold, and dark blood streamed from an ugly gash in his forehead.

The next shock wave hit, sending Tees reeling, and out of the corner of his eye he saw the pure white mega blast as the Indio's aft section, where the fuel and explosive uranium was stored, hit Vestine Station head on. “Put your head down!” He yelled to Jack, but not in time. The last blast rocked the shuttle with such force the electronics sizzled and burst into flames along both control panel walls. The outer bulkhead creaked and moaned in protest, as its metal frame warped like bent aluminum, only to reshape itself a second later with a reverberating *toing*.

The sound of escaping gas and sizzling wires woke Tees. The cargo section was in a shambles. Jack was covered with melting wires, unconscious, but apparently still alive. Edge was face down on the cockpit doorstep, bleeding still. A small puddle of blood marred his face and coagulated in a sticky pool on the floor. He was likewise still alive. If anything, the clones were resilient.

They were losing their air. A large rip in the thin wall bulkhead hissed like an enraged cobra as the oxygen escaped from the ship in a steady vapor stream.

Toren rubbed his stinging eyes. Witnessing the mini nova that was the Indio exploding had blinded him momentarily. Finally, he released the hitch and pulled the belt off his chest before climbing out of his seat. A small cut over his left ear throbbed, but the bleeding had stopped. He looked around the cockpit. All the systems appeared to be functioning. That is, all but the navigation computer, which had a torque wrench protruding from the console. Little blue sparks arced up the metal handle before sizzling away into tiny puffs of white smoke. He pulled it out, held it a moment, considered throwing it viciously at the wall, but thought better of that. Finally, he dropped it with a sigh and listened as it clanged on the metal floor.

Then he remembered Tees. He had never moved so fast as he did then. He had to open the cockpit door manually, but something was pushed against it and it only shuddered with each shove. Finally he put his shoulder into it, then all his weight, and only then did it open. Edge Fland fell through the opening, his head cushioned by Toren's booted foot. The door was stuck halfway and wasn't going to budge another micron.

Tees went to him. "Thank goodness you're all right," he said, embracing Toren. "Are you hurt?"

Toren smiled slightly. "I was buckled in," he squirmed in his seat a moment. "A little cut, some bruises maybe and my ass hurts like someone kicked me really hard, but I'm okay." He looked down at Edge, then over Tees' shoulder at the slumped form of Jack. "Are they..."

"They're both alive, but Edge is bleeding badly." Tees looked into the cockpit. "Get back to the cockpit and get us into the atmosphere." Tees reached into his pocket and withdrew his podpad. "Take this, the coordinates for the main complex are there."

"So, I guess this is a good time to ask," Toren said, taking the pad. He looked at it, turned it on and saw the numbers flicker brightly. He looked into his lover's eyes. "So, we're going through with it, then."

Tees smiled. "There can only be one answer." He pushed him gently through the door. "Go, get us there, I'll take care of the rest." He watched him bolt, then he moved into action. Their air was still being sucked out of the ship. He knelt before the trunk and began pulling everything out of it. He found nothing that would help. Then he saw it, and the obviousness of it made him feel silly. He jumped up and pulled the pressure suit glove out of the small bag below it, and pressed it against the small rip in the hull. Part of the glove was immediately sucked through the gash, and with a sudden soft popping sound, the hiss of escaping air ceased completely. The glove would remain there, held fast by the vacuum of space and nothing else. The four men on the ship wouldn't have been able to pry it off with their combined strength. He only hoped they hadn't lost too much oxygen, or they'd never make it to Earth. Not alive anyway.

The ground beneath him continued to shake, finally losing his balance, the next rumble knocked him backwards onto his back. Jack groaned in pain and held his head, blood gushing from a gaping wound. He looked up to see a monstrous cloud that began to part as soon as he turned his attention to it, and despite the raging pain that wracked his entire body, his vision became as clear as it had ever been.

"Has the fleet reached the main belt?" the Hierarch asked a man beside him, who quickly nodded. The Hierarch then turned his gaze to the screen before him. "And the lead ship?" He waited with a tap tap tap on the arm of his throne.

"The first battleship has come into orbit around Jupiter," the man said, pulling on his black hair until the end was released from the silver ring on his collar. "The remaining three ships ran into a heavy asteroid field and have been delayed slightly." He lowered his eyes a moment, then looked back at the screen, unblinking. "I've disabled the radar tracking system, Brother. They don't know what's coming."

“Good, and the rest of the fleet will cut them off.” The Hierarch smiled thinly. “Do you have the samples I asked you to procure?”

The man on the display reached down and held the vial close to the imager, tipped it upside down, and watched the red liquid curiously. “The sample is secure, Brother.” He looked into the overlay and cocked his head as if he were examining his own reflection in a mirror.

Pain.

Jack raised his head, looked around, and tried to shake the dream-vision from his mind. His eyes finally focusing on Edge. Tees was kneeling beside him, wrapping white bandaging over his head. A blood stream slid down his lover’s face, like a miniature rivulet. Drip, drip, as if in slow motion, Jack saw the blood drops splatter on the floor. “Is he alive?” Jack asked, trying in vain to wiggle his way out from under the array of wiring he was covered with, to no avail. *It’s coming, Edge.* But not response came. Another dream, another future. I don’t think this is going to work out well for anyone, Jack thought.

Tees nodded, then turned to Jack. “He’ll be fine.” He tapped his pocket, then finished securing the bandage. “Just trying to slow the bleeding before I use this.” He withdrew the silver medical device. The very same one that had healed Jack and Edge months before. The very same miracle device that had saved Jack’s life after the Dark Robe assault on Ganymede.

Jack pushed against the wiring some more, and wondered if any of it was still electrically charged. “I don’t suppose you’d be willing to get me out of this?” He didn’t suppose he would be.

Tees chuckled. He turned the device on to full power and moved it over the area where Edge was bleeding the most. It clicked, hummed and the light at the tip glowed and lit up the cargo section, as if a tiny sun had just burst into existence. “No.” We’re too close to victory, Tees thought. He rolled Edge over onto his back, not being overly careful doing so, but his anger hadn’t superseded his humanity. Not yet. Quickly looking around, he spotted a cushion torn free from the long bench. He

used it to prop Edge's head up. I didn't take first aid and I have no idea what I'm doing, he thought, grimly.

Jack smiled. "We're too close to victory." Jack laughed, but it caused a twinge inside his chest. He suddenly felt all of the bruises that he knew must be there. He sat back slowly.

Tees turned to him. "What did you say?"

Jack laughed again, despite the pain it caused him. "We're too close to victory, that's what you're thinking. That's what your mind is screaming." He shook his head at Tees. "Folly. But," Jack shrugged, "it is what you're bent on doing, and what my lover over there thinks is best as well." Jack winced and tried to stay still. Finally he looked Tees in the eyes. "Then I won't try and stop you." He nodded his head at the cockpit. "I think your friend in there is going to need some help flying this bitch."

Tees stared at Jack. "Did... are you reading my mind?" If he was, then it was true about the clone's ability to hear the thoughts of others, he thought with an inward shiver.

Jack twisted his neck, trying to dislodge a frayed wire that lay painfully tight against his chin, and nodded. "It seems so. Perhaps that bump on the head I got... or was it two or three, woke me up completely." He sat up, leaned back, and the wire finally slipped off. He leaned forward as much as he could, trying to get the pain in his lower back to stop its endless spasms. "C'mon, unshackle me. Your friend, Toren is it? He needs help up there."

Tees smirked. "He's fine, and you're fine sitting where you are, Mister Harrow."

Jack shrugged, despite being tied down, and waited.

Tees stood, looked at Edge, then at Jack. "He'll recover." He said it like he felt. He didn't really care. One less clone to worry about. He smirked again. He was in a mood, but he looked toward the cockpit, barely able to see Toren in the pilot's seat.

"He needs help..." Jack said again.

Tees stepped through the door, then turned his head. "Don't move."

Jack laughed, looking at the wires that covered him like a spider's sticky web. "Not like I'm going anywhere." Tees returned in less than a minute. The look on his face said more than he needed to. Pale.

Tees stepped over Edge, and knelt down before Jack.

"Not now," Jack said with a smirk. "I have a lover already."

Tees' glare would have wilted roses. "I'm going to release you," Tees said, reluctantly. He got up, went to the trunk and fished around a moment, finally pulling out a pair of old cutters. He returned to Jack, began to kneel, but paused, looking deeply into Jack's bright green eyes. "I have a lover too." Then he began to expertly cut the wires, quickly freeing Jack from the multi-colored tangle. In his younger days he had helped build the rebel base and he hadn't forgotten anything.

Jack could breathe easier with the wires off his chest and he inhaled deeply. The pain in his chest had ebbed somewhat, but the pain in his back was worse than ever.

"Lean forward, put your head between your knees," Tees said. Jack did so, gritting his teeth as a fresh fire-hot spasm bolted up and down his spine. He paused a moment. "You said you wouldn't try and stop me. Toren trusts you. He believes in your... *dreams*. Make me trust you as well."

Jack sat up and bit his lower lip. "Help me up," he said quickly. "Get me into the copilot's seat." He put his hand on Tees' arm, squeezing in an iron grip. "Take care of Edge." If he dies I'll aim this ship at a mountain and kill us all.

Toren turned and watched Tees and Jack enter, a pale and somber expression creased Tees' usually confident demeanor. Jack practically fell into the seat beside Toren, not bothering to clear off the scattering of debris that had fallen from the console in front of him.

Tees reached into his jumpsuit pocket and withdrew a neutazer and handed it to Toren. "I'll see to your friend." He looked at Jack, waiting for him to meet his gaze, which Jack finally did. "He'll use it if you give him reason." There was a seriousness behind the smile on his face.

"I will at that," Toren said, swallowing hard. He finally took the weapon, and turned the safety off, but didn't point the tazer at Jack. Tees left them, squeezing through the half opened door.

"We really don't have time for threats," Jack gazed at Toren. "We're too close to victory, right?" Buckling in, he leaned forward, taking his steering lever. "Status?" He scanned the displays with knowing eyes, looking for anything to jump out at him that spelled impossible to fix.

Toren released the controls to Jack with a touch of a button. "We're stuck under a wing of a medical ship." Toren shrugged. "I thought it was a good idea."

Jack gave Toren an amused look. "Stuck?" He scanned the controls a moment and shrugged. "It was a good idea. Their shadow will obscure us on any radar, and we can follow their thrust."

"Huh?" Toren asked.

Jack nodded, then pointed at the weapon in Toren's hand. "Put that away. You won't be needing it."

Toren looked at the tazer. "Yeah, I didn't think I would. But..." He paused just a moment. "Don't disappoint me, okay?" He put the weapon in his pocket.

"Alright, where was I?" Jack asked. Under his direction the shuttle moved up slightly. So close it almost skimmed the underside of the medical ship's wing assembly struts. "Oh, yes it's a neat little trick I learned... somewhere. Our proximity to the larger ship, its mass you know, combined with gravity, and we can just follow them into the atmosphere."

Toren shook his head. "That doesn't sound right. But then what?" It sounds like a load of crap, Toren mused.

Jack shrugged. "A load of crap?" He chuckled. "Don't worry about it. I think we can fix this thing to navigate again." He winked at Toren. "Okay, most of that was true. I was testing your skill, but really, I just got us close enough for our shield to mesh with theirs."

Toren gave Jack a funny look and nodded. "Oh now I get it. They'll tow us through."

“Bingo.” Jack said.

Toren was perplexed. “Bingo?”

Jack patted Toren’s thigh. “A very old expression. Before your time. It just means, that’s exactly what I meant.”

“Did you just read my mind back there?”

“Yes, and I didn’t tell this to the admiral, but I’ll tell you. Put a black sheet over your thoughts and I won’t be able to.”

“A black sheet?”

“Imagine the darkest thing you’ve ever seen, then let it fall like a sheet over your thoughts.” Jack turned off the aft thrusters and powered down the engine. “We can just cruise until we breach the atmosphere, Trust me. It’ll do you good and it’ll help me concentrate. Right now you’re too close to me and I can hear everything you’re thinking.”

“I didn’t know I was that loud.” Toren grinned.

“Keep an eye on that lead ship.” Jack instructed, pointing at the thruster flares of an asterminer. They were small, but their forward particle lasers packed a significant punch. Jack almost wished they had snagged that ship, but there was only room for two, so that wouldn’t have worked. “We don’t know where they’re going, but if I’m reading their angle, they’re heading toward a mid-Atlantic descent.”

“I don’t even know where we’re going,” Toren finally said. “But I have this.” He reached into his pants pocket. He’d almost forgotten Tees had given him the pad with the coordinates. He thumbed it a moment, moving his fingers across the keypad effortlessly without taking his eyes off the lead vessel. He tapped the radar display below his right hand, to make sure it was working properly as well.

Jack smiled. He pointed his thumb to the cargo section. “I hope he’s got the right coordinates.”

Toren nodded, but didn’t look at Jack.

“He’s not very trusting,” Jack commented.

Toren glared at Jack, but only for a moment. He thumbed some dials, tapped the radar overlay. "He trusts me. That's all that matters to me."

Jack only nodded, keeping his eyes ahead. The view of Earth's sphere was about the same size as Mars would be from a few million miles away, and he hoped they would have enough fuel to escape its gravitational pull when it came time to get the hell out of there. If he could correct the malfunction in the navigation computer.

Toren finally looked at Jack. "The way you trust Edge. He'll be okay, Edge, I mean."

Toren unbuckled himself and got out of his seat to stretch. He kept his eyes on the radar. "Yes, Alton will take care of him. The device works well, but you know that already... and Jack, you should give the admiral your word. As long as you never break it, he'll trust you."

"Let's follow this little parade and see where it takes us," Jack said finally.

"I thought we'd be closer by now," Toren said, looking at the view of Earth.

Jack shook his head. "We're still a good two days away." He tapped the speed indicator display. "I'm guessing the only reason the Indio hit the moon as fast as it did is because all three engines were at full power."

"They were," Tees said. He had come in quietly. He seemed to have a knack of arriving unheard. He put his hand on Toren's arm, leaned down and looked out the window. "Do you still think it looks like Europa?"

Toren smiled. "No, it's far more beautiful."

Had any of them decided to look upon the Earth's moon, they would have discovered a new crater. The fusion core that powered the cities, the stations, and the lunar subway, had been incinerated in the megablast, leaving no one. It was as if Vestine Station and Dead End Pike had never existed at all, and all that remained of the two Lunar cities was blackened, melted rock,

and a nineteen mile wide, abysmal hole that could very well have led to a place known as oblivion.

ON THE EDGE OF ASCENDENCY

Just as the Jovian shadow blocked out the feeble light the sun shone this far out in the solar system, a sleek, metallic black ship passed the northern hemisphere of the system's largest moon. Ganymede, rock, ice and rebel base below it. The ship moved silently, as everything did in the vacuum that was space, into orbit around the moon. Its launch bays were already open, its running lights off, and its jamming signal at full power. A multitude of smaller black ships could be seen. Spidery silhouettes preparing to skitter from their mother's abdomen.

Below them, some one thousand feet, a nearly healed hand turned a lever and watched the fusion core power down. The frozen vapors that kept the intense heat that powered the reaction in check, and was held under great pressure, were exhausted from the sides of the immense cylinder and the incessant humming finally ceased.

Jack hadn't slept for two days. Yet he saw with eyes closed, but completely awake and aware, a vision that could spell the end of everything he had been fighting for. He had known it already, having seen it before, but now he realized the rebels had not anticipated a full blown assault on their base.

An assault that was either taking place now or would happen very soon. His dreams weren't dead on specific however. A glimpse of something, a voice heard, and always the shadow that pervaded his dreams. A fog so thick and dark, as if it was an impenetrable curtain of darkness enshrouding him. Which lent him the idea that he couldn't be positively certain about any of it. You're going crazy. One little voice would say. You're right on target, yet another.

Jack stood up and considered going to the cockpit, but thought better of it. Edge was on the verge of consciousness, and his mind was a whirl of confusion. His mind was in such turmoil, that he had tried, unsuccessfully, to block out his

thoughts.. Besides, from the sounds coming from behind the now semi-repaired door, the other two occupants of the shuttle were preparing to become intimate, and he didn't want to interfere. It could very well be their last chance.

Edge woke up to see Jack's handsome face bare inches from his. He rubbed at his head and pulled the bandage off at the same time. "What's this for?" Then he saw the dark blood that was dried and caked all over it. Some of it had flaked off and fallen to form false red freckles on his cheeks. "Oh."

Jack had been watching him until he woke. "You're going to be fine." He leaned down just a little farther, and kissed his lover on the nose. "What did I tell you about ducking?" Edge smiled and tried to sit up, but he had been strapped to the one functioning bench. The other had torn free from its wall brackets and now lay on the floor under melted wires and frayed cables. "We're not out of danger yet." Jack said.

"Oh? You mean it's not over? Fuck." Edge rubbed his eyes. "I was hoping that dream I was having was real." He sighed and tried looking out the port window. He thought he saw a shape, but couldn't make it out.

"What was the dream?" Jack looked too. "That's our cover. An asterminer ship." He didn't want to tell Edge of his own dream. Eventually, he decided.

Edge nodded and grinned. "You and me. Fiji, on the beach." He began to unbuckle himself. "I guess all the racket and the earthquake should have told me something wasn't quite right." He rubbed at his left arm as a jolt of electric pain shot up and down it to his fingers. "Fuck, was I hurt bad?"

"Bad enough," Jack replied. He rubbed Edge's neck, trying to soothe him. With a sigh of disgust, he swatted the bloody bandage to the floor. That out of his sight, he forced a smile. "So, Fiji huh?" He thought about that a moment. "It's a date. You and me." *If we get out of this alive.*

"A vacation? Good, this war business is getting tiresome." Edge put his good arm around Jack's neck. "I think I want this

battle over as much as you, Jack.” He pulled him down into a deep wet kiss.

“Wait a minute.” Jack cupped Edge’s cheeks. “Did you just say you’re tired of war?” Jack smiled. “That’s not something I ever thought I’d hear my killer say.”

Edge gave a half smile. “People can change, Jack, don’t you think? Even us clones.” He wrapped his arms around Jack’s neck. “Now, kiss me, and don’t stop until I tell you.”



“You know, I think you’re right,” Toren said, as he caressed Tees’ chest. Cramped as the cockpit was, there was still room enough for them to lay side by side behind the pilot’s seat. Tees was flush against the door, lying sideways facing Toren. The cold of the metal somehow adding to the excitement of the moment.

“What’s that?” Tees brushed his fingers across Toren’s wound. There would probably be a scar just above his ear, but it would be a worthy scar, Tees thought.

Toren turned away from his view. “Earth. It’s so blue and white. The clouds. I’ve never seen such beautiful clouds.”

“I used to lie on my back, the sun shining hot on my face and watch the clouds pass by. I would imagine each was a different creature, then watch as they wisped away.” Tees leaned over and kissed Toren’s cheek.

“Then what?”

“Then I would watch for another and do it all over again!” Tees laughed. Toren joined him, and for a moment it seemed like the war was just a distant memory. Even a nightmare that had finally ended and he and Tees could go to Earth and live happily with no war or death. He looked deeply into Tees’ eyes then. His face had become suddenly warm and his throat and chest felt all knotted up, as if someone was standing on his sternum, forcing the breath out of him.

Tees noticed it and grew concerned. “What is it?”

Toren lowered his eyes, tracing a crease in his lover's wrinkled uniform. He was moving toward those perfect lips with the tip of his finger. He looked up. Their eyes locked. "What?" Tees asked again.

Those slim seconds that went by felt like hours as Toren's finger finally reached those lips, to ever so gingerly brush them. "I think... I think I love you." For some reason he laughed, and he just knew his face had become a deep scarlet.

Tees laughed too, softly, and his smile going from small to huge. Ear to ear, making his eyes go wide and sparkle in the light above them. "You look so gorgeous." To him, if he could have described Toren, he'd use words like beautiful and fiery, amazing and as hot as the burning core of a star about to explode.

"What?" Toren laughed, but the way Tees was looking at him made him wonder what was going through his mind.

"Your face, so blushing red." He put his hand on Toren's face. "And hot like a burning star. I think I love you too."

"You think?" Toren moved closer, nuzzling Tees' neck, kissing his stubbly chin. He could have used a shave as well, the short whiskers now becoming the beginnings of a full blown beard.

"I know. I know I love you, but damn our timing."

Toren looked at him. "I know. It just burst out of me." He sighed. "I just couldn't stop myself. I know I love you and I had to tell you now."

"Let's not think the worst," Tees said solemnly. He slid one hand under Toren's neck and embraced him with the other. "But let's not talk until we're sure we've won."

Instead of saying anything, Toren kissed him, sliding his tongue into his mouth. Tees closed his eyes while he slid his hand down Toren's body. Eyes still closed, he fumbled with the flap that covered his crotch, finally pulled it open. He inched his hand inside until his fingers grasped the warm stiff cock within.

Toren tried not to laugh. "Have you ever fucked in a closet?"

Tees kissed his chin, softly scraping his teeth on the lengthening stubble. "You would know." He slid on top of Toren, scooting down to sit on his thighs, pulling open his shirt, popping a button or two. "I'm so glad your father urged you to keep in such good shape," he said, and then he leaned down and brushed his moist lips across one nipple, then the other. He wet his lips with a slide of his tongue, then he made his way down past Toren's bellybutton. "You taste so good I could almost eat you."

Toren laughed. "You can eat me, just don't take any big bites." He raised his ass off the cold metal floor, anticipating his lover's next move. Tees of course had been planning that very thing. He pulled Toren's pants down until his fully erect cock sprang free. In the coolness of the cabin, his hairy balls were shrunken tightly against his body. That could be remedied, Tees thought, giving the sac a luscious lick.

"I suppose you've measured this beauty?" Tees asked. Hadn't every man?

"No, I never thought it mattered," Toren replied. He raised his ass further off the floor, and made his cock jerk without touching it. "Does it?" Toren was teasing him.

Tees shook his head. "It's... beautiful. Let me show you." He kissed the head, moving his wet lips around the circumference, then closed his mouth around it, going down until his chin pressed against Toren's cooler ball sac. Toren moaned and even though his cock was fully engulfed, he pushed further, his eyes closing in ecstasy.

He had put his hands on Tees' head at some point. Arching his back, he pushed his cock deeper into the inviting mouth. Tees looked at him, then let the cock fall from his lips.

"Do you have something in mind?" Tees grasped Toren's cock in his hand and tongued the shaft, watching his face contort with quiet bliss.

Toren bit his lower lip as Tees moved up the head to tease it. "We probably... don't have much time. Ahh, tickle the slit. Drives me wild."

"I know," Tees replied, between slow tantalizing flicks with the tip of his tongue.

"Fuck me," he said bluntly. "It could be the last time." He craned his neck and looked toward the cockpit window. "I see the glow of Earth light is getting brighter."

Tees nodded. "I noticed. But we're still a few hours from Earth, and I don't think we've deviated from our course."

Toren's eyes went wide. "You're declining?" He squeezed his cock and rubbed the head against the bristly whiskers.

Tees knelt, quickly opening and pulling down his pants to show his answer with his hard cock pointing straight at Toren. The head glistened against the ruddy swell. "Sometimes, you talk too much." But he smiled when he said it.

An interminable buzzing in his ears woke him from the first real sleep he'd had in days, and the sound was getting more obnoxious with each passing second. "What the hell is that sound?" Edge said. He tried to sit up, but Jack's arm was draped over his chest. It was then that he felt the soft vibration underneath him, and it was accompanied by the low humming sound, the effects of which seemed to make all of the smallest hairs on his body stand up and tickle his skin.

Jack opened his eyes and listened. There were telltale clues the sound was giving him. The discovery of what the sound was didn't need the presence of a rocket scientist, not while he was there. He started to sit up, but stopped just in time to avoid banging his head on the unprotected metal underside of the bench.

"It's atmospheric turbulence," he said without much thought. He glared at the bench, as if that would teach it a lesson, and crawled out from under it.

They both listened to the increasingly loud hum, then looked at each other wide eyed. "We overslept!" They said it at once, two voices melded into one sonorous melody. At least it was to them. Jack jumped up, helping Edge to his feet, then he quickly pulled on his jumpsuit. Edge was a blur of motion. That

is once he found his jumper, which was rolled up underneath the torn cushion he had used as a pillow. It was soaked with blood and one sleeve was torn off, but it'd have to do, since he didn't really have time to go rummaging for another.

"Go!" Jack barked. He had no need to say more to his lover.

Edge was already moving. He quickly pushed the cockpit door open. At least this time he didn't have to squeeze through it, but he nearly tripped on Admiral Tees and Lieutenant Toren, who were asleep on the floor and entwined in each other's arms. But it was the view out the shuttle's forward window that had Edge's attention. Bright red and white flames surrounded the hull of the small ship as it penetrated Earth's upper atmosphere. And just ahead of them was the gray medical vessel they were shadowing in hopes of remaining unseen by the enemies on the planet below. The manta-shaped ship, with its higher powered electromagnetic shielding, was scintillating with bright flares of blue and red sparks as it repulsed the intense heat caused by planetary reentry.

"Jack!" Edge's shout resounded from the walls.

The yell woke Tees first, who sat bolt upright, his face nearly in Edge's crotch. Toren woke next, wide-eyed, alert, as if someone had just dumped a bucket of ice water over his head. He vaulted to his feet, and as cramped as the room was, he was able to quickly climb over the back of the pilot's seat, strap himself in, all before anyone could blink twice.

Tees watched Toren move to his duty, admiration in his eyes, and it propelled him into motion. He stood and tried to ignore the fact he was completely naked. He quietly wondered if Toren realized that he was also wearing nothing, but he gathered his clothes, boots and all, and fled through the door. His composure had never been so devastated. *They certainly know we're fucking now.*

Jack didn't say a word when he saw Tees in his naked splendor, but he did toss him a mirthful grin as he stepped into the cockpit. He pushed his way past Edge, giving his lover's ass a soft pinch, and climbed into the seat beside Toren. "Did you know you're not wearing any clothes?" He said to the young

lieutenant, not directly looking at him. He did notice his gorgeous manhood at full attention, though. Not a bad looking cock, Jack thought.

Toren blushed. "I didn't think getting dressed was priority number one." He looked down and only then did he notice his morning wood prominently on display.

Jack chuckled softly, but his attention was now on the ship ahead of them. Their smaller shuttle was still adequately hidden under the right wing of the manta ship, and in its proximity close enough for them to be protected by the larger vessel's more powerful shields. It was still a close call though. At any moment a number of things could happen. The manta might suddenly veer off, and with the heat, friction and gravity strain, pull the two ships apart. Or the reverse, push them together into a fiery embrace that would certainly kill them all. Jack decided that he'd allow neither of those to occur.

Not on your watch, Jack. Edge thought from behind him. He had heard every thought and for just the briefest of moments, could almost see images from Jack's mind.

"Go buckle up, the admiral too." Jack told him without turning around. "And tie down anything that's large and pointy enough to kill you." He added the last in hopes of counteracting Edges periodic recklessness.

"I'm going to put some clothes on..." Toren said. He climbed out of his chair, suddenly remembering he'd rolled up his clothes and shoved them under the seat.

"Take your time," Jack told him. "I've got it under control." He added confidently. "I just hope our shields hold out long enough for us to break through the atmosphere on our way outta here."

Toren dressed quickly anyway, finishing with a snap of his boot straps. He resumed his seat, buckled himself in and watched Jack work.

Jack's eyes were scanning every display, every blinking and non-blinking button, looking for anything amiss. The ship shuddered about once every three seconds, but not hard enough to worry him. He held the steering lever and turned it

left ever so slightly. He watched the display, and the shuttle's wing showed movement. There was a brief flash, then billowing white smoke as the flames surrounding the ship suddenly blew out. The small parade of ships had just broken through the Earth's atmosphere and began their descent through a thick white cloud cover.

That's when Jack kicked the engine to life. Aft burners, landing thrusters, and the ship's minuscule shields were on full power when he veered the ship sharply to the right. Looking out the cockpit window, he could see blue-white tinged, yard long electrical sparks dance along the skin of the hull as the shuttle's shields parted from the manta's. Below them, he could just barely make out a sea of dark blue. They were still some seventy thousand feet above the Atlantic Ocean. He watched as the manta ship banked to the left and dipped sharply, following the parade of other Indio survivor ships. He finally lost sight of them when they were swallowed up by cumulonimbus clouds far below. Looked like they were heading to North America's east coast.

He checked the radar and saw not even a blip for miles. He quickly punched in a trajectory that would bring the shuttle through a dense cloud layer, to thirty thousand feet. Hopefully, normal aircraft traffic would obscure their identities, at least long enough for them to reach the island.

"I take it we're out of danger," Admiral Tees said. Once more, he had arrived without a sound. Jack turned and nodded to him, noting he was fully dressed, his hands behind his back. He looked like an admiral now.

"We're over the Atlantic, Admiral," Jack told him.

"He's a great pilot," Toren said. He had been quietly watching Jack with admiration the entire time. He got up. "I need to stretch my legs a bit." He clasped Tees' hand then left the two alone.

"He believes in you," Tees said quietly, looking back to watch Toren leave. He moved between the seats and leaned down to look. "I didn't think I'd ever see this again."

“At least someone does,” Jack replied with an accusatory glance. He shrugged though. “I knew I’d see it again.”

Tees ignored the former, and watched as the shuttle pushed through the cotton-like clouds. “Your dreams?”

Jack grunted. “That and pure stubbornness.” He grinned then.

It forced Tees to smile. “I know all about the latter, Mister Harrow.” He put his hand on Jack’s shoulder. “Thank you for giving me the chance to trust you.” He moved away to the cabin door. “I have to prepare our little friend... and Jack, I think you call can call me Tees from now on.”

Jack nodded. Good, he thought. I was tired of calling you Admiral. But then he said, out of the blue. “Toren loves you.”

Tees stopped, turned. “What did you say?”

Jack checked their descent, then turned fully to face Tees. “He loves you. The biggest thing running through his head is you.”

Tees didn’t know what to say for a moment. “You’re able to read his mind as well?”

Jack smiled, then turned back to the controls. “Yes, when he’s close to me.” Jack shrugged. “You know he loves you. I just felt like making sure you knew it.”

“I need to prepare our gift to your brethren.” Tees shut the door as soon as he cleared it.

“And you love him too.” Jack said to the door. He turned back and scanned the readouts. The shuttle began to shake and continued for several long moments, as the ship, buffeted by high winds, slowly leveled off, skimming just above a puffy cloud deck. It looked more like a soft mattress made entirely of pure white cotton balls. Their elevation was now thirty thousand feet, and it was time to make a course change. He increased the thrust until the speed indicator registered exactly six hundred mph, sending the ship hurtling toward the European continent and his destiny.

With Edge looking on, Tees and Toren slowly pulled the egg-shaped N1b to the center of the cargo section. Tees waved Toren away to give him more room to inspect it. He knelt before the bomb, studying the indentation on the very top where the arming mechanism was held. A small white light sensor softly blinked, showing that it was operational, but not armed yet.

“You *do* know how to make that thing work, right?” Edge asked. He sat on the bench and crossed his arms.

“Shh.” Toren glared down at Edge. He was standing back near the cabin door, his legs spread, one hand on his hip. He was nervously chewing the fingernails of his other hand. If he’d had an iron nail, he was sure he could have easily bitten through it. The tension in the room was as thick as molasses. He looked at his lover. *I sure hope you know how to make it work*, he thought.

Tees finally turned to them. “It’s a technological marvel, this bomb. The mechanism for arming is simple. I don’t suspect they ever thought this would get into the hands of anyone other than who it was made for. They made it simple to operate.”

He turned back to the N1b. He slowly placed his hands on either side of the narrow top near the indentation, then slid a finger of his right hand up and pushed the top down. The bomb gave out a soft chirp, the dent lowered, and the soft white light suddenly became red and no longer blinked. Not even a second later, a small round panel on the side of the bomb slid open, revealing a circular dial, which then pushed out about an inch.

“They made it easy,” Tees said again. “As if killing millions of people was no different than making a cake.” He wanted to spit with disgust. He moved his right hand down to the center of the egg shape and found the dial. He moved around the bomb to get a better view of the timing controls. He studied them a moment, then turned the dial until it was set on one-thousand.

“It’s ready,” he finally said. “There will be collateral damage,” he added, sadly. “But this is war.”

Toren knelt beside him. "I know you don't want to use it," he said, as if he were reading his lover's thoughts. Of course he wasn't, but he was dead on about that. "We really have no choice."

Tees smiled at him, then stood, helping Toren up. "No, I don't want to use it, but as I've said far too much, and as you just pointed out so expertly to me... we have no other choice." He motioned to Edge. "Help me pull the bomb to the ramp." He jacked his thumb aft. "When we get ready to let her go, we'll all have to be tied to something. I've never opened a shuttle door at this speed in an oxygen atmosphere." He was silent for a moment, staring at the bright white eye on the bomb. "I have no idea what the hell is going to happen."

"When?" Edge asked. He had stood and come up behind Tees.

"One thousand feet above the complex." Tees bowed his head a moment. His heart was beating so fast, he almost wondered if the men standing around him could hear it. If they could sense his fear. His excitement.

"Boom," Toren said to himself. His companions both looked at him and nodded simultaneously.

"Then what?" It was Jack. He stepped out of the cockpit, and clapped his hands, rubbing them together vigorously.

Tees motioned to Toren. "Get in the pilot's seat and make sure we're not going to hit something." He turned to Jack. "Then we get as far away from detonation point as we can."

"As fast as we can," Edge added. "Hey kid," he winked at Toren, "speed is our friend." He watched Toren zig-zag past Jack, and for the first time let his eyes move up and down Toren's body. *Fuck, he's a hot one, Jack.*

"I just hope we have the fuel to reach escape velocity," Jack said. Then he looked at Edge, giving him a sly wink. *He's got a hot ass and a nice cock, too.* Jack thought back, grinning inside.

"Huh?" Edge asked, distracted from the thought of Toren for a moment by the mention of escape velocity. He remembered Europa and the trouble that he and Jack had had

there trying to get the 'Little Fucker,' the name they had chosen for their small shuttle, away from the moon's gravity field without much fuel. "Not again."

Jack nodded. "We should be okay, but let's not take in any sightseeing." He leaned on the wall. "We're going to have to hit twenty-five thousand mph to break free of Earth's gravity."

How long did you look at his cock and ass, Jack? Edge wasn't really jealous, but the thought from Jack was filled with erotic images.

Just long enough to know I wouldn't mind filling him up one of these days. Just kidding...

Edge was about to retort with some wiseass comment when Toren's garbled voice came over the intercom. "Umm, get in here." He didn't sound happy.

"Go," Jack told Edge. He moved closer to the ramp and knelt beside the bomb. Tees appeared oblivious to the goings on, and had his hands on it once more.

Edge hesitated. "Uhh, I'm not the pilot, Jack, you should go."

Jack shook his head. "I want to be here with that." He pointed at the N1b.

Edge shrugged. "Whatever you say."

"I wonder if..." Tees began. He looked up from the bomb, into Jack's bright green eyes. His own were reddened as if he'd been weeping.

"What?"

Tees smirked. "Can't you read my mind?"

"Yes, but I choose not to right now." Jack looked at the dial on the side of the silver egg, then he met Tees' gaze once more. "You wonder if... history will forgive you?"

Tees nodded, an anxious smile crawling over his face. "Yes."

"The winner is the one who writes history," Jack said, truthfully. "I wouldn't let it bother you." He stood up. "Would you like me to push it out the ramp?" *It would be fitting for me,* Jack thought.

"No, I'll do it. Using it is my decision after all."

"I think that's France," Toren said, with a shrug. He punched up a map overlay, and the display flickered to life.

Edge examined the map closely. "This information is old." He quickly strapped himself in and checked to make sure his copilot controls were activated. "That device works great, but it doesn't do wonders for headaches like the other one did." His head wound was completely healed, but the pain persisted. It was only a dull throb, but now pulsed up and down the back of his head, making him feel nauseous. He had to concentrate hard to not throw up all over the cockpit controls.

Toren nodded agreeably. "You could ask Alton—er, the admiral." He looked closely at Edge. "Are you as nervous as me? And what do you mean the map is old?"

Grinning, Edge said, "Yes and no." He chuckled. Toren gave him a puzzled look. "Well," Edge pointed to the western coast of France, "there's a large manmade island there now. At least there was when I left Earth, and I doubt it sunk."

Toren nodded. "Oh..." He tapped the touch screen and pushed his finger up, watching as the map moved with it. He stopped. "There it is." Then he added, "I kinda was talking about when I asked if you were nervous... you said yes and no..."

Edge could see it. "Zoom?" He nodded. "I was trained to suppress that sort of thing. It's just not as easy now."

"Zooming," Toren replied. He touched the screen twice over the tiny island just off the coast of Norway, and it grew to a point where nearly all of the island's features could be studied without difficulty.

"How far?"

"Not far." Toren shrugged, and grinned at Edge. Nervousness masked Edge's face. "That's why I wanted someone in here with me." It probably masked his too, but he couldn't tell. They were silent a moment. "Is it because of Jack?" He leaned forward and tried seeing through the cloud cover. "Why you're a little nervous I mean." He tapped the

screen again, and turned the dial on the radar to strengthen the beams that cut through the clouds.

“Yes, it’s Jack’s fault.” Edge replied. *Thank you, Jack.* He pointed out the window. “Look there.”

“That’s the place?” Toren had no idea if it was or wasn’t.

“Yes, see that silver dome? That’s the main complex.” Edge remembered it well. He was at once filled with dread, having thought he would not see this place again, and also overcome with a sense of joy that he would have a hand in ending the Dark Robe threat.

Surrounding an ocean of white sand, the silver dome shone mirror-like in the sun. It wasn’t tall, but very wide. Its sides, if that is what one chose to call them, were rounded and pockmarked, like a golf ball. The base of the building was sunk into the sand, and scrub brush and dune grass thickly surrounded it like seaweed growing from the ocean floor. Radio, radar and security antennae protruded from nearly all of its free spaces, making it look as if a metal skinned sea urchin had grown to monstrous proportions, crawled out of the sea, and made the island its nest. Surrounding the main complex was a high fence of corrugated titanium, with long copper colored poles erupting every ten feet or so to strike out at the sky to roughly fifty feet in height. Very dim blinking red lights could be seen a top each pole tip.

“A high-powered plasma field flows through that fence,” Edge said. I wonder how close we’re going to be able to get to that fucker, he thought. Fuck, my head feels like it’s going to split.

“I was wondering what that was.” Toren inhaled deeply. “Now what?” Suddenly Toren wished he was back on Ganymede, at least there he’d have the cavernous control center to breathe in. He was beginning to feel the shuttle walls close in on him.

Edge climbed out of his seat and clasped Toren’s shoulder. “Circle it. I’ll be right back.” He walked to the door and stopped. He massaged his temples, trying to make the

throbbing stop. "But not *too* close, we don't know if they see us." He winked at Toren. "We wait."

Tees and Jack finished tying braided nylon cording around their waists, finally securing themselves to the shuttle wall. "Just in case things go crazy when we open her up," Tees said.

Jack was dubious."Have you done this before?"

Tees chuckled. "Open a shuttle door at this speed in an atmosphere?" He shook his head. "No, it wasn't part of my training." I wish it had been, he thought.

"That box, push the blinking light and lower the ramp," Tees instructed Jack.

Jack went to the ramp control board and hit a blinking red button. A door slid open on an innocuous looking metal box and a lever the size of a normal hammer pushed out. "This?" He fingered the metal bar.

Tees nodded. "Pull it when I say... that lowered the ramp, pulling the bar back will open the airlock door." He stood and braced himself against the wall. Somewhat surprising, and without really thinking about it, he took hold of Jack's sleeve and held on tightly.

Jack acknowledged Tees' concern with a slight nod, and gritted his teeth as he gripped the cold metal bar. "You'd better get this right, we only have one chance." He didn't suppose there was another cast off nuclear bomb they could get their hands on...

"**NOW!**" Toren's voice boomed from the speakers.

Jack didn't wait for Tees, but cast one more look at the bomb and pulled the lever back hard. A whoosh and sudden release of pressure made both men's ear drums pop. Jack got yanked toward the open ramp, pulling the nylon cording around his waist tight, and the bomb shook for just a moment, then was sucked out of the shuttle, along with everything else that wasn't secured. The wrecked bench tore free of its fastenings and hurtled like a missile toward Jack's head, but Tees saw it

coming and pulled Jack back just in time, and the sharp edge of the seat only grazed his head.

Even as Tees strained to breath as all of their air was being sucked out, Jack appeared mostly unaffected by the lack of oxygen. Despite the gale force trying to pull him into the abyss, Jack managed to reach out and push the lever back. The hydraulics protested against the pull of evacuating air pressure, but the door finally slid closed. Both Tees and Jack fell forward and crashed to the floor. Jack climbed to his feet and removed the cord from around his waist. He cast a glance at Tees to make sure he was able to manage on his own, then bolted into the cockpit.

“Don’t look.” Edge grabbed Jack’s hand as he rushed in. The flash lit up the cockpit in a white blaze tinged with red and flame oranges even as Toren yanked the wheel up and to the right, pulling the shuttle away from a rapidly approaching burning mushroom cloud. Edge pulled Jack close just as the shuttle was rocked by a shock wave that sent them both into a heap on the floor. Toren yelled something that neither of them could make out, then something popped nearby and a shower of sparks erupted from the wall next the navigation computer. The shuttle shuddered several times, then it veered sharply to the right, and up. The fast maneuver sent the two clones sliding across the cockpit floor and into a tangle of burning wires.

Unscathed, Jack pulled himself to his feet and looked out the port window in time to see a dark black and red cloud billowing up into the atmosphere. He helped an unhurt Edge to his feet and quickly looked away from the destruction. *We did it, I only wish we hadn’t had to use it.*

They left us little choice, Jack,. Edge thought back.

“Do you think we got him this time?” It was Tees. He stumbled in, holding his hand freshly wrapped in bandages soaked with blood. “Did we hit the complex?!”

“Yes.” Jack offered. He pulled Edge toward the cockpit door. “Toren? Confirmation?”

“Dead center. Our ‘egg’ detonated just above the complex.” Toren turned to them. “Sorry, I had to get us out of there fast.

There wasn't any time to tell anyone to strap in." His face was streaked with sweat, but he managed to grin ear to ear. "The whole island's toast." He unbuckled himself and stretched out his cramped legs. "Burned toast." He added almost to himself. He looked at the faces of his comrades and smiled. For a moment, he felt the lone hero, but he knew they had all played their part.

"Get us out of the atmosphere and away from the planet," Tees commanded. He clapped Toren on the shoulder, giving him a gentle squeeze. "Toren, remind me to put you in charge of flight instruction after we get home." He grinned. "If there's still a need for a rebel army, that is." He held up his wounded hand. "This needs to be fixed before I bleed out."

Jack and Edge followed him out and into the mess that was the cargo hold. The platform that held the N1 made for a nice seat, since the bench had been pulled out of the shuttle, and Tees sat on it and allowed Edge to tend to his wound with the healing device. "That bench hit me and I didn't even feel it. Just felt the blood and then it hurt like a bitch."

Edge nodded and turned on the device in his hand. "This'll do the trick, good thing you brought it along."

"I don't feel him anymore," Jack said. He was staring out the portal window as the Earth's halo grew brighter. They had nearly reached the outer atmosphere.

"And the others?" Edge pulled the bandages off Tees' hand, then ran the light back and forth over the gash along his palm.

Jack only shook his head and continued to watch the blue planet receding. He straightened up. "I'm going to keep our pilot company... and make sure we aren't being tailed."

Edge ran the devices back and forth over the wound until the blood stopped flowing, and a crust of red began to flake off. "You'll be fine, but I wouldn't do any lifting with it for awhile." Edge smiled.

"Thank—thank you Edge." Tees had believed that was something he would never do. Thank a clone. They'd proven themselves though, at least to him.

Edge nodded. "You're welcome." Edge stood and switched the device off, handing it to Tees. "Some pilot Toren is eh?"

"You love him, don't you?" Edge leaned against the wall. He already knew the answer, and he smiled inside. It appeared Tees knew less about love than he did, and Tees was human.

Tees smiled. "Yes."

ON THE EDGE OF VENERATION

The Borgen's lustrous lines were barely highlighted by the dim running lights that ran along the hull. The shielding had been doubly reinforced, stern and bow, giving the ship a rough, armadillo-like appearance. Even its landing gear had the look of sharp reptilian claws that seemed to stretch out underneath it, preparing to grasp its prey. They needed to be, in order to clutch the surface of whatever it landed upon, especially if it was a zero gravity moon or asteroid. It had been hiding at the bottom of Stickney Crater for two months, scanning for the armada of Dark Robe vessels, and waiting for the rendezvous.

The first week they had been on board the Borgen, Toren and Tees hadn't left their cabin for more than an hour at most, until day seven, when Tees held a meeting with the ship's new commander. Tees had left Toren behind, giving him explicit orders to take it easy, and stay put. He was a hero, after all. Toren had argued, briefly. He had wanted to accompany him. To be by his side, and not just because being cooped up in the cabin was beginning to wear on his nerves. The war was over, at least that's what they all hoped. Once they reached the Jovian system they'd know for certain. Radio transmissions were being bounced back, and they were unable to reach the rebel base.

Tees had slept for the majority of the time they'd been on the one and only battleship of the rebellion. He had left command of the Borgen in the hands of ship's captain, at least for the voyage back to Ganymede. Had even pulled off his rank insignia, handing it to Toren as they left the bridge.

Tees couldn't shake the thought of all the death he had caused. It had been eating away at him since the blast and flash of blinding light, still visible as they turned their ship sharply and sped away from it. The shock wave had even given the shuttle a tiny burst of speed to enable them to reach escape

velocity. The guilt gnawed at his mind still. He had even almost had Toren assigned to separate sleeping quarters. Almost.

“Miss me?” Tees asked. He had come in quietly and closed the door, immediately spotting Toren scantily dressed in boxer shorts that really hid nothing, lounging in his chair. He passed a hand over the sensor to lock it and noticed his hand still quite wet. In fact, he was still dripping from head to boots. He looked at his reflection in the room temperature control board and saw his hair was an oily wet tangle. His normally pristine white uniform was covered with sickly black splotches mostly about the shoulders and back. He looked like he had been caught in an oily deluge.

Toren jumped up and went to him. “You know better than to even ask me that,” Toren replied with a grin. “My love,” he decided to add. He had wanted to say it more, and even though it had felt right, with the question of war still going on he had tried hard not to fall too deeply for Alton. He shrugged off that thought, gave Tees a questioning look, and kissed him sloppily on the cheek. He refrained from throwing his arms around him since he was soaked. “You’re a mess, why don’t you get out of those wet clothes.” He had an ulterior motive for wanting him out of his clothes. Being wet was not the reason. He went to the door, and noting it was locked, he playfully swatted Tees on the ass. “By the way, why are you all... wet?” He only then realized it wasn’t just water, but some oily gunk as well.

“That’s the best idea I’ve heard all day,” Tees said playfully. “We had a coolant leak, and I just happened to be standing directly under the release valve when the gasket broke.” He paused a moment. “Anything I can eat?” He walked off toward the bathroom. “I didn’t even stop at the mess for dinner.”

“Cold beer, or maybe it’s ale, in the cooler and a meat sandwich I picked up from the mess. I don’t know what *kind* of meat though...” The bathroom door closed. He went to prepare their bed in hopes they’d use it for something other than sleep. Chances of that, one hundred percent. If I lie naked and spread myself out for him it’ll be obvious, and we can get right to it, Toren thought with a grin.

Tees tossed off his shoes and opened the door. "I was able to wash up a bit, but as you saw, not enough. Going to take a quick shower." This time he didn't close the door. Perhaps that would be invitation enough, he thought.

Toren had ideas of his own. He pulled down the blankets that covered their bed, fluffed up the pillows, and pulled a tube of lubricating jelly from inside the bedside table and put it within reach beside Tees' side of the bed. Chocolate mint flavored, and quite edible as well. It would be there when they needed something slick. Then he stripped off his thin boxer shorts, and dropped them at his feet. He could hear Tees in the bathroom running water and splashing about. He sat on the bed and bounced excitedly, making the bed squeak in a comforting fashion. He hoped it would make the same sound for a few hours without ceasing and turn the faux night into a blissful one.

He stretched and lay back against the mattress, lifting his legs and limbering himself for what he hoped was coming. He sat up and looked at the bathroom door. He was glad Tees had returned sooner than he had planned. His heart, as it had always done when his mind was on sex, began to thump faster, skin tingling with anticipation.

Toren could hear Tees rummaging around in the cooler just outside the bedroom door. He almost got up to join him, perhaps to watch him eat. He loved watching his lover eat, but he knew it was more than that. Much more. He was starting to love everything Tees did, whether it be eating, or standing there doing absolutely nothing. He decided to wait though. He wanted to warm the bed, and make it inviting.

Toren looked up as Tees walked in, and gave him a wanton smile. He was shirtless, wearing gray fleece pants that stopped just below the knees, showing off his dark sexy legs. His nipples were wet and perky. Droplets of water, catching the glow of the overhead lights, still clung to his sparkling skin like tiny diamonds.

Toren reached over to his bedside table and dimmed the lights just so. "You took a shower?" Silly question. He knew it. But his cock was thinking for him now, not his brain, and it didn't think before he spoke. His eyes roamed up and down his lover's body. He almost wished he could read his mind like the clones. Will you fuck me tonight? He blatantly wanted to ask. But instead, "Come and lie with me?" He patted the bed, and ran his hand along the silky sheets. He was being aggressive, he knew it, but they'd not fucked since the shuttle. Alton had slept around the clock for days, haunted by his guilt.

Tees grinned. "Yeah, they've turned off the corridor heating to conserve energy, and walking wet through them gave me a chill." He shrugged and sat on the bed beside Toren. He leaned down, just barely brushing his lips to Toren's. "So, how much did you miss me, my love?" He blinked inwardly. He'd never used that term before, and for the life of him couldn't fathom why he'd said it. Or could he?

Toren didn't say anything. It was as if the *my love* part had completely gone over his head. Instead, he glanced at the bedside table. Tees followed his gaze, and his eyes twinkled when they caught sight of the lubricating tube. He looked back at Toren and smiled knowingly. The smile immediately turned into a gleaming grin "Oh, *that* much..."

"Mhm." Toren reached down and pulled on his now stiff cock. He looked into Tees' eyes as he stroked up and down. The stroking was measured, and with his left hand he pulled on his balls. He laughed playfully and quickly rolled over and spread his legs. He wasn't about to play games for too long. He *wanted* to be fucked.

Tees leaned down and put both hands on Toren's ass and spread him wide. He slid a finger down all the way to his balls. "I missed this." He swallowed hard and his cock, still hidden by his pants, jerked on its own. He considered burying his face between the smooth cheeks, to devour Toren's ass with licks and kisses, but he wanted to do something that would be far more pleasing for both of them.

Toren propped himself up on an elbow. "It's only been a couple days or so..." Since you fucked the hell out of me, he

thought. He brushed the hair out of his eyes and flexed his butt cheeks in the same motion. He turned his head slightly, shading his eyes from the light, and raised his ass in the air. He then thrust down, one stroke, to hump the mattress, and held his flexed ass cheeks tight for a moment. He was teasing Alton of course, and by the look on his face, it was working rather well.

"Oh," Tees said. "You missed me more than I thought." He straightened up and slowly pulled off his sweats, as Toren watched him. The bedside lamp was on, the light to the left side of him, so he was partially in shadow. The contours of his sexy muscled arms and chest were portrayed just right in the soft golden glow. His cock looked somehow larger than it really was. The hairs on his balls caught the lamp light in such a way to make them appear more gold than they actually were. His long thick cock stretched the limits of the boxers' elastic waistband. The head protruded from them and Toren could just barely see the luscious pink tip.

"Do you like it?" Tees asked. He caught Toren staring, and liked the look in his eyes. They had not really had a lot of time to talk about sex. The times they had coupled had seemed rushed to him, especially when they last fucked on the shuttle.

Toren nodded, but said nothing. His mouth had become as dry as sandpaper, but he was sure he could muster up some spit to give his lover's cock a thorough going over. The opportunity for that particular pleasure had been few and far between lately.

Tees smiled, reached down and slowly tugged at the waistband of his pants. He let it snap back, and slid a fingertip down the length of his erection all the way to his balls. He looked in Toren's eyes, then reached up and pulled the pants down to his ankles. He stepped out of them, and with a toe sent them flying across the room. He stood there now and faced his lover, taking a step closer to the bed. He looked down at his cock, which stood straight up, hard as an iron pole and glistening slightly on the head. He ran his hands up and down his hairy chest and stomach, then grasped his cock, pulling and squeezing it.

"Spread your legs more," Tees said.

Toren swallowed hard and did as he was instructed. He watched Tees reach for the lubricating tube and squeeze some of the pearly white liquid into his hand. Tees grasped the shaft of his cock and began to stroke it slowly, until it was thoroughly covered with the gel. An involuntary huff of anticipation escaped Toren as he watched the slick cock jerk on its own, and at that very moment he just wanted to be fucked hard. There was no more need for words to be spoken. If their bed broke during the frenzy, all the better.

Tees knelt on the bed and positioned himself between Toren's legs. Tees leaned down, placing both hands to either side of Toren. He looked into his eyes and kissed him hard on the lips, sliding his tongue into the inviting mouth. He inched away and looked down at his lover, then he reached down and pinched both of his nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, twisting only slightly. The look of pure pleasure that quickly appeared on Toren's face was the desired affect that Tees had sought.

"Mmm." Toren opened and closed his eyes as Tees let go of his nipples, then once again held them, and gave them a pinching turn. He licked his lips and arched his back, bumping the head of his cock against Tees' ball sac.

Tees smiled and straddled Toren at the waist, sitting on his hard cock. He moved around a bit until the shaft was perfectly aligned with his ass crack. Then he closed his legs around Toren until his knees were snug against his torso. He began moving his ass around on his lover's cock, then leaned close and slid his tongue in and out of his mouth. That was enough to send him over the edge. "Ok, lift your legs. I can't wait any longer."

"Are you sure?" Toren asked, playfully. "Maybe we should roll around on the bed awhile and..."

Tees shook his head and laughed. "I'm sure. I know I want to fuck you right now, just like this." He wanted to drive his cock into Toren, see his face, and look into his beautiful blues at the same time.

Toren bumped Tees, encouraging him to move off of him. Tees then crouched and watched as Toren agilely lifted his legs

until his feet were above his shoulders. Toren then spread his legs wide. As Tees mounted him, Toren raised his ass off the bed as high as he could comfortably manage. He flashed a grin, and made his cock jerk without touching it. "How's this? Do you like the view?" He batted his eyes.

"It's perfect. Just beautiful," Tees replied, approvingly. The hair around Toren's asshole was sparse. Just enough to be sexy, but not enough to interfere with his thrusts. He looked into Toren's eyes, and then guided the head of his cock to the target. Then he pushed his prick all the way in and held it for a moment, flexing it inside him several times.

Toren could feel Tees' thick cockhead pushing against his asshole. He closed his eyes and tried to focus all of his attention on that spot. He felt the cock begin to slide in, felt the head and thick shaft as it stretched his asshole wide. It burned for a moment, but that pain was soon overcome with waves of intense pleasure that made him gasp beside himself. "Yes," Toren said. "Just like this." They could fuck like this and forget about everything that had happened.

Tees nibbled on Toren's ear lobe. "Shh," he said, as he lay on him fully. He reached out, grasped Toren's ankles, pushed down slightly, then raised his ass higher, pushing his cock just slightly deeper inside him. He liked that a lot. He nuzzled Toren's neck with his lips, and moved them over to his ear, his cheek, then kissed him softly on the nose. He thrust his cock in all the way then, held it, then began to hump him hard and fast. He no longer felt the need to be gentle, and with all the anxiety they had both been feeling lately, this was as good as any medicine in the universe.

Toren couldn't hear his lover's thoughts, but if he could have, he would have agreed completely, and as Tees fucked the hell out of him, he in turn pushed his ass into the thrusting cock only to feel the head swell inside him and the warmth flow. Tees buried his cock all the way inside Toren's tight hole, as waves of pleasure shot through his groin, into his belly and up his chest. Jolts of electric love that soon had him spent and rolling off Toren. He sat up just long enough to wipe himself off, then lay back, trying to savor the moment.

“I’ll be right back,” Toren said.

Tees nodded. He watched Toren walk into the bathroom. He listened to the running water, then got up himself, slipping into some thin pants. Toren returned, having obviously cleaned himself, wearing one of his silky black robes. He sat down beside Tees and sighed.

“I’ve been wanting to tell you something now that we’re safe. Maybe it’ll mean more now that we’re out of danger.” Toren said, but he didn’t look at Tees.

“I love you, and it’s not just being in this moment. It’s real. I’ve never felt this strongly about anyone before,” Toren said. There was an awkward moment of silence, and then they both laughed, a hint of flush on their faces.

“I didn’t know you’d feel that way,” Tees said softly. “Even with the ‘my loves’ between us, the talk on the shuttle, I still didn’t know for sure.” He took Toren’s hand in his.

“I’ll say it again then.” Toren said this, placing his other hand on Tees’ thigh. “I love you.”

ON THE EDGE OF DAWN

One month later

There was no doubt in Jack's mind that ninety-nine percent of space was empty. Absolutely, godlessly empty. They hadn't seen a blip on the radar, received a radio transmission, or seen so much as an asteroid since clearing the belt beyond Mars. Yet they still had two hundred million miles to go to reach Ganymede's orbit. Was victory going to meet them there? Or had it already been achieved? Jack hadn't dreamed a single dream since their gift to the Dark Robes had been delivered.

Edge and Jack sat side by side at an observation window in the Borgen's spacious cafeteria. "When this is over, if there's anyone alive..." Jack began.

"What, Jack?" Edge leaned forward, and rubbed the healing scar on his forehead. He took a drink of coffee spiced with cinnamon and looked out into the void a moment. Nothing to see. He looked at Jack and smiled.

Jack looked into Edge's blue eyes. "The Outsiders, Edge. The other clones that threw off the Dark Robe control over their minds and escaped, as I did."

Edge's eyes widened. "There are others? I was only told of you..."

Jack chuckled. "Of course you were only told of me. The Hierarchy didn't want it known that so many had broken free. But..."

"But..." Edge said.

"They aren't as free as me. I can feel them, all of them. Hell, I can *hear* them and it's all I can do to block out their voices."

"I'll help you, Jack. To find them, when this is over."

Jack smiled at Edge. "I was hoping you would." He sighed. "But I didn't want to ask."

"Do you mind if we come with you?" Toren chirped, tapping the intercom box. "We heard everything and we'd like to help." He and Tees were arm and arm, having entered without a sound. They joined Jack and Edge and watched as the massive Jovian planet came into view. Tees didn't look so pleased at Toren's volunteering them, but he looked at his young lover with approval anyway.

"If you go, I will follow, even if it gets me killed," he admitted with a slight smile.

"Hm, that sounds vaguely familiar," Edge said with a grin. He took Jack's hand. "Well, now what?"

Jack shrugged. "I'll just make one thing clear now." He looked out the window for a moment, then he scanned the faces of his friends. He patted his chest. "I'll be leading this time."

Toren, Jack and Edge all looked to Tees then, waiting for his response as if it were all dependent upon his decision "We have to prepare our defenses just in case."

"I don't think we've got much to worry about," Toren said. He sat on the edge of the observation window and pressed his face against the glass.

"Let's get started," Tees recommended. He moved behind Toren and clasped his shoulders. "Well, pilot, prepare the shuttle and make ready to enter the moon's orbit."

"Europa?" Edge asked. "I hope..."

"Ganymede. He means Ganymede," Toren replied, shaking his head at Edge. He turned on his heel and left them.

BEYOND DUTY

JAMES BUCHANAN

NEALGALT, XUYI SECTOR - QUAD CYCLE 4, PAY CYCLE 6, PATROL 4, DAY 36

18:65hours army-standard

Gray mist undulated around him and Alad hunkered into his greatcoat, cursing the government, the military, the enemy, religion and pretty much anyone else he could blame for stranding him on this rock in the skanky armpit of the far side of the universe. He'd beg for sun, but none existed here, at least not in this season. Perpetual overcast served up with sides of absolute darkness and intermittent twilight haunted his days. He'd be so stoked when he found a ride off this shit-pit.

Alad stepped from slick twisted root to twisted root, a winding, treacherous and living shortcut from one ramshackle walkway to another. Things slithered through the oily water below. Tumbledown bars, whorehouses and low rent lodgings twisted off in dizzying directions, their location due more to where infrequent patches of solid land could be found than actual planning. All of it castoff MDU and MTO prefabs destined for the scrap heap, salvaged and pressed into service to make up the eyesore known as Desperation Alley—the no-man's land between base and the up-rank civilian settlements. Missing panels patched by biopolymer sheets added off-color dissonance to the grays and muted blue buildings. Shadows flitted behind window openings covered with NatuResin tarps. Here and there, outmoded and damaged shipping containers served as pod barracks: racks of one-bod and two-bod bunks bracketed floor to ceiling for those too drunk or burning to stumble back to base.

Above him, a canopy of steel blue foliage almost three stadium deep hid the makers of all the various scurrying sounds. Large trunks, bleached white by the salts sucked up through the water, supported networks of vines and explosions of flora in

colors the human eye couldn't even register. The whole planet washed out into a charcoal rendering of actual living things. Rotting organic material tainted the air with an ever present miasma of decay. Yesterday was spent searching for companies that would have him and his men. The standard hours akin to daylight today dwindled away in the same futile quest and Alad figured tomorrow would dawn on him humping his ass to various commands. Not even a hint of a future appointment graced his horizon. If he didn't land something soon, well he'd have no choice but to tell his men to split up, try to find a rack on their own with some squad down a couple of grunts. Trying to place an entire patrol... hard didn't begin to encompass the problem. *Xosh*, at this point if some other sergeant expressed interest in his boys, Alad would have gladly let them go on without him.

He'd traded half a month's pay off the bar-code scan in his forearm for a third of a month's pay in local trade chits on the black-market. Alad needed them to buy off information brokers in the cumshaw data pool. Really, if he hadn't needed any lead possible, there was no way he'd step into Desperation Alley right now. All the good tips though, they came out of the scuttlebutt haze floating through taprooms, dice dens and sex parlors.

Alad stepped onto the plank walkway that comprised the misnamed Mander Blossom Highway and huffed. Various beings, each more disreputable than the next, passed him. Alad debated whether to start the search first or fortify himself with the local version of rot-gut to file the edge off the eventual disappointment. Shoving his hands into the pocket of his greatcoat, he stepped into the flow of traffic and let it sweep him towards the quasi-legal establishments.

Heading toward him and away from Desperation Alley, Alad caught sight of another human. Not that humans were uncommon in this area—*pisk*, they made up sixty percent of the military troops in the region—but by now most were stationed on bar stools or slop shop benches and planning the night's entertainment.

This guy seemed different. Tall, whip crack lean, his shoulders rolled in a resigned, but still defiant, manner. Black hair shorn in military fashion, longish on top, but buzzed so short it barely rated as fuzz in a halo from above his ears to his neck line, marked him as infantry—what they called the collar cut so that neck armor wouldn't rub. It set off features so sharp a man could cut himself on his chin. His eyes damn near glowed blue-white like eons old ice flows. All the more striking when contrasted with the cinnamon tones of his skin. A cold and reserved air blew off the man... must have been what kept his pupils from melting.

Alad hadn't seen anything that enticing in six patrols.

Waffling, unsure, he paused. He couldn't let his troops down, but *xosh*, it'd been almost a cycle since Alad allowed himself any real R&R. A little booze-up followed by a little naked bust-up, Alad got hard just working the possibility. The man approached, completely absorbed in whatever drove him from the Alley. Three steps. Two steps. If Alad didn't act soon opportunity would pass him up. As the man started to walk by, Alad decided; he jerked to the side and bumped the man's shoulder. The man stumbled on the slick planks, running up onto the roots of one of the many Handoatoa trees.

"Sorry," Alad mumbled, even though he wasn't a bit remorseful, and offered a hand.

The indignation boiling through those ice blue eyes radiated such frost it burned. After glaring for a moment, the man took the proffered grip and allowed Alad to help him back onto the walkway. Everything from about mid-thigh down dripped water. *Shudo!* Alad had forgotten that Handoatoa tended to act like sponges and purged sucked up swamp at the slightest bruise.

"You need to watch where you walk," the man spat, "*subin!*"

No telling who this man was. His bearing, even under insufferable circumstances of being knocked into morass of vomited up swamp water, spoke to rank. Nobody however, except the greenest of the green, wore their confetti into Desperation Alley. Too much of a chance someone would roll

you for the decorations. Unwritten protocol dictated that no one asked who was who, either. The most anyone traded over was a first name.

“Yeah, I’m clumsy.” He grimaced in mock apology. “Alad,” offering up his name as greeting equaled the first tentative step. “Let me buy you a drink to apologize for the damp boots,” made up the second.

A hard once over ran up and down Alad’s body, those ice colored eyes somehow burning into his gut. “A drink?” This time the words sounded more incredulous than antagonistic. The guy’s nostrils flared as if taking in Alad’s scent. As the air moved, a slight fluttering of the skin on the right side of the man’s nose caught his attention. *Xosh*, a notch had been cut out of the nasal fold. Alad shivered despite the greatcoat.

Still, the black haired soldier—Alad knew he was a soldier—reeked sex... or maybe fight-lust. Both equaled about the same to Alad. “Yeah, a drink.” Pretending indifference, Alad turned his eyes away. He drew in a deep breath, touched his index finger to his left cheek and slowly brushed it toward his ear. “To apologize for being... clumsy.” The thumb up the bridge of your nose meant you were indiscriminate about your choice of partners. Pinky on your right eye and you wanted the opposite sex. Alad had indicated he wouldn’t be opposed to a hookup with this man, in a way that let everyone pretend nobody suggested anything about sex. Nobody cared about your choice in partners. Saving face in the event of a refusal though, everybody cared about that.

Slowly he eased his gaze back toward the man with the thick black hair. The guy huffed. Alad waited for a signal. Yeah, the guy was leaving Desperation Alley, but hope sprung eternal. Alad also realized he shouldn’t be putting his dick ahead of his boys. *Piské*, though, he’d been stumping for days to get placements. Blowing off some juice would help his concentration.

As Black Hair raised his left hand, Alad stepped back and sucked in his breath. The correct hand, but *xosh*, the man’s pinky and ring finger both were severed at the first joint. Not that Alad hadn’t seen a freighter load of combat wounds.

These seemed different somehow; clean cuts, but like they hadn't healed right. And something that could take off the first joint of the pinky would have clipped the other finger off at the knuckle, so it wasn't a frag grenade, spinner round or other mechanical mayhem.

Black Hair's eyes went wide and Alad blinked. He didn't even have time to register why when a large form slammed into him from the side. His boot skidded on the wet walk despite its grip treads. Alad stumbled. Twisting, he lurched away from the massive ungulate before it ran him over completely. Alad jumped again to avoid a tail swipe, and bumped into another being.

He looked up. Just blast him back to last pay cycle and let him start over. Hazy blue mottled skin, receding thick lipped jaw and nasal folds that covered half the face in snot: Nofre. A yanked, insulted Nofre at that. Of course Nofre were insulted that other beings existed—running into one boded well for a fight.

The Nofre's two tongues wandered out from between his lips and explored each nostril. He reached out with a thick fingered paw and thumped Alad in the center of his chest. "You pushed me." The thing's accent fell so thick Alad could hardly understand it.

Alad stepped back, hands held forward in pacifying manner. "A thousand apologies." Not that he thought that he owed the Nofre one apology much less a thousand. But reasoning with them was like wanking off to Hesloid porn, never did you a bit of good. "Didn't mean to." Nofre were easy to anger, always up for a brawl and harder to put down than an armored transport.

One of the Nofre's companions, with a deep blue stripe tattooed across his epicanthic ridges and, if anything, bigger than the first, shuffled around towards Alad's flank. "You did it on purpose." Another, with a ragged scar cutting across an already flayed face moved off to the right. *Xosh*, damn creatures were trying to circle and pin him.

“Accident,” Alad gave up a few steps to keep the big oafs from getting behind him, “I swear.” With fists the size of his face, Alad wouldn’t last long in a pummeling by them.

“The Nirapatuat ran by.” A reedy voice on his right came to his defense. Alad spared a glance at the speaker. “They no look where they go.” A rust-colored Disshad, its feather like pelt fluttering in agitation, ambled up. It reached out with a disproportionally long arm and patted Alad on the top of his skull. Remarkable reach since the Disshad barely stood as tall as Alad’s belt. “He fall. You move. He there. It happen.”

“Here my friend.” The black haired man eased up on Alad’s left. *Pisk*, Alad hadn’t even gotten the man’s name yet and there he was choosing sides on a dust-up. “There is no reason to be angry. It serves no purpose.” He cajoled. His voice, the way he spoke, the patter was almost hypnotic. “Let him apologize as soldiers do. Let him buy you and your comrades a drink.”

“He insulted me.” The first Nofre grunted, shuffled in and thumped Alad in the chest again.

“No, I got pushed into you.” He didn’t have to keep reasoning. It was fairly obvious that the Nofre were looking for a fight.

“Are you questioning his truth?” Barked the Nofre with the scarred face.

“It’s not that he is questioning.” Wary, the black haired soldier eased around to keep the one with the scar in his sights. “There are many versions of the truth as there are eyes to see it.” Although he coaxed, Alad noticed his eyes were bright and shoulders tense. Everyone knew they were about to brawl. “Give a thousand men a drop of water and they will tell you a thousand things they see in it.” Seemed that no one wanted to make the first move. “All of them will be that man’s truth.”

“They too stupid get you pretty words.” The Disshad gagged out the sentence. Well, trust the Disshad to throw the first real insult. Alad had known a couple and they were as eager brawlers as any race. They, unlike the Nofre, thought it was just great fun. They’d pick the side most likely to lose and

jump in just to see if they could turn the tide. “You convince you own leg worm,” adding emphasis that even the Nofre would be able to understand, the Disshad brushed Black Hair’s inner thigh with the back of his hand. “That it a female hole, before you change him mind.”

Blue face growled. “Miserable little tree hanger.”

“Dumb herd animal that eats its own dung,” the Disshad retorted.

For some unfathomable reason Nofre resented their lineage. Best way to light one was to point out that they basically stampeded at any provocation. Or chewed cud. Or fifty thousand other truths that none of the race wanted to hear.

The black haired soldier hissed. “Let’s not do insults here.” There was a subtle difference between an angry Nofre and a rampaging one—survivability often hinged on that subtle difference.

“You take his side, tailless simian?” The scarred Nofre reached in and swatted the Disshad. That lit the fuse. The Disshad shrieked and launched itself into its attacker.

The Nofre that Alad had bumped body slammed him. Alad sprawled back onto the walkway and the crowd who’d gathered to watch the initial trading of barbs scattered out of the main path of the melee. The Nofre scrambled over Alad, pinning him. One leg on either side of his body, and the third between his knees, the Nofre’s hand went up. That huge fist slammed hard into Alad’s head. For a moment he saw five of everything. Then Alad brought his knee up, catching the guy in the balls from the back. At least on a human it would have been the nuts. He had no clue where a Nofre’s ‘nads might actually be situated. Good enough though, the blow pitched the Nofre forward over Alad’s head.

Massive hands latched onto Alad’s feet and yanked. As he slid, Alad caught the first Nofre’s knees. The momentum flipped it off the walkway into the water. Since Nofres couldn’t swim, and if the water was deep enough, that one was gone.

Black hair guy kicked up, caught the Nofre goon, the one with his hands on Alad’s legs, across his mid section. Must

have been like kicking a brick wall, Black Hair twisted. Fell. Sputtered curses in a language that Alad didn't comprehend but somehow understood. Scar Guy punched the small of the black haired man's back as he went down. Black Hair dropped, dodging the worst of the blows, and weaved. The weight of the punch glanced off. Scar Guy kicked and Black Hair jumped back. Alad scrambled to his feet and waded in, landing punches here and there. Kicks, shoves got passed around like a drill instructor's wrath.

An elbow slam to the side of his head knocked Alad onto his back. He skidded to a stop on the slick walkway. He flipped onto his knees. The crowd had swelled to catch the brawl and Alad caught the flash of coins in his peripheral vision. They were betting on the outcome. Catcalls and hoots in a dozen different languages egged them on.

The Disshad was all fingers and toes and teeth on the Nofre with the blue stripe tattooed across his eyes. Blue Stripe writhed and pried. Every time he threw the Disshad off, it screeched and wrapped around another part of his body.

An outraged bellow sounded as Black Hair and Scar tumbled into a Vormenta Bondoar. It blasted again. Alad's ears rang. The Vormenta reared up. Countless segmented appendages flailed and thumped everything in reach. Black Hair danced away, lashing out with his boot at his Nofre attacker. Scar doubled over. Alad launched himself, catching Scar shoulder to shoulder and driving him back. The Vormenta unhinged its jaw, twisted the sinuous neck segments and latched onto Scar's legs. It whipped around and with a snap slammed Scar into the walk.

There wasn't much that could put a Nofre down quick. That did it.

Alad turned to see Black Hair straddling Blue Stripe. Once a Nofre was on its back, they couldn't get back up. Black Hair had one knee in the Nofre's leg joint and his boot heel pinned Blue Stripe's palm against a post. With his left hand shoving that ugly face to the side, Black Hair slammed his fist into the soft spot behind the Nofre's ear slit.

Alad took two steps in their direction and heard it: MP's whistles.

Xosh! A buzzing whine shot past Alad's ear. The projectile slammed into the walk, splintering the wood and splattering a glowing yellow gel around the impact area. "Dye markers!" Yelling, he jumped to Black Hair, grabbing the man's coat collar, and tried to yank him back and up.

The soldier shook him off. Another dye marker whizzed over their heads and exploded on a Handoatoa. "Come on!" Rank swamp water spewed from the wounded plant. Wet thuds sounded as Black Hair continued to pound.

Like he'd lost all sense, Black Hair's blows kept landing around the thing's eyes, it's only real vulnerable point. "This Nofre's a meat stick," Alad yelled. "Let it go!"

The Disshad scrambled to Alad. "Must go now!" and pulled at the tail of his greatcoat.

Alad pushed him away. "Go! Go on!" He ordered. Not bothering to see if the Disshad obeyed, Alad caught the soldier's elbow. He yanked, using leverage to pull the man up. Black Hair spun. Those frozen blue eyes locked on Alad. With a roar, he launched himself at Alad and caught him across the chest. They went down. As more shots whizzed over their heads they skidded off the walk into the swamp. Alad rolled away across the set of gnarled roots which broke his fall. He scrambled to his knees. The other soldier erupted out of the shallow morass spitting water. Adrenalin pumped hard through Alad's veins. From foe, to friend, to let's just get ourselves killed... the man had vapor locked on combat. "Look ass-head." Alad pointed toward where the shots had come from. "Military Fucking Police!"

They locked eyes. Another dye marker tore through the foliage. Like he shook off a neuro-block the man shuddered. "*Seppel!*" He hissed and scrambled up on the roots.

Good enough for Alad. He bolted. Black Hair dashed after him. More dye-filled balls splattered the trees. Alad had no bead on what happened to the Vormenta and Disshad. When MPs showed up, it was best just to bail. Even if they didn't

latch onto you right away, the dye markers would paint you as wanted. That *shudo* stained skin three layers deep.

Insane trying to outrun the MPs. Their only real chance was that police started firing into the crowd from a distance, figuring to round everyone up and then sort it all out. They dodged and scrambled, hearing the MPs tearing the brush for them. Someone must have seen them duck into the trees. Branches whipped Alad's face. Black Hair paced him as they scurried up, under and around. Falling farther behind them was the stomp of what sounded like half-a-hand of MPs.

Alad jumped from root to root. No way would he stop until he knew the MPs were gone. Alad heard Black Hair yell. Spinning, he saw Black Hair stumble on the slick bark. Alad grabbed a vine, jumped and grabbed Black Hair's hand. Alad hung by his fingers from the hard segment of creeper, the toes of his boots barely clinging to the roots, suspended over the water. A smile slipped between them, barely visible in the dim shadows that made up the passage between insipid daylight and full dark. Alad hauled himself back. Black Hair used the grip on Alad's arm to winch himself up until they stood on the same root.

Chest to chest, Alad tasted the adrenaline seeping off Black Hair's skin. "Hey." He stuttered out and then cursed himself silently for sounding like some fry-brained burnout.

Black Hair leaned in and whispered, "Hirah thanks you."

Alad assumed that was the guy's name and not some religious figure. He started to give his own name, sort of half realizing he might have already said it, when the vine in his hand twitched. A long, muscular section of body looped behind Hirah. Gold-glowing segmented limbs spread out and snapped shut over his legs. With a yelp Hirah went ass over end and vanished into the canopy. Alad tried to jump. The vine he held wrapped around his arm. With a spine jarring snap, it jerked him up.

Breath knocked from his lungs, Alad found himself nose to undulating eyes of a Vormenta. Its gibbous mouthparts oozed.

Alad swallowed hard. Above the Vormenta's myriad visual apertures appeared the grinning face of the Disshad.

Alad assumed it was a he as he'd never heard of a female Disshad venturing offworld. And it wasn't too hard to conjecture that the Disshad smiled. The race carried a freighter load of similarities to the extinct great apes of ancient Earth. Well, except for the rainbow colored sex organs on their shoulders... and the fact that their soft, luxurious fur was actually colonies of symbiotic organisms.

The Disshad slapped its oral opening with long, flat fingered hands, creating pops of compressed air. Alad figured it meant that they should be quiet. He was about to hiss it to Hirah when Alad noticed him putting his fingers to his lips. The universal human gesture for *shut the pisk up*.

As the swamp shushed around them, Alad heard it: MP's moving through the twisted vegetation. They all clung to the tree, half a stadion up in its branches, and held their breath. The MPs slowly approached then the sounds of their movements dissipated. Finally, Alad remembered to breathe. "Thanks," he whispered to the Vormenta and hoped it'd understand him.

A series of whirrs, click and groans emanated from the Vormenta, sounding, to Alad, like some archaic machine on its last functioning legs. The Disshad, apparently noticing and comprehending the confusion that must have been written on Alad's face, translated. "She say she always find humans strange. You never look up. Come have drink with us. I, Pemtch, ask of you. Come, come. Is good."

Alad slid his gaze toward Hirah. "So you up for a drink? I owe you one."

"I'm up..." Hirah paused and actually added a smirk, "for a drink."

"Very much pleasure for me, you have drink with us." Pemtch grabbed each of their skulls with his huge hands, palms on their foreheads and his fingers reaching to the back of their skulls. Like he played with youngsters, Pemtch tussled with

them a bit. “You fight good for human.” The praise sounded like a proud father commending a rather slow child.

As the Vormenta wrapped around them and deposited each onto the damp ground Alad respectfully acknowledged, “That would be a pleasure.”

Hirah added, “Definitely a pleasure.” Since he looked into Alad’s eyes as he said it, Alad figure there was a special part reserved just for him. In that thin moment Alad forgave Hirah for turning on him—justified it as combat rush, it could screw up anybody’s wires. Plus, how he said it, Hirah was accepting Alad’s earlier proposition. Had to be. Then Hirah turned his smile toward Pemtch and Vormenta, including them with, “To have a drink with such warriors.”

19:20hr

A damp slog got them into the back half of Desperation Alley. Pemtch's stories and teasing made it all seem a little bit more like a fun stroll and not a reeking hike. Plus the Vormenta—who they called Vormenta since none of them, even Pemtch, could pronounce her name—eased their passage over quagmires and rank water with her ability to extend her segments and jointed body four times its size. The first time Alad used her as a bridge, he'd felt uneasy about it. By the sixth, he'd forgotten why it bugged him in the first place.

Finally, they navigated the main thoroughfares of the settlement. Hookers leaned off terraced platforms made from stacked MDUs and taunted passersby. Since the evening was still early, a good deal of the sex-workers lolled in disheveled clothing they'd worn to the baths or during the morning hours. Robes and kilts casually draped open advertised their fleshy wares. They groomed each other—brushing hair, oiling skin, or applying cosmetic concoctions—and graced the masses below with jaded stares and off-color jibes. If you wanted it, likely it called to you from one of those sex-joints: men, women, and beings not really classified as either, or both. And even if it wasn't on display, the generic bio-ped lolling over the railings knew who carried more exotic fair... for a commission.

Pemtch loped up between them, swung up and dangled off of a bright post. "The fun people want you to pay and play." Disshad didn't need to copulate often, storing gametes for decades at times, and teased other species about their rampant need to procreate.

"No," Alad figured he'd give a little tease to Hirah. Grabbing the neck of the man's greatcoat, he yanked so that it slid down, off those sharp shoulders in a parody of the sex

worker's casual, seductive drape of robes. "I don't think I have to pay for it tonight."

Hirah turned and smirked, "You'll pay." Then he licked his middle finger—of the hand that was missing pieces—and ran the wet tip along the rim of Alad's ear. "Just in food and spirits."

"What?" Alad shuddered, all thoughts of landing leads on placements blasted out of his skull. "You're not going to match me?"

"Alad," Hirah purred, "with what two night brothers can blow through on tanking the fuel quotient and lubricating the engines, we could buy a high class lay-back." He rolled his eyes.

Ambiguous at best, Alad thought they had an understanding, but they'd never gotten to finish their initial trade of innuendo. "Want to?"

"*Xosh* no!" Hirah laughed. "Give me tanked and oiled and then some honest, mutual engine maintenance... so much better."

Pemtch swung off the bright post and landed with a thud at their feet. "Why does your species," he grumbled, "no matter what planet, speak in code? Is it not better to say, 'I wish to eat good food, drink intoxication with comrades and mate with what I must not pay for,' than play with words?"

Hirah snorted back a laugh as Alad answered, "You are correct, my friend. I want to eat until my stomach is full. I want to drink until my vision is blurred." Then he looped an arm around Hirah's body and reeled him in close. Almost nose to nose he purred out, "And I want to have sex with this arousing male member of the basic-human stock until both of us are drowning in rivers of seminal fluid." That lean muscled form felt so good up against him, even with coats and uniforms squashed in between.

Hirah smirked. "I don't have rivers."

"What," Alad teased back, "a blaster cap?"

“Maybe two, if you work it right.” The way he rubbed his crotch into Alad... yeah, there was a least a couple lurking in that stiff rocket.

Alad shuddered. “Can I have it all up my ass and you lick it out?”

“You know,” Hirah brushed his lips across Alad’s mouth, “if you hit on me any harder, you’ll knock me unconscious.”

“That would be inconvenient.” The teases set up a promise of a hard night spent sweating and grunting, possibly Alad’s favorite recreational activity. Then barking bellows sounded from Pemtch’s throat pouch. Alad had forgotten just how resonate a Dissshad’s laughter could be. He twisted his face, leaving Hirah to blow across his ear and grumbled out, “What?”

“She ask what you say.” Vormenta’s vocalizations must have been lost in the foreplay between Alad and Hirah. Pemtch swatted Alad’s ass in a parody of a sexual blow. “I tell her not important, you doing mating things.”

“Oh.” Hirah muttered against the skin of Alad’s temple as Vormenta warbled.

Another, softer, amused sound emanated from Pemtch’s throat. “She ask if she okay watch?”

Alad stifled that with a definite, “No.” It earned him a low, soft keen.

“She disappointed.” Pemtch translated another set of burbles. “Never seen humans mate.”

“Hey, give me a ComAdd and I’ll zip her some videos.”

“So, Alad,” Hirah draped his arm over Alad’s shoulder and whispered, “Food?” as he drew Alad in closer.

“Don’t know.” Alad took a deep breath. Layered over the miasma that made up desperation alley—swamp, hundreds of races packed on top of each other, myriad cooking smells, and rank latrines—he caught the sulfur tainted ozone cologne of weppack drills in Hirah’s hair. “Gonna let me eat pickled kiddia off your chest?” He teased, referring to the local take on aphrodisiac eats. Of course, why brined and fermented testudine sex organs equaled sex never made sense to Alad, but

once you got past the what and texture of your food, they tasted pretty good. If prepared right. Because get them sliced a click past the encasing membrane and you'd get hit with a core-breach set of runs.

"I say," Hirah tugged Alad closer, "share a bottle of Diamr with some bowls of Mayacoe to start off." Light grain beverage and hearty vegetable noodles in indeterminate protein broth rated as cheap but solid fair... and considered a good base for a hearty night of heavy drinking. "And work our way up to fingers of engine fuel licked out of each other's navels."

"Shir, shir." And a tug on Alad's coat tail distracted him from the mental picture of Hirah pouring booze across his naked belly. He looked down into the moonplate eyes and almost featureless face of a local. "You need help, shir?"

No way for Alad to actually get a bead on true age, but by the size and strips of cloth making up its attire, Alad figured a juvenile begged for attention. Laced over its fragile forearm, woven strips of cerulean, piss-yellow and black rags marked the being as a Fetch, a local servant for hire. None of them claimed to have names. You just called whichever you hired, Fetch. Fetch found you a place to sleep, brought you food and drinks and whatever else you desired. Most directed you toward establishments that fed them a commission, but not all. Coming in at the middle of Desperation Alley they'd avoided the swarms lurking around the major paths leading into the district.

As Hirah nuzzled his neck, Alad fished out a trade token. He flashed it before Fetch's gaze. "We want someplace clean and safe, not whatever pit you normally use."

A slow blink, one set of eyelids folding over another meant Fetch considered the token—twice a Fetch's normal rate—before he answered. "Okay, I take you."

"We need something kinda big." Hirah added as his arm drifted down to circle Alad's middle. They ambled after Fetch. Vormenta gibbered questions and most all seemed answered by Pemtch. Only occasionally would he ask for a clarification on

some habit of humans—like swapping spit—that Hirah and Alad engaged in during their walk.

Fetch led them to a two tiered structure of castoff MDUs. Unlike more central pleasure houses they didn't appear to be arranged around a courtyard. It also boasted a swept stoop and reasonably clean banner hangings in the open doorway, advertising quiet rooms and good food, not sex or spirits. Fetch drummed the customary call with his fingers on the door drum.

It took a moment before a swarthy, rotund humanoid brushed aside the banners to stand on the stoop, wiping furry hands on a ragged towel. "What, Fetch?" She growled.

Fetch prostrated himself on the lintel. "I bring patrons for you, shir." Fetch called everybody sir. Alad figured it was easier and safer than guessing at a patron's sex.

The next growl echoed just as suspicious. "You're not my fetch."

"No, shir," he rocked back on his haunches and whined, "but I brought where they ask."

Amused, and a little befuddled that they'd found a reasonably honest fetch, Alad added, "We told him to find us someplace clean and safe."

Commanding officers hadn't given Alad such intense once overs. Finally, the proprietor jerked her chin back toward the sounds of music and bright lights of the brothels they'd bypassed on their way to her establishment. "You're soldiers," she sneered, "the parties are that way."

Hirah broke his exploration of Alad's skin to look at her. His smooth, almost intoxicating voice sounded. "I'm not into drunken brawls in the halls and having to sleep with a knife under my pillow." Alad wondered if other people noticed those same tones when Hirah spoke to him. He couldn't imagine that they did. Hirah's voice seemed more relaxed, natural in the few sentences they'd traded. "We want our own little private party in a reasonably nice place." There must be some trick to his modulation, Alad figured, something he was trained in. Alad wanted to be nice and give in, just in the way Hirah spoke.

The woman seemed to mull it over. Finally she grunted, "Soldiers pay up front."

After collecting her money, the proprietor led them past discount night racks stacked three high along the street-side wall. Fetch scuttled along in their wake. The hallway gleamed, clean rack curtains hung across occupied bunks and the whole building smelled lived in, but not overused. At the end of the hall the proprietor pulled back the panel on a step-up small room. That boded for heated floor panels in the room, definitely a cheap, but still upscale rack. Four wood slat benches stacked along one wall held mats and blankets in cubes slung underneath. Alad stepped up and in before grabbing the top two and placed them in the far corner in an L, classic dining couch style. The other two he set side by side to make a wide bench. He assumed Vormenta would need the space of a double wide for comfort. Pemtch busied himself laying out cushions, tossing almost all onto the L configuration.

In the hall, he could hear Hirah instructing Fetch what to buy for food and drink. "Pemtch, what does she want?" He called the question into the room.

After a gibbering and rumbling conversation, Pemtch ambled to the panel. "She say she eat some time ago and maybe eat sometime soon. No offense she say, but no food Fetch can get would feed her."

Alad shrugged in response to a puzzled look by Hirah. The only reason he knew anything about Pemtch was because he'd served with two Disshad in a demolitions crew his first tour. The Grand Army tended to bunk like with like, keeping units segregated by general species so that they didn't have to continually arrange and rearrange housing each time a unit took on new troops. Allowances were made for specialized ops, like demolitions or engineering. Still, you'd never find an oxygen breathing bi-ped racked with a partial-gilled vestigial sauropod.

Despite the damp chill outside, their room radiated warmth, likely held in by the door panels before they arrived. Somehow Alad doubted that each room had individual regulators, although he didn't bother to look. Hot water pipes likely ran under the raised floor from one end to the other. He'd gladly

trade a little head space for the amenity of heat. Alad ditched his greatcoat and over jacket in favor of the comfort of his tee and fatigue pants.

When he turned from stowing his gear in a vacant cubby, Hirah caught his eye. Combat fatigues and boots... Hirah's muscle laced chest was bare. A fine feathering of hair fanned out across his chest and drifted in a line, creeping toward where the head of Hirah's prick was, almost, visible above the band of his fatigues. Tiny, dusky nipples poked out of the curling hair covering his pecs, hiding them—but not quite—from Alad's eyes. *Pisk*, he had a thing for guys' nipples, chest hair just made it all better.

Settling into the corner of the L positioned benches, one leg propped along the wall, the other dangling off the bench, Hirah beckoned Alad over. The position pressed Hirah's swollen prick against the fabric of his fatigues. Even Vormenta couldn't miss that signal.

Alad crept along the lip of the bench, shedding his t-shirt as he moved, and snuggled into Hirah's body. Communal living with various sexes and races conditioned soldiers to just not worry much about the distinction between public and private. Alad didn't care for an audience when things got full on busting, but backing down a bit of foreplay just because others were in the room, why bother?

The fuzz of fur across Hirah's chest tickled Alad's hairless skin. Genetic blessing or curse, but Alad's race boasted big frames and little body hair, not even in places most adult human stock sported it. Give him a man with a nice coat of fur and Alad could spend hours nuzzling through it. Running one big hand over his close shaved scalp, Alad snorted. He always wanted what he didn't have.

They spent the evening drinking as booze was brought, feeding each other morsels of food as it came and trading war stories with Pemtch. Finally, all the rough edges filed off his senses and a general warm haze flooding his burners, Alad ran his thumb over Hirah's nipple. "Ready to sleep?"

“No, blue eyes,” Although he shuddered under the touch, Hirah drawled out the response. “I’m ready to bust, then sleep.”

Alad chuckled, “Well we’d have to shed the fatigues.”

“Sounds good. Like to see if the muscles on the bottom half match what the shoulders promise.”

Vormenta warbled something and Alad heard, “We go now,” up close to his ear. A long, strong finger poked Alad in the chest. He rolled his head toward Pemtch. “Give you alone space.” Then, with almost a snicker, Pemtch added, “Vormenta wishes you strong offspring.”

Looking a little perplexed, Hirah hissed. “Ahh.”

“I know.” Pemtch slapped his oversized palms together. “Her,” he brushed the air indicating Vormenta as she uncoiled off the bare double bench, “they only need the one. They don’t know human female, human male. Don’t see.” Then he patted Alad’s ass through his fatigues, since that was the only body part available. “You play, have fun good warriors. May you die with your hands in enemy’s heart.” The standard Disshad farewell wish.

“Good luck to you too.” Alad mumbled while he listened to Hirah’s heartbeat.

Hirah mumbled, “Walk in his footsteps” to Pemtch although he never took his eyes off Alad.

As Pemtch and Vormenta left, sliding the panel shut behind them, Hirah ran his hand over Alad’s neck. “So.”

“So what?” Alad rolled his head into the touch. A warm room, a warm body, full stomach and his senses a little loose from alcohol, Alad’s pulse shot up, anticipating the cap to the evening.

With his free hand, Hirah grabbed Alad’s hand and brought it down to his crotch. “So, you’ve been humping this all night.” He pushed his hips into Alad’s touch. “Why don’t you just go down and make yourself friendly.”

Alad teased. "You're just a whore for it, aren't you?" He didn't waste time, however, in working the fasteners loose on Hirah's fatigues.

"Look, big-slick-and-broad, I don't let loose much." Hirah grinned while his fingers tugged Alad's own pants open. "I got a lot of *shudo* that needs done and an R&R pass is worth ten thousand times the weight of the plastic it's stamped on. But when I see something I want... I want it." He paused and squeezed, making Alad grunt. "I want to roll around sweaty and grunting and purge my basket enough so I can wait a while before the next opportunity."

Rolling around sweaty and grunting sounded fantastic. In order to mange that Alad shifted and sat back. He'd have rather stayed wrapped around Hirah, but he had to get his boots off. "So you're using a chit on me?" He grunted before snapping the buckles on his boots open.

"No, vapor head, technically I'm AWOL." Hirah sat up, fussed the six buckles on each boot open, before kicking them off. "Should have been back on base two clicks past dark-thirty." He swung his legs off the bench and stood. "But it's me, and I was stumping the black-market route for my CO." Laughing, he headed over to the double wide benches. "Since I've got cred banked with him, he'll rack me, he'll roll me, but he won't slap me down for getting a little distracted."

"I'm getting you in trouble?" Alad watched as Hirah pulled out the big mats and tossed them on the benches.

Hirah shucked his fatigues and shorts. "Well, less trouble than getting hauled back to base by the MPs." His prick, dark, ruddy and proud, stood at attention. Hirah ran his hand over his hard cock a few times and growled out. "But I'll get enough stripes that you better make this night worth it."

Boots off, Alad stood and shoved his own pants down, stepping out of them as he bent over. "Are you sure?" Somehow, with as flamed as he was, Alad managed not to fall.

"Look, they say, 'live on the edge 'cause you can only die once.'" Hirah stepped up and ran his hands over Alad's naked chest. Alad shuddered under a touch filled with wepgrip

calluses. “Sometimes, you get a second chance. So you take the small moments and make them worth while.” A feral grin flashed as Hirah added, “Like that old saying, ‘dance as if no one’s watching, sing as if no one’s listening, and live every day as if it were your last.’”

“*Pisk*, you’re as bad as the party toys.” Alad’s grumble barely hid the lust swimming under his voice. He grabbed a small bottle of oil from the bench. Fetch had brought it with the food earlier.

“If I was a party toy...” plucking the container from Alad’s fingers, Hirah licked the line of Alad’s jaw, “...I’d have told you to pay the meat-puppet at the door and be whispering all sorts of lies to make you tip good. Now stop asking questions, battle monkey, and suck my dick like a soldier.”

As he dropped to his knees, Alad teased, “What do I get then?”

“If you’re good?” Hirah slid his hands around the back of Alad’s skull and pushed Alad’s face into his crotch. “I’ll stick it up your ass, bust you hard.” He growled.

Alad mouthed Hirah’s hard prick, teasing it with his tongue. He tasted like drills and heat and sweat. It was the most intense, sexual flavor in the universe. He sucked it down, hard. For a time, Alad lost himself in the feel of Hirah’s cock in his mouth. Cheeks hollowed with the effort, Alad’s whole focus centered on giving Hirah the best blow he could manage.

Hirah laughed and, with the butt of his palm, shoved Alad back. Then, dropping back onto the cushions, Hirah stretched. Tight muscle, dark hair covering his legs, belly and chest, hard lean frame and a nice sized prick leaking anticipation from the tip—Alad couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen something that hot. Hirah stroked his dick a few times. He flipped the cap on the lube and drizzled it over his cock, oiling himself up. “Get your ass up here then, Soldier.”

Alad climbed up onto the bed and straddled Hirah’s body. “Ordering me around?” He grinned as he squatted, his hole brushing the head of Hirah’s dick.

“Yeah. It’s what I’m good at.” It was the only hint of rank either had traded that night.

Weight balanced on the balls of his feet, knees and thighs straining, Alad worked himself down on that long hard cock. The first second Hirah’s cock breached his ass shot pressure through Alad’s frame. He hissed with the thrill of the sharp, short burst of pain. Then Hirah was inside him, filling his senses. Alad eased himself down, feeling the invasion inch by inch. Hirah hissed, “Yeah take that cock.”

Hirah’s dick spread his hole so good. Alad kept rocking until the whole thing was crammed up his ass. “Damn, just damn, that’s good.” Then he rocked around, wiggling with that thick piece of meat deep inside him. He shuddered as heat ripped up his frame. Finally, he got his knees down and his feet back under Hirah’s thighs. Hirah’s hands cupped his ass, lifting him, pulling his butt cheeks apart. Thrusting deep, Hirah slammed up, pounding Alad from below. Hirah’s hands ran along his back, dragging fire through Alad’s skin in their wake. Alad squeezed his own balls and groaned.

Lacing their legs together, Hirah grabbed Alad’s arms and pulled him down. Alad locked his mouth on Hirah’s. He shoved his tongue between Hirah’s lips. Their tongue’s fought in a tight, hard kiss. As Alad explored the inside of Hirah’s mouth, Hirah rolled them.

Hirah kept pounding as they moved, his dick never completely out of Alad’s hole. Alad grunted as he landed on his back. They broke the kiss, and Alad threw his head back, exposing his throat. Hirah licked down until he sucked on the base of Alad’s neck. Then he hooked his arms under Alad’s knees. He pushed and shoved until Alad was nearly bent double. Alad’s ass was up in the air. Hirah drove down, ramming Alad’s hole with that thick prick. “Take it with your tight ass.” Hirah’s words poured another layer of insanity into his bones. Alad threaded his arms through Hirah’s legs, grabbing his knees, urging Hirah to pound. He groaned under the assault on his ass. With the intense pressure from the stretching of his hole, Alad was damn near insensible.

Hirah's face twisted into a tortured mask of ecstasy. He groaned. Wet heat filled Alad's ass. Hirah shuddered as he reared back. Alad's legs slid off his arms and Hirah added a tired laugh. "Hey, Soldier." He ran his thumb up Alad's aching prick. "Still at attention after that." Leaning in, he kissed Alad hard and hot. Then he pulled back. "I can remedy that."

Pushing Alad's knees wide, Hirah moved down, bent over Alad's crotch. His tongue snaked out to lick the tip of Alad's prick. Sparks shot down into Alad's balls. Hirah's hands slid to the back of Alad's thighs. He pushed Alad back again. First he sucked one of Alad's nuts into his mouth, rolled it around with his tongue. Then Hirah licked back to Alad's hole. Strong and demanding, Hirah's tongue worked inside Alad's stretched ass.

"Yeah, suck it out." Alad panted as Hirah ate the cum from his hole. He reached up and grabbed his prick. Frantically, Alad stroked heat into his skin. Every nerve frayed to breaking, Alad groaned. Fire ate him inside and out. Spunk spattered his chest as he shuddered through the shredding of his mind.

When he could think again, Alad found himself lying on the bed. Hirah knelt between his legs, cleaning himself with a rag. He tossed the cloth onto Alad's chest before rolling off the bed.

"You're not going to stay?" Alad grunted as he hauled himself up onto one elbow.

"Hate to fuck and run." Hirah snorted. "I have to get back to base." After grabbing his fatigues from off the floor, Hirah stepped into his pants. "I'd rather bunk with you and go for another round." Pulling his shirt over his head, Hirah added, "But a few stripes for being late is better than a quarter cycle of bread and water for being absent without leave for a whole night."

Yeah, Alad couldn't blame him for the choice. "I understand." He smiled and watched Hirah finish dressing. "If you're around, leave word here. I'll do the same. We can get together again."

Hirah shrugged into his greatcoat. "If I'm around, I will."

13:24hr

Captain Zen Mark Lodi sat at a small folding table with sturdy legs, the kind they called a front-desk, his fingers absently drumming the pitted putty colored surface. The rack stool creaked as he moved. Alad's steps rattled across the grill plate floor. Each tread of his dress boots, with the waffle soles and six buckles jangling as counter-point, reverberated in the space. Otherwise the room filled with oppressive silence. While most of the Mobile Duty Units came prepackaged with Murphy-furniture and rack benches that could be yanked from the floor to create briefing areas, the designers had never spent a day in actual combat. None of the integrated options passed the three Ws: when you needed it, where you needed it, and why you needed it.

Alad reached the invisible two-thirds marker of the room, knelt on the floor as the terms of this meeting dictated and waited to be noticed. Nobody pulled up the benches for this *shudo*. Full formal briefings maybe. Still, most times it was more efficient to have the grunts kneel on the floor. In this negotiation Alad's slashes meant nothing—shell-monkeys ranked higher than an unattached sergeant. Around him, Captain Mark's ranking officers and non-coms all stood against the walls, faces steeled in identical masks of disinterest. Yet, Alad knew, each and every one of them studied him with a critical mixture of disdain, sympathy and curiosity.

A civie, or a greenie, wandering into the room probably wouldn't see it. The participants' carefully scripted attitude of boredom and indifference contradicted by the thick charge of pheromones. If they hadn't actually been expecting him, Alad would never have made it past the door. Every one of them pretended like this was an accident. Down to the nervous as hell corporal who'd bumped Alad in the mess this morning,

stuttering out that Alad might want to wander by Captain Mark's MDO at thirteen-twenty-two.

Alad crossed his arms tight against his chest, pressing the molded armor into his skin, and stoically stared at the grill pattern on tiles, his eyes just up enough that he could study the captain without seeming to. At least the non-skid plating didn't dig into his skin. One of his boys had sewed some padding into the knees of his Combat-Dress uniform. He'd sold off his Mess-Dress to give his crew an extra bump in rations for the cycle.

Not looking at him, rather seeming to study the op pad in his hand, the captain spoke. "Major Shevardnadzde says you're trying to place a crew."

Alad did a quick walk through his memory as he barked out, "Yes, sir." The sharp crack of his own voice startling in contrast to the soft spoken, almost offhanded question. How did he know the Major?

"Why aren't you using a broker?" Mark thumbprinted his signature on some eForm, then used a swipe of his finger across the pad to send it wherever it needed to go. "Trying to discover the leads on your own, get appointments, like being a Sunday morning whore after the war's ended."

"Yes, sir." This time his response echoed far more subdued. Alad pulled in a heavy breath. Funny thing, he'd actually brokered a few deals for some fire-units and tech-teams as he stumped his own unit. So much easier to place a few grunts than fifteen. It hit: he'd placed a damn fine communications specialist with the Major. "They want to break us up. I'd like to keep my squad together if at all possible. Greenest guy I got, got two tours under her belt." At least the commission on those deals stretched the thin non-deployed credit his guys racked up. The military wouldn't let them starve, kept a set of racks for their use. Everything beyond basic necessities cost. Plus there were the bribes and payoffs for information on placements. "But, if it comes down to it, sir, we'll have to disband and I'll try and get my troops good positions." And then hope for the best for himself. Officers, even non-coms,

were hard to place. Commanders wanted guys they'd brought up. Who were loyal to them.

Still positioned with the op-pad up in reading position, Mark seemed lost in his duties, but Alad sensed the captain's gaze slide toward him. That was a good sign. Everyone was supposed to pretend this *shudo* didn't matter, didn't go on. Central HQ supposedly doled out the orders and assignments. After all the forms and red-tape, six cycles would drift by before a requisition even got acknowledged, much less filled. So everyone played at the fiction. Battlefield promotions were common. Alad's own stripes bore stains of the last two sergeants' blood. He'd stood over the body of Sergeant Toyotomi as Warrant Officer Devilaint cut the patch off the dead woman's sleeve and handed it to Alad. Devilaint ordered the men to salute and Alad had stepped into Toyotomi's quarters and possessions.

Mark tapped a display screen in the front-desk. "Says here you served under Ecial Card. Knew him. What happened?"

"Major Card went down on Fortcer, sir. The battalion rotated in a captain named Reykjavik. We got separated from the battalion at Etamond Hych. Started—"

The captain butted in, "Hard to see a guy like you getting separated from the battalion." He snorted. "Investigation says somebody handed you outdated topo-maps and orders two patrols old."

Assuming it as a compliment, Alad responded with a more hesitant, "Thank you, sir." Alad couldn't decide if he should be elated or terrified. Mark had taken the time to search out his records—including the official why Alad's boys found themselves three stadion behind lines looking for sniper nests cleared a patrol before. That meant interest and need. The Wild 48, Mark's boys, dropped down last patrol. Not really even time to form a pissing relationship with the shit-cans. Most of the company would still be working transport comas out of their system. Usually new drops came fully loaded, but not always. "Shit happens, sir." The one ironclad rule of combat, especially when you had a superior officer who couldn't find the latrine without an escort.

“Don’t have to be polite, Sergeant.” He grunted up a laugh. “A patrol later, Reykjavik got his balls handed to him at Hell’s Ass. You should count yourself lucky to have gotten your men out. Fate can be a rotten mistress, but sometimes she does fuck you nice and sweet.” Picking up a cup of steaming synthetic coffee, Captain Mark stared off and beyond the little prefab officer unit. “You know Mira Constantine?”

“Yes, sir. Lieutenant Constantine was my direct CO.”

“Probably never told you, didn’t like to throw it around, but she was Mortaki Brilliant’s granddaughter.” Alad sucked in his breath. He’d served under the granddaughter of the commander of the Rahtyern Cross Army. “Reykjavik got her killed. I’d say I was sorry for his ass, but he got fragged on the pull out. Scuttlebutt says some of your own might know a little more than they should about those shells.”

“I wouldn’t know, sir. I wasn’t there.” He’d humped his unit for half a cycle around the edges of that battle until he convinced a transport pilot to pull them off that hell hole. Then the man dumped them in the shit pit.

“I know.” The captain set the coffee down and whisked his fingers over the view pad, perusing through info. “Well Dale seemed somewhat impressed with you.”

“I’m honored, sir, that he thinks so.”

“You should be, son.” Captain Mark swiveled on his stool and stared hard at Alad. He could feel the man’s eyes crawling over him. “Major Shevardnadzde has a rod up his butt the size of the Three Sisters Galaxy. Son-of-a-bitch shits in cadence. Did three tours with Dale during the Makorya-Nail offensive. If he’s somewhat impressed, the rest of us idiots would probably be fucking floored. So here’s the deal.” Captain Mark stood and stepped away from the desk. Alad, sensing favor falling upon him, jumped to his feet. He fell into parade rest—feet slightly apart, arms crossed behind his back, resting on the tail of his segmented spine armor—and waited. “You lucked out. I was supposed to get two new units at Aorangi Station. Only one made it. Ran into Dale at the executive reading room yesterday while I was taking a piss. He and I swapped the latest

and greatest. Haven't even had time to get my feet under me and call in the brokers. You lucked the fuck out."

Alad took a deep breath and filled the pause with a, "Yes, sir."

Captain Mark nodded perfunctorily. "So I got this Lieutenant Gahage, his troops call him Preacher Man. He's strict, he's good, he'll work the shit out of you and your crew. Comes offa Krtayurga in the Edutita Nebula. One of the Ubdhata." He smirked, "Ring any bells?"

His new captain, with that smirk, hadn't expected the information to mean anything to him. "No, sir." Apparently, since it rated high enough to mention it, that meant Alad needed to find a little time to get acquainted with a Quadrants, Customs and Procedures text about the Edutita Nebula.

"Well, we did the draw and he lost. His troops, most all the seasoned staff rotated into vacancies. Left him with the new crew full of wet behind the ears idiots and maybe a couple of veterans. So right now he probably hates your ass for no good reason, and you're his. Lieutenant Winestadt here," a hard bitten, lean woman with the bars of a second lieutenant and the sharp edge of a combat veteran stepped away from the wall, "will show you where your men will rack for now. I got Preacher Man out stumping cumshaw routes on *shudo* that disappeared on the transport." The captain's broad, evil smile indicated that it was probably punishment for back-sass. "We'll do the paperwork tomorrow and act like everything's approved." His face drifting into a softer smile, Captain Mark barked out, "Dismissed."

The second lieutenant stepped up to Alad's side. "Follow me, Sergeant."

Alad would have thanked the captain, but he'd already been dismissed. Plus the best way to thank the man was to serve him well. Words weren't really needed. Instead, he spun on his heel and followed Winestadt out of the MDO and down two flights of stairs. Drizzle, as usual for the time of day, pissed on him from the sky and seeped under the high molded collar of his combat dress uniform. He'd worn extra layers of thin-skin

under the basic under-uniform and kilt, but with everything damp, he still felt the chill in the air. Unfortunately his greatcoat didn't fit over the combat dress.

They negotiated the maze of prefabs and supply stacks in silence. Once they broke out into more open area, the lieutenant picked up the pace. Winestadt strode across the parade grounds—the highest and driest section of base—with purpose. “Can I give you some advice?” She glanced over her shoulder and smirked. Her sun bleached skin wrinkled up around blue-hazel heterochromatic eyes.

“Certainly, sir.” Everyone of rank equated as sir; male, female, indeterminate levels in-between.

“Don't let them scare you off.” Her voice broke every few words, like it hurt her to talk. Certain weapons chemicals were known to strip vocal cords, a not uncommon scar in long-timers who got saddled with faulty breathing gear. “Preacher Man, he's just strict, expects everybody to carry their weight and then a little bit more. He gives you an order, he just expects it'll get done. Don't expect to be his buddy. Man never yells no matter how lit he is. He can be spitting rocket fuel and be all somber and thoughtful, sounding like he's presiding over a funeral. Don't let that fool you.” She paused and waited for a crew drilling to pass. Then, still talking, continued on to the far side of the grounds. “People who do, they get their asses handed to them on a plate with a side of hurt. You remember that, you'll do all right in his unit.”

“So, sir,” Alad followed her into the warren of Mobil Residence Units, “to what do I owe this little bit of guidance?”

“I got his troops.” The smile the lieutenant added, flashing the bright-white ceramic dental implants across the front of her mouth, made that pronouncement all the more ominous. “You're going to be on the brunt end of his stick for a bit. Figured I could at least give you a little heads up on the low down before you walk into it.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“No problem.” Stopping before a large MRU, she announced. “This is it. Unit 29-44-6.” Other than the

designation stamped above the door, it looked like every other putty-colored rack crate. Rows of them, stacked two high and two wide, stretched in all directions. "You want me to send someone over to collect your troops?"

At least the unit Winestadt directed him to was at the top. He, and his troops, wouldn't have to listen to thirty other beings living above their heads. "If it's all right with you sir, I'd like to go give them the news myself."

"Fine by me." Both of them took the stairs two at a time. Once at the top, Winestadt set the codes, allowing Alad access. "The lieutenant probably won't be back until around late mess, although he didn't come back until way past curfew the other night." She stepped in and the light panels flickered to life. When Alad followed her inside, nothing surprised him, looked like every other MRU on base. "Got himself a couple stripes for that... the Old Man doesn't like his troops taking liberties." They walked between two rows of billets on either side of the unit. The ones on the left looked occupied—military neat and organized, but with photos and small mementos tacked on the personal boards. "Replacement recon is hard, frustrating work. You'll probably be settled in by the time he hits base... at least if you don't want to irritate him any more than he already is." She stopped at the back where an off-center short hall led to a mesh screened weapons locker. Again she entered Alad's access for the locker and then turned to the right and coded him in to the locks for the sergeants' quarters. "There you go."

Alad sucked in a deep breath of re-circulated air that carried the taint of too many bodies in too small a space. "Thank you, sir." Smelled like home.

"Go get your troops, Sergeant. Welcome aboard the Wild 48." She headed back to the front hatch where she paused and turned. Winestadt thumped her left fist against the center of her chest plate. Alad immediately returned the salute, although he held his as required. Normally, he'd be expected to signal first, but this was more of a formal welcome on the lieutenant's part. "The captain will do a full-unit briefing sometime tomorrow. I'll send a runner after mess with the details."

Before he headed out to collect his unit, Alad spent a few clicks across the clock insuring that his own access codes worked and programming in those of his troops. Then he headed out to deliver the good news. First he detoured by his old bunk, changed into standard fatigues and packed his rack while fielding congratulations from his former bunkmates. Repeated promises to make it back for the regular game of *As Nas*—especially since the last time he'd played, his five soldier cards beat out three other hands of mixed sets of higher ranks and they wanted a chance to win their chits back—was the only thing that got him out of the building.

Since Alad had sensed his unit getting a little combat soft from sitting on their tank ends, he'd slated for confidence courses that afternoon. He found them out on the Furnace scaling a slick-wall by using each other as a soldier on soldier ladder. Soldier Kelien had just reached the top when Alad jogged up and relieved the unattached sergeant who'd taken his unit out on a favor while the loose-troops had fire practice. Alad slipped the Enhanced Reality Shield over his eyes and watched as the bottom soldier, Oskaga, scrambled up the bodies of her comrades. As he focused on each one, the stats for heart rate, respiration and energy output layered itself over his view of the soldier. Yep, they were getting soft. Their basic bio-stats were an *etch* out of line from base norms. When Kelien, as rear man, came down the rope on the aft end of the wall, Alad spoke the command to send a cease and return tone to his troops.

Although he wanted to yank them, let them writhe for a while in not knowing, Alad couldn't maintain. By the time his squad made it to his station, Alad was grinning bigger than a soldier who'd gotten a ten day leave. The whoops and hollers told him they all figured it out. He let them have it for a while and gave them the basic run down. Then he called them to order, double-timed them back to their quarters and got the troops racking and packing their gear.

The MRU was still empty when his unit rolled in. Maybe the other half of the lieutenant's team was out on an all-day, full-pack walk in the park; one of those sergeant tricks for

working the drugs out of newly dropped down soldiers' systems. Once his troops' basic gear'd been stowed Alad sent them off to the showers and mess. Sometime during their meal the other unit came back and vanished again. Alad sensed it in the slight disturbance of blankets on bunks and rearranged boots when he returned from his last solitary chow down. From here on out, he'd be sharing a table with the rest of Captain Mark's non-coms.

18:32hr

Alad sat on his rack stool, what few possessions he kept already stowed in the lockers and cubbies assigned to him. His workstation fit into the corner between side wall and the forward locker. Behind him his bunkmate's desk faced that same side wall, so they could work in relative privacy. A day bench sat atop built in cabinets for storage and ran from just short of three paces back from the door along the far wall to the rear locker. Two offset bunks locked into the ceiling panels meant Alad had as much room as ever in one of these crated non-com racks. With the bunks pulled down, his head would barely fit between.

Still, given everything, his quarters rated as fairly spacious. His previous digs, for the unassigned officers, were four racks deep since they didn't need to provide office space. Right outside the hatch, Alad could hear his corporal checking his squad's personal arms into the weapons locker inventory.

Alad rolled his neck and rubbed his eyes with the tips of his fingers. Ambient light from the luminal panels never rated enough candles to work by, and Alad sold off his desk lamp for upgraded meds for one of his troops right after the last cluster-fucked battle. Maybe in a few pay cycles, after his debt load dropped, he'd scrounge up another. The info-assist data pages flickered on his inset monitor. Alad, based on the captain's cues, scrolled through data texts on his new commanding officer's home world. 'Course every time he blinked the cursor reset to some random point—it'd take the terminal a while to adjust to him. Somehow he managed to read:

Krtayurga is one of three hundred TSHS planets in the Edutita Nebula. While habitable without terraformation, it is considered one of the most

brutal environments in the Nova Sea Quadrant. Only a handful of landmasses, throughout the equatorial belt, can be said to be at all livable. Those are scattered and isolated by geographic features. It is theorized by scholars that these natural barriers to offworld communication have aided the Krtayurga people, who identify themselves simply as The Children, to maintain a ridged and homogenous culture.

The social structure is caste based and hierarchical in nature. Because of their secretive nature, little is truly known about The Children and their cultural evolution over the past four hundred years. Foreigners are restricted to the two port cities—Taratos and Uffren—and walled districts within those. Only those considered most upright among The Children are allowed contact with outsiders. All such contacts are conducted within the formats and structures of the Red Book of Justice, the only portion of their religious texts accessible to outsiders. Further Reading: Wisteria, Joh *Religious Settlement and Cult Behavior*, Mador Mahahou Shmemart *Twenty-Nine Pillars of Understanding and the Rise of Harousam* and *The Red Book of Justice*.

Alad tapped the sense pad embedded in the desk and clicked through to the first intext link. That gave him all of a half a paragraph in a chapter entitled “Other Known Cult Settlements,” and added nothing to the sparse information he already read. Shmemart’s contribution ended up being an eighteen volume treatise on the Harousam movement of the first century after conquest. No way did Alad have the time to sift through that. Maybe there was a condensed version of the

text out there somewhere. Alad was about to spin through a search when the hatch opened.

Alad stood and stepped away from his desk so that he wasn't hidden behind the corner. "Sergeant Alad Deming." Barking out his name as a greeting, Alad folded his hands so that they rested loose, just above his tailbone; the proper way to greet a relative equal in rank in less than formal circumstances.

A woman, scarred face darkened by an inherited exposure to high ultraviolet light, stopped just inside the door and mimicked the informal rest of Alad. "Sergeant Ninda." She smiled in a way that let Alad know she'd be perfectly comfortable ripping his throat out with her small, white teeth. "Proud to be serving with you." Layers and layers of muscle rippled under her uniform.

"As well." So this was his bunkmate. One of the few longtimers left in Lieutenant Gahage's troops. A round face with high cheeks and narrow nose didn't line up with any specific strain that might give him a bead on where she came from and what interaction landmines stood to be trod upon. Although military culture carried its own customs and regulations, the nuances of several thousand planetary systems could skew any social interaction. That often meant blunt questions were tolerated at initial meetings where they might otherwise be considered inappropriate. Since Ninda only offered one honorific with her rank, Alad asked, "So is Ninda a familiar or formal name?"

"Only." She snorted and that feral grin widened. "But shouting my cultural and planetary designation got old fast for my training officers. So Ninda it is." With a nod, she dropped the ridged stance, pushed past Alad to lie on the day bench. "Found your rack okay?" Likely, Ninda asked the obvious to open up conversation, but steer it away from personal questions.

"Thank you, yes." Alad sat back on his stool and waved toward the back closet. "Stowed my gear." Then he picked up a half eaten sweetbar. He'd found it propped on his desk with his takepad and two memory sticks pre-loaded with rosters,

assignments and duty sheets for the coming cycle. “Thanks for the welcome gift.”

“Little something to welcome you aboard.” Ninda brushed it off with her tone. “That’s the best you’re going to get, ‘cause Preacher Man, he’s been lit and on re-entry for a few days now.”

A rampaging officer, the perfect way to start a tour, Alad shrugged. “I got food. I got a rack for my troops.” Shaking his head, he gave into fate. “I’ll try not to get ashed in the wake.” He hadn’t caused the problem, but since shit rolled down hill, Alad knew he’d bear the brunt of the lieutenant’s ire for a time.

Ninda pointed toward the terminal and text still visible on the screen. “What you looking at?”

Alad glanced back at his screen and shook his head in resignation. “Nothing much.”

“Doing your homework on your new lieutenant, maybe?” A little respect lurked under her tease. Anyone who gathered intelligence on a new officer wouldn’t likely be the type to rush into a drill blind or laze about duties. That meant he could be trusted. It could also mean Alad was a suck-up. But an informed suck-up wouldn’t get you killed where a lazy dumbass might.

“Like I said,” he grouched, “nothing much.”

“Started with the whole cultures and quadrants mess?”

“Yeah.” He sighed.

“Wrong.” Ninda sat up and laughed. “Found out about the Red Book of Justice?” When he nodded, she flashed her predatory grin again. “‘Cause you’re new and you’re about to get pounded for no reason but Preacher Man drew the short straw on assignments.” Ninda touched the panel screen on the wall beside her. It cycled to life. Quick movements of her fingers brought up the text on Alad’s monitor. Since it wasn’t personal, he hadn’t put a lock code on the search. Quickly, Ninda flipped it back to the previous text then flicked her finger over the link to the Red Book of Justice. “Find version ‘Allreads Annotated,’ in-text search, parameters: Ubdhata, caste

system, outsiders, find-all within twenty words.” She ordered the computer before instructing Alad, “Ignore the first two links and go to the third.”

Both monitors mirrored the same text. He peered at his since it was closer. “It’s an annotation.”

“Well you can spend the next cycle wading through all the rot with ‘thees and mees and what you can or cannot eat while you’re standing on your head wearing feathers while the moons are full,’ or you can read that,” Ninda banged the wall next to the screen with her knuckle, “and owe me a favor later.”

Alad hoped it wouldn’t be a major favor. He didn’t have enough chits collected in this unit to be able to honor or pawn off most. It meant if Ninda called it due soon, he and his boys could end up doing her troops’ work on top of their own. Blowing out a breath of hope he read.

The Archimandrite Caste of Udbhata consists of warrior priests and makes up the highest levels of the theocracy of Krtayurga. This most influential segment of society is the only one of the fifteen estates to which members need not be born. Although those descended of any caste of the Children, who show special merit or ability may be taken into training, hereditary Udbhata, known as Abdal or Sidesmen, are the only members who are considered pure enough to resist the temptations of offworld and allowed to interact with those in the port cities. This sacerdotal privilege provides them with immense wealth, power and influence. Primacy candidates may only be chosen from among the Abdal.

Well, he understood about half of that, but at least Alad had some inkling of what his captain intimated. “Udbhata, huh?”

“Bow down, bow down,” Ninda drawled, “before the big black boots of your deity of choice.”

“Was he one of the bright and shiny?” Privilege: Alad guessed that’s what Captain Mark meant by Lieutenant Gahage being one of the Udbhata. Of course wealth, power and influence usually meant those living lives far removed from the Grand Army. Something had to go down like a badly planned missile strike for someone raised in those circumstances to wind up as a combat monkey. “And how did the lieutenant end up in the service?”

She screwed up her face in a quizzical sneer and snorted, “From what I’ve been able figure out, he wasn’t just bright and shiny, he was fucking glowing.” Then Ninda shrugged. “Never had the balls to ask what the hell happened to throw him into the meat grinder, though.”

Alad was about to add something when the call of, “On Deck!” reverberated through the MRU.

Given the timing and the place, Alad guessed he was about to meet his new lieutenant. He and Ninda bolted out of their quarters. Alad scrambled through the hatch and spun left out of the short hall. Slamming his feet into parade rest, Alad rammed his fists into the small of his back.

Down the center of the MRU strode a lieutenant. He shed his greatcoat as he walked, throwing it at the soldier following in his wake. He reached the middle of the room and stopped. Slowly, he surveyed Alad’s unit, the soldiers standing at attention at the foot of their bunks. That sharp face and snowbound eyes, Alad cringed inside.

“*Nro Pisk!* What the frag? I’m out for a few hours... Ninda!” Hirah spun towards his two sergeants. Alad met his eyes. He saw the recognition dawn in the tightening of Hirah’s lips the slight twitch of his cheek. Hirah licked the corner of his mouth—a deliberating, calculating gesture—there was nothing sexual about the move. Still, heat worked up into Alad’s gut.

Addressing Alad from across the room, Hirah growled, “So, you’re who I get saddled with?”

Since Hirah hadn’t directly referred to him and what happened the other night, Alad figured he should keep it under wraps. “Yes, sir. Captain Mark brought me on this morning.”

"I see that." Deliberate and controlled, Hirah walked toward Alad. Like Lieutenant Winestadt warned, nothing in Hirah's outward appearance or the tone of his voice indicated anger. Still, Alad smelled it, the irritation rolling off Hirah's form. "Ninda," Hirah's tone was measured, "why don't you go over our rules with the sergeant's crew. You," he paused next to Alad's shoulder. Without even looking at Alad, he added, "In my office. Now." He stalked off.

Alad glared out at his men. All of them looked confused. Well, he didn't have the time or inclination to straighten them out. Instead, he barked out, "You heard the man!" Then he spun on his heel and fell into step behind the lieutenant.

Ducking through the hatch, Alad stopped a step or maybe two inside. Then he waited. Hirah, Lieutenant Gahage, stood beside his desk with his back to Alad. The lieutenant unfastened the buckles down the left side of his uniform as he turned. Then, shrugging out of the over shirt, Hirah ordered, "Shut the hatch, Sergeant—"

Realizing he'd never introduced himself fully, Alad responded to the prompt, "Sergeant Alad Deming, Lieutenant." Then Alad reached back and hit the button. The hatch slid into place with a thump. Although he'd expected to see Hirah again—more like wished it, wanted it—Alad hadn't envisioned these particular circumstances.

Hirah stared for a time, slowly draping his shiny black uniform shirt, with its silver buckles and trim, over the back of his rack stool, drumming his fingers on the surface of the desk, but not saying anything. Silently, Alad met his gaze. Deep gray fatigues, high black boots and the gray tight undershirt stretched across Hirah's muscled chest all hit Alad right in his balls. And he knew he shouldn't be thinking about Hirah, his new officer, like that.

Finally, Hirah drew himself up and crossed his arms behind his back. "Despite what happened the other night," his voice was soft and more commanding because of it, "You are to expect nothing special from me." Hirah walked up until his nose was almost pressed against Alad's. "You get nothing special. Do I make my self clear?"

Alad swallowed. "I understand completely, sir." Blood rushed south. Why he reacted so strongly, Alad didn't bother to fathom. Maybe it was Hirah's smell. Hair wet from the drizzle outside, leather and fibers from his uniform and full on guy from a day's worth of exertion... the scent damn near shot Alad's boots out from under him. What he did try was to hide his erection by rocking his hips back.

The lieutenant sneered. "Do you?"

"Yes." *Piske*, Hirah had to know he was hard. Loose fatigues couldn't hide it if he just looked down. "I don't expect preferential treatment based on one night." One incredibly hot night. One night Alad would love to repeat. One night that had fed his stroke fantasies for the past couple of days.

"Good." Although he didn't growl, it was as effective as one. "Any questions, Sergeant?"

He should just shut his yap, salute and get the *piske* out. Instead Alad found himself saying, "One, if I may, sir." He was going to dig himself a pit and pull the latrine on top.

"What?"

Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Alad licked his lips then asked, "Permission to speak candidly, sir."

Hirah glared. "Spit it out." Each word got its own emphasis.

"If I left you a note at that place, would you respond?" He sucked in his breath and waited.

Hirah's eyes went wide. "Didn't you just hear me?" He barked it out like he thought Alad had left his senses two systems over.

"Loud and clear, sir."

"Then what are you asking?" Now, pushing forward, Hirah actually growled. "I told you no special privileges." Alad gave ground. "You pull your weight like anyone else."

"I intend to." Still walking backwards, Alad swallowed again. "You won't catch me slacking. But..." The wall bumping his back stopped him.

Once more, Hirah was right up in Alad's face. "But what?" His face was a righteous mask of flamed-up officer. Alad hadn't seen anything that lit his jets that hot in years.

Zip it, salute it and walk the hell out. Alad couldn't convince himself to let it be. Instead, he dropped the more formal stance, let his body move an *etch* closer. "I can serve you other ways, sir." *Xosh*, he was shaking.

"You can serve me other ways?" Pinning Alad with his arms, Hirah braced both hands on the wall behind Alad.

"You were out scoping cumshaw today, right?" Alad rushed the words out. "If I go back to that little dive would there be a note for me?"

A little tremble ran up Hirah's arms. "You're walking a dangerous line here, Sergeant." *Pisk*, he was, but something told him he hadn't landed that far off the mark. Maybe the heat drifting off the man's skin or how Hirah's breath suddenly seemed a little more ragged.

Alad shifted again, pressing his groin against the lieutenant's hip, letting him feel the excitement bundled in Alad's dick. "Answer me truthfully, sir, and if I'm wrong I'll back off." Hirah actually shuddered. He hissed. He glared at Alad with those deep cold eyes. What he didn't do was back away. Bolder, Alad hissed, "But it ain't like it's against the rules. I think someone once told me, 'live like you may die 'cause they can only kill you one time.'" Then, almost afraid to move, Alad waited. He was about to get flamed or fucked, and he really hoped for the latter.

Every muscle in Hirah's body tensed. He leaned in, putting his mouth right up near Alad's ear, Hirah mocked, "It's live on the edge 'cause you can only die once, ass-head."

Alad shuddered and felt the involuntary movement echoed in Hirah's frame. Hirah pulled back. His chest heaved with rapid breaths. When he spoke it was through lips compressed into a thin tight line. "Little piece of advice, Sergeant, if you're going to throw my words back in my face... get 'em right."

Taking a chance, Alad ran his knuckles down Hirah's sternum. "Does that work?"

“*Nvo Pisk*, you talk too much,” Hirah growled, “shut up.” Then Hirah clamped his mouth over Alad’s. The weight of his body pinned Alad against the wall. Grinding and humping, four layers of uniform and shorts between their cocks. Alad groaned. Thrusting back, he managed to get his hands around Hirah’s body, grabbed that tight ass, and pulled him hard against his crotch.

Hot, desperate kisses welded Alad to the wall. He could barely even breathe under the assault. Hirah’s thick, stiff cock blanketed in a camouflage prison pressed like a cannon into Alad’s thigh. Alad could feel every *etch* where it ran along Hirah’s leg. Alad writhed against him. Their mouths devoured each other. Hirah sucked on Alad’s tongue like he was giving him head.

Alad’s prick throbbed so hard it felt like it might split his skin. He shifted just right and felt the head of Hirah’s prick dig into his groin. Hirah groaned and humped harder. Almost desperate, trying for more contact, Alad thrust back against him. It was as if he didn’t even have control over his hips.

Hirah’s hand wrapped around the back of Alad’s skull and pulled him deeper into their frenzied kiss, like he was trying to swallow Alad’s soul. The fingers of Hirah’s other hand dug into the side of Alad’s face. Alad could feel the rough skin where it had healed over the missing joints. Alad tugged the t-shirt out of Hirah’s fatigues. Desperate for skin, he shoved his hands up under Hirah’s shirt. A thin set of not-quite-healed welts marked the flesh of Hirah’s back. Alad traced them with his fingertips and Hirah shuddered and moaned into his mouth.

Hirah shoved his knee between Alad’s legs. Insane pressure from being crammed between his own body and Hirah’s leg tore like a spinner round through Alad’s senses. Insane amounts of friction, heat and desire shoved Alad over the edge. He arched his back, pelvis jack-hammering against Hirah and groaned out, “Fuck!” as he exploded.

Hirah kept thrusting against Alad. Alad maintained just enough sense to slide his grip back down across Hirah’s ass, grab his cheeks and pull him hard into his body. He matched

Hirah's rhythm with a vengeance. Hirah grunted. He jerked. Alad held on tight as Hirah shuddered, groaned and blew.

Hirah pulled away and wiped the sweat off his forehead. As he glared at Alad, he licked his lips. Alad wondered if he had as obvious of a wet spot on the front of his fatigues, and then realized he probably did. Hirah snorted, "Okay, Alad, we get one thing out on the line. In here you can consider this part of your service. Otherwise, I'm your lieutenant. You ever let this," he pointed at his boots and then at the wall between his bunk and the soldiers' rack, "interfere with that, I will make you wish you had never been born. Understood?"

"It didn't even need to be said, Hirah, sir."

"Good." Hirah palmed his face. This time the snort came out as amused. "Go get cleaned up." He waved toward the hatch. "Try not to let Ninda see you with spunk soaking the front of your uniform. We'll never hear the end of it if she does."

04:28hr

Alad woke smelling guy. Actually one guy, right up in his face. A deep breath drew in scents of the previous night's horizontal calisthenics. He yawned and felt a soft prick slide against his cheek. That rated opening his eyes. Oh yeah, right there, Hirah's cock lay soft against Hirah's furry thigh. Of course, *pisk*, how did he end up crammed down at the bottom of the bunk? These racks weren't made with his bulk in mind. At least his bulk plus a lean lieutenant.

With a quick glance, Alad checked the chrono panel. He had about twenty clicks before he and Ninda sprang their little surprise on the troops. Just enough time for a real reveille. Alad blew across Hirah's prick. Hirah mumbled something and shifted.

Alad moved in closer, sucked that soft, warm skin into his mouth. He heard Hirah grunt and felt his leg go tense. Alad kept sucking. Nothing equaled feeling Hirah's prick swelling between his lips. Hirah's hands ran over his skull, pushing him down. Alad took him deep, licking and sucking the meat in his mouth, until Hirah's cock was at attention.

"*Seppel*!" Hips bucking into the kiss, Hirah groaned out, "Swing that aft end over here. That's an order."

No way would he ignore a direct order—especially not one that promised what Hirah's did. Still swallowing Hirah's prick, Alad got up on his hands and knees. Hirah tugged on his legs as Alad shuffled over. Then it was Alad's turn to moan as Hirah sucked Alad's aching prick into his mouth. They worked each other hard, almost like it was a race to see who could make who blow first. The back of Alad's thighs frosted over with chills.

Hirah broke off a moment. Alad groaned again when a spit slick thumb pressed against his hole. He shuddered under the dual sensation of getting finger fucked while Hirah nuzzled his balls.

Alad sucked harder. He reveled in the feel of Hirah's prick sliding over his tongue. The musky taste rated higher than any wakeup juice on the market. Heat built in his gut as Hirah pumped his ass and started sucking on his cock again. The whole thing melded together into one massive ball of pleasure sparking through him. It didn't take long, not that early in the morning. Alad shook. He pulled off Hirah's prick and groaned. Hirah swallowed him as Alad's balls let loose.

A few quick breaths and Alad recovered his wits. He sucked Hirah down with determination. Bracing himself of his elbows, with one hand Alad massaged Hirah's sac. The other matched the pace of his mouth along Hirah's thick cock. Arching his back, Hirah jerked off the mattress. He hissed out, "Fuck!" as cum boiled out of his cock. Alad gagged for a second and then caught his breath. He swallowed all that thick, bitter spunk.

Panting, Alad dropped onto his side and then rolled onto his back. Give him that kind of wakeup juice every morning and Alad'd die happy. 'Course, he couldn't stay there and revel. Alad looked over at the chrono again. Three clicks before Ninda came looking for his ass. Alad grunted and sat up. Yawning, he ran one hand over the fuzz carpeting his scalp. That he followed with a spine popping stretch.

As he swung out of the bunk, Hirah slapped his ass and asked, "What's the roster for the morning look like?"

Alad scrounged for his gray short-sleeved tee and light-weight fatigues. He'd stashed a set in Hirah's quarters the night before. "Ninda and I—" He found the fatigues first, stepped into them and yanked the pants up over his ass before continuing. "Scheduled a physical training endurance-formation run."

"Sounds like a walk in the park." Hirah swung his legs over the bunk and rolled his neck. "Time to rattle and wake 'em?"

As he jerked the shirt over his head, Alad asked, “You’re coming?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.” Hirah slapped Alad’s thigh and then hit the button popping his rack back up into the ceiling recess. “Need to keep fit.”

Leaving Hirah to dress, Alad grabbed his boots and stepped through the hatch into the small hall. Ninda stood, fully dressed and waiting. She scrunched her brows together and rolled her eyes—Alad barely made out the chiding expression under the dull orange glow of the safety light. Alad hunkered down, tugged his socks on and stepped into his combat boots, zipping the side closure of the ergo-soled breathable light boots up as he muttered, “Morning, Ninda.”

“Sleep good in that big bed?” The sickly sweet tone of her voice taunted him more than the words.

“Yes.” He didn’t rise to the jibe. “And you?”

“Like a babe in my *vam*’s arms not having to listen to that blaster-rattle snore of yours.”

Alad stood and snorted. “Love you too.”

“I’m just waiting for the point where you go swear the whole blood oath thing.”

Ninda referred to the ancient allegiance vows from the conquest eras. Soldiers didn’t join the army, they hooked up with an officer and served whoever the officer chose to follow. “You’ve been sucking rocket fuel.” He growled.

“I can see it.” She smirked. “One of the personal loyalty vows—you pledging your life to him forever. Like all those dead guys the Army calls heroes. Soldiers defending their commander to the last bullet. Staggering back to base carrying their officer only to fall down dead themselves.”

“That’s hard-core old school Army.” The loyalty oaths and those who made them were still revered as the Army’s pinnacle of service to the cause. “Nobody does that *shudo* any more.” Alad had never met anyone who’d sworn such an oath. *Pisk*, he’d never met anyone who’d ever met anyone who’d sworn such an oath.

“Well you just warn me if you decide to go there.”

“Not in this lifetime.” Holding his thumb up to the light control, he asked, “Ready?” When Ninda nodded, he flipped on the illumination at full candle. “On your feet!” Alad barked, charging down the row of bunks banging on the supports.

“Get those eyes open!” Ninda mirrored his moves on the opposite row. “You ain’t civilians. The army doesn’t get to sleep in!”

Chaos erupted as soldiers threw off blankets and bolted out of their racks. Alad kept taunting at full volume, “If we ain’t back by morning mess, you wastes of space don’t get breakfast!”

Troops threw on shirts, light fatigues and boots as Ninda added her shout, “Come on you idiots! Retired vets move faster!”

They drove the squad out into the pre-dawn fog with yells of, “Move it! Move it! Move it!” and herded them into loose formation in front of the MRU. Corporal Mace, from Alad’s squad, unfurled the unit’s banner as he scrambled to his position to the extreme left of the first row. As Alad and Ninda took up their positions facing the shivering unit, Alad nodded to the division’s Pace Keeper. He leaned against the side of the MRU, with his mated pair of Mawas on their double tongue leads at his feet. The lanky, brindled beasts nuzzled and groomed each other by combing sharp incisors through spiky coats. Their black, shiny ears rotated to catch every sound.

Hirah exited the hatch, clothed in the same fatigues, tee and combat boots as his troops, and went through a quick inspection. Alad used the time to adjust the stripped down ERS headset so it wouldn’t shake loose as he ran. Hirah signaled that the troops passed a basic muster and Alad barked, “Move out!” letting Mace set the pace for the start.

The squad fell into three rows, a pace or two behind him. Alad took the left flank observation position and Ninda moved to the right. As per tradition, the lieutenant would fall somewhere into the rear left flanking position on par with the Pace Keeper, who ran just to the rear of the unit. So long as

the unit kept tempo they wouldn't overrun the bloody hand banner of the Wild 48 or fall back and be mauled by the pair of salivating mustelids barely held in check by their handler.

The chill air sparkled with their breaths. The thud of their boots on damp turf, the huff of air going in and coming out of their lungs, the rattle of the Mawas' chains from behind and clink of the rings holding the troops banner on the bearer's staff in front were held heavy and close by the fog. Not even the jungle stirred in the quiet dead time just short of dawn.

Two stadion into the run and they made the outskirts of the base in good order. Up ahead, the sentencing grounds would give them a chance to up the pace. Especially since the Mawas at the rear began to lunge at their restraints the moment they scented carrion. Gray mist swirled about them.

Alad barked, "Keep it paced," to his corporal, the lead on this run. The point of this early morning outing was to remind the troops how to run in formation, and for Ninda's lot to learn how to match Alad's.

Vacant eyed corpses glared from the poles as the troops ran past. Their hands strung to the side and feet lashed to the pole, rotting flesh and tattered clothes fluttering in the dark and the wind formed the wings of the rising Bennu. The embodiment of the motto of the Grand Army: fire to ash to flesh reborn. The oldest carcass, a mere heap of bones at the base of the banner pole, hardly kept the image. Even the rapist, strung up four cycles back from what scuttlebutt said, well, the scavengers and time had pretty much picked him down to a skeleton.

The unit always got a little somber at this part of the run. *Pisk*, Ninda's crew seemed downright terrified, could scarcely keep up the pace for all the sightseeing. Too bad there wasn't an execution scheduled any time soon... good way to put the fear of law, order and the supreme justice of a military tribunal into a greenie's soft tissues. Like any good non-com Alad knew that the key to discipline was making your soldiers fear their superiors more than they feared the enemy.

A chittering snarl and then a more human yelp sounded from the rear. Alad looked right and back. The light duty ERS

fed the soldier's data overlaid on Alad's view. Actually, if it wasn't for the tactical screen projected onto his retina, Alad would barely have been able to make the man out in the darkness. No acute distress seemed evident. Alad yelled out, "Keep formation!" at almost the same moment as Ninda's voice echoed a similar sentiment from the other side of the formation.

They worked fairly well together. Especially since it hadn't quite been a full pay cycle. Behind him, out of his vision and in the rear observation position, ran Lieutenant Gahage. Alad really respected an officer who went out with his troops for PT, especially at bum-fuck before sunrise. Not every time, Hirah had duties to attend to. Still, often enough to be a part of the unit, understand how it moved and thought, who was strong and who needed a bit of motivation to pull their weight.

"Sergeant," Alad decided to poke the squads' pride a bit. "What the frag are they sending into combat these days? I got troops missing kneecaps that can keep pace better."

"Can't be any worse than those lazy tanks of yours who've been idling their engines too long." She shot back through the deep blue morning haze. "Getting all soft living on base."

"I'll take my tanks to your wet behind the ears unit. We could give you a head start and still make it back to the MRU before your flame-outs."

"I think I'm hearing a challenge there, Sergeant!"

"What challenge? My unit'd blow yours off the map without even—" The com beep in his ear cut off the rest of the taunt. "Sergeant Deming!" He barked out his rank and name, acknowledging and answering.

"Good morning, Sergeant." The sound of his captain's voice nearly tripped Alad up. Why was he contacting him and not the lieutenant? "Where are you?"

"Sir." Well, he had to know they were out on a PT run, the rosters would tell him that, he must mean at what point on their route. "Just passing the sentencing grounds, sir."

"Well, I need you to come on in to my office."

“Yes, sir.” *Pisk*, what the frag did the captain need to see him about? “I’ll be there as soon as we come in.”

“Ninda can handle the troops. I see she’s there with you?”

“Yes, sir, she and the lieutenant.”

Alad’s com clicked off and he heard Hirah snap, “Lieutenant Gahage.” A couple of clicks went off the clock then Hirah shouted, “Deming!”

Spinning to face Hirah, Alad managed to keep pace running backwards and still respond, “Sir!” When Alad focused on the lieutenant, Hirah’s stats came up into his vision.

Hirah’s arm, outlined in a virtual ghosting of green-blue light, shot out as he pointed toward the general location of the officers’ quarters. “Captain wants you now.” Picking up his speed, Hirah moved into Alad’s position, effectively emphasizing his not-quite order.

Alad dropped the pace, falling back and away from his troops as they pulled ahead. Drawing in a couple of deep breaths, he put his hands on his hips and walked a few paces. Enough time for the cold to grip all the sweat held close to his skin by his t-shirt and light fatigues. A damp chill seeped up through the soles of his combat boots. If they’d been out for speed, he and Ninda would have had the unit in trainers. An endurance-formation run, well, the hostiles didn’t pause to let you switch footwear. He huffed with a mixture of dread and anticipation then, taking the short cut, jogged across the sentencing grounds toward the main base.

06:43hr

During the time it took to cross the base, Alad debated showering and changing. After mulling it over a few times he abandoned the courtesy. If it was important enough for the captain to call him off PT supervision, he shouldn't waste the time. He threaded through the maze of prefabs until he reached the block of offices where Captain Mark resided, and then took the stairs two at a time. The exterior hatch opened onto a vacant and quiet briefing room. Alad, still sweating from the run, walked across the space toward the back left corner where the hatch for the captain's office was.

Fighting off a bout of nerves, Alad rapped on the frame for the open hatch. "Sergeant Deming." He announced, still having no idea why he'd been summoned into his commanding officer's presence. The meeting *request* didn't come through channels like the officer of the day or an enlisted runner assigned to message duty. The personal com was so out of the ordinary that Alad had damn near shit his shorts.

When the voice inside responded, "Come," Alad started to quake all over again. Like his cherry combat run, the first summoning into his commanding officer's presence shot ice down his spine. What had he done that rated bad enough not to let the lieutenant deal with it? Maybe the whole thing with the MPs back before he landed the post. He hadn't heard a thing about the fight, but maybe they figured out who he was. And he'd kept his boots clean for almost a whole cycle in between then and now.

Alad stepped inside the small office. Actually the captain's office was bigger than the quarters he shared with Sergeant Ninda. The same modular construction, just configured different. The captain sat at a full-sized desk. Information scrolling over various monitors cast strange patterns of shadow

over his face. Behind him, another hatch opened onto his tidy personal quarters.

"You wanted to see me, sir." Alad managed to get the words out without showing how scared he was.

Captain Mark smiled. "I did, son." At the press of a button on the captain's console, the hatch slid shut behind Alad. Didn't help Alad's nerves at all. He beckoned Alad closer and pointed to one of the rack stools. "Come on in. Have a seat."

Well, even with the hatch closed, it didn't seem like an ass-chewing session in the making. Most officers Alad served under made him stand through those. "Thank you, sir." He eased into the room and settled on the nearest stool.

"Coffee?" Pointing toward a niche in the wall with cups and a dispensing nozzle, Mark added, "Ain't real, but it'll do in a pinch."

"No thank you, sir." Even synthetic coffee on his pitching stomach would just make last night's meal come up.

Mark nodded then leaned forward, propped his elbows on his desk, laced his hands together and braced his chin on them. "Tell me, Sarge," He smiled, "how are you and your troops liking things in the Wild 48."

"Fine, sir." This must be a little getting to know you session. Most of the other non-coms in the Wild 48 Captain Mark would have brought up through the ranks. Maybe Mark didn't like the run around search and decided to page him. Really, more efficient that way, but most officers just fell into habit of using staff instead of technology, giving the grunts a purpose on base. If they were just headed for a basic welcome-home jaw, then five or so clicks off the clock and they'd have done face time. The captain could feel good about himself and Alad could move on to shit that needed doing. Still, Alad couldn't shake the feeling that it was something more than that... given how he'd been summoned.

"You can drop the 'sir' right now. We ain't on a review here. I sometimes like to talk a little with the people under me." Mark reached out for his own coffee. "Get a sense of where they're at and what's going on." Like he needed a bit of

time to think, he studied the liquid swirling inside before taking a swig. "Seems like you," Mark used the aft end of the cup to point in Alad's general direction, "and Ninda work okay."

"I'd say so, sir." Alad grimaced when he realized what he'd said and apologized for the slip. "Habit's hard to break."

"Not a bad thing." Mark laughed. Not a big belly laugh, but still Alad started to get the sense that his new captain rated as fairly easy going. The captain rocked back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. "Ninda and I go way back. Good sergeant. I trust her opinion on a lot of things and she seems to think you'll do fine with us. You fit in well."

The praise made Alad sit a little straighter. "That's nice to know, sir." Yeah, Ninda was just another sergeant, but that she'd said something positive and the captain believed her... well that was good. It meant there weren't any major mines between them. Especially as Alad spent more time in the lieutenant's bunk than his own.

Dropping his gaze, Mark stared at the desk top for a moment. Then he snorted and looked straight into Alad's eyes. "Ninda says the lieutenant busts you quite a bit."

Bust him? Yeah, he'd gotten chewed a couple of times. Nothing major though. "Sir, no, sir." Perplexed, Alad shook his head. "Not any more than he gets on anyone." He scratched behind his ear and tried to think what would have ever given the captain that impression. "We're just working out—"

"Son," Mark's voice stopped him. "Don't play stupid."

"Stupid?" Alad blinked. Then it hit him. "Oh. That kinda bust." Heat seeped up the back of his neck. Usually, he wasn't that thick. Alad just hadn't expected that sort of question. Not then, not from his captain, even if he'd been thinking the same thing as his commanding officer not a click before.

The captain chuckled. After a moment he asked. "You get along good with your dad?"

He was fielding missiles out of uncharted quadrants. “Ahh,” Alad stammered, “he got lit when I joined up, but we worked it out.”

“Good, ‘cause I want you to imagine that what I’m gonna say right now ain’t coming from your captain, but more of a father-son thing.” When Alad opened his mouth, Captain Mark held up his hand. “Hear me out, son. I normally don’t care if my troops are getting their rocks off within ranks, not unless it becomes a discipline issue. But I’d much rather have it under my roof, where I can control things, than you all screwing with married civilians and farmers’ spawn.” He leaned in over the desk. “Now I’m a little harder on it when we have a senior-subordinate situation.”

Most all units put up with sex between troops, who else was there on a long haul? But some were stricter than others on fraternization between those unequal in rank. “I see the problem, sir.” It was a chewing session. A rather nice one since Alad hadn’t gotten all the rules of the Wild 48 down yet, but he’d landed in the latrine.

“No, I don’t think you do.” This time the captain’s grin came off pained. “I told you, hear me out. If I had *that* sort of problem, I’d be talking to the lieutenant. My theory is, if there’s an issue you go to the top first ‘cause they should know better. You all seem to be handling it pretty well. Nobody’s asking for favors, even in your squad. Assignments don’t come off as being doled out any way other than they should be. But I’ve got this big worry going on that there may be a different kind of problem.”

“Problem?”

“You know what planet he comes off of?” Mark drummed his fingers on the desk surface. “Ninda said you were looking through things.”

“Yes, sir.” Alad swallowed... hard. “You told me, in not so many words, that I should.”

Captain Mark smirked, probably realizing he had sent Alad off on that chase. “One of the things that those books don’t tell you is about the treaty we have with the Krtayurga Primacy.

They don't let their people leave the home world. Ever. See, though, the military, we won't protect any planet that won't allow us to recruit and that poses an interesting little problem. Know what the solution is?"

"No, sir." This was way higher in Policy than Alad ever had to think.

"The only way we get to recruit is from those they don't want." Mark laced his fingers together then bowed his arms out in front of him, causing all the joints to pop. "Now," he settled his elbows back on the desk top, "from what little I understand, there's about five hundred ways to get yourself sentenced to death on Krtayurga. They range from borrowing your neighbor's transport during harvest without permission, to killing people. If someone gets condemned and manages to make it to one of the gates of the offworld compounds and asks for asylum, the military gets them."

"What did he do?"

"I don't know, son." The tone said he really didn't, wasn't just flashing sun-spots at Alad. "They didn't tell me that, and I don't even know if they asked when they took him."

"So he asked for asylum?" If it was true then that meant Hirah was a criminal. A lot of military personnel joined up to escape the law. But a death sentence? Although the captain brushed it off, Alad figured the Krtayurga government didn't dole them out like holiday sweets. "He told you?"

"No." Mark frowned as he answered, "He never talks about it, but that's the only way someone born on Krtayurga gets off Krtayurga."

"So he may be a criminal and you think I should know."

"No maybe about it, son." Frag, Mark looked sad, like he really did feel like a dad imparting painful advice. "And normally, son, it's his place to tell you. But Lieutenant Gahage has been with me going on three tours now. I trust him with my men. He's a damn fine soldier. But there is something in that boy that is broke." He tapped the desk twice. For some reason that made the next bit sink in more. "Deep broke. Once or maybe three times I've seen it kinda boil up to the

surface and it was something I'd be scared to have living inside me." Pursing his lips into a thin line, the captain added a small shake of his head. "He got back ahold of himself both times before anything had to come of it. Still..."

The memory of Hirah beating the balls off the Nofre came rushing up. "You're warning me off, sir?" When Alad had pulled him off, that wild look, like Hirah wasn't all there.

"No, son, you're an adult." A sharp nod confirmed the statement. "You've seen enough fire rain down that I don't think you'd be naïve about anything. What I'm saying, like I might to my own son, is be careful." His voice went all soft and concerned. Not what Alad expected out of a captain. "I don't want any of mine hurt, and I don't mean some little broken heart nonsense that's just life. I may not be able to hand you a recon-map, but I can at least warn you that field you're walking into has a few mines. And I don't want them blowing up and taking out half the camp. Understand?"

"I think so, sir."

"Good, son." The screen on the wall near Captain Mark's right shoulder flashed green. Alad knew that meant an incoming low priority message. The captain glanced at the screen before huffing, "Enjoyed our little chat."

"I'll be going then." Alad stood and turned toward the hatch.

"Oh." The offhanded syllable caught Alad up short. He paused and looked over his shoulder. Captain Mark pointed at Alad's back. "Sergeant, don't be holding nothing against Ninda on this. I pay you all to be my eyes and ears with the troops, and if it's something you don't think you can handle I expect you to bring it up to your superior. In this case, she had to jump a step. Carry on." He waved his hand in the air as though he swatted Alad out of the room. "Dismissed."

AALTJE, OBERMAIR SECTOR - QC4, PC9, P3, D21

25:20hr

Sucking, oppressive heat coated the inside of Alad's mouth with grit. It was a bitch just working up spit. Alad plucked at the front of his uniform, trying to create even the most pathetic breeze. The meager draft did nothing to stop the moisture from leeching out his pores.

Another volley of screaming whines shot over their heads. Ninda didn't even stir. Half a click later the heavy thud of deployment echoed back. Alad counted to seven under his breath. Then the pop-whizz of spinners bursting from the round sounded. In the middle of the cacophony a few of the troops caught up with the insides of their eyelids. Ninda, upright on the bench next to him, snored softly. They'd traded dozing as the squad loitered at the float-boat waiting for deployment. Learn to sleep where you can, when you can—the infantry's motto. Alad checked his chrono: twenty-five twenty. In sixty more clicks the day would roll over.

It felt like forever that they'd been stuck here. Roused days ago on orders to prepare for lift. They'd scrambled like ditta mites from a flooded nest trying to put things in order. Armor, weapons, supplies all rounded up in the space of a few hours. Then the company'd sat on their packs on the lift field, playing *As Nas*, smoking whites to stay calm, and waited for something to happen. The order finally came—to put the toys away and go back home. They hadn't even started to unpack before they were out on the field again and loading a transport for a short hop. At least once on the leg they'd been hit with the order to turn around and had that countermanded. Alad wasn't terribly sure if it was only once since he'd caught sleep while he still could. A day and a half sealed in a transport tub with re-

circulated air and nothing to look at but the troops. Windows were a defensive weak point, and through-view screens an expensive luxury the army wouldn't spring for. Alad preferred long transports where they knocked you unconscious and then woke you up when you arrived. Then you didn't have to think about the possibility of getting vaporized mid route without being able to fight back... you just never woke up.

They'd landed. The aft bay hatch dropped and heat as brutal and suffocating as the inside of a combustion engine swelled around them. Offloading took their attention for a while. Then it was back to waiting. Smoke, clean weapons, check and double check packs, clean weapons again. They'd load up on the float boat, get ready and then stand down. Sometime in the middle of it, they'd roused a reasonable facsimile of chow. Halfway through the meal, though, the mission hit go again and they'd scrambled to deployment. Now they waited with nothing more than Humanoid Sustainable Stationary Rations to gnaw on for the past seven hours. Another day in the Grand Army: hours of insufferable boredom randomly laced with half-clicks of un-piloted terror.

Alad pulled a meat-stick from his HSSR. Protein, sugar and starch... usually one of the three was edible in a standard HSSR. If you got lucky, maybe two. One item always had to be unpalatable and indigestible. Alad chewed on the stick for a while. Then he elbowed Ninda in the ribs.

"What?" She growled it out without opening her eyes. "If it ain't an emergency I'm going to kill you."

Standing, stretching, Alad didn't let her gruffness get to him. "I got to take a leak. You're on deck."

This time she cracked an eye. "That's not an emergency." Alad wasn't sure which was more poisonous, her tone or her glare.

"It will be," he chuckled, not at all intimidated by Ninda's attitude, "when I piss all over you."

She gagged then yawned. "Go hit the head." Ninda grabbed her empty hydration canister and, using the short strap, lobbed it at him. Alad caught the HC with one big paw. "Be useful.

Bring me some water when you come back.” As he hooked the HC on his own belt, she added. “A sweetbar would be good.”

Shaking his head, Alad walked away. “I’d have to trade my left gasket for one of those.” He headed toward the quick-set canvas blobs of the mobile headquarters.

She called after him. “You only need one.”

“Be back.” Alad wrapped his fingers into a fist and popped it against his butt; the universal signal for *kiss my ass*.

“Don’t threaten me.” Ninda warned. “I know where you sleep.”

Alad headed across the field toward where the dull silver bubbles of quick set buildings hulked in the darkness. Viewed from above, the Mobile Headquarters’ optical camouflage would blend the humps into the surrounding dirt. If you approached them straight on you could see the lip of the risers under the ragged flaps used to diffuse the aerial profile even more. Plus, Alad *knew* where they were.

First he hit the latrine, then headed over to fill up Ninda’s HC. A few auxiliary troops loitered about. Special ops mostly, but one solider knelt under a static camo tarp surrounded by a cluster of canister totes and lit by a small haze lamp.

“Hey, Starlight.” He greeted the unit’s medic as he approached the MHQ. Long, feminine and pale hands sorted through medical supplies, but her hair was shaved down into the standard army collar-cut. “Ready for the party?”

“If we ever get to party.” Starlight’s voice held the timber and pitch of a young man’s. If the blaster racks on her chest weren’t confusing enough, Alad knew she had both sets of plumbing going on... communal showers and all. Alad wasn’t sure if she was born or made that way. Not that he cared overly much, and his curiosity never pushed him to the point where he felt a need to ask.

The flap door to the MHQ opened, spilling a wan patch of light onto the ground. A man stepped into view briefly, moved through and dropped the flap, settling the world back into darkness. An insta-charge flared at the tip of a smoke. For a

brief second the rosy bit of light showed a profile Alad was used to recognizing in the dark.

“Oh, it’s the nasty man.” Starlight hissed as Lieutenant Gahage turned toward them. She glared at Alad with almond eyes outlined in gold cosmetic. “I don’t even know how you stand to be with that.” Medics could get away with a lot of backsass other soldiers might get stripes for.

Alad wagged his almost non-existent eyebrows and leered. “He packs a hell of a cannon.”

“Eh!” Starlight shuddered. “Well you can have it.” Grabbing a rack of HCs, she undulated to standing and rolled her eyes. “I’m going to go check the troops for hydration.”

“Okay, Starlight.” He touched his left hand to his sternum in a half-ass salute. Then he waited and watched as Hirah sauntered over.

Alad still wasn’t over how he’d gotten from almost three cycles ago to now. Where would they be in a quad? A year? Tattooing each other’s names on their dicks? Alad shook it off, no use thinking about *shudo* until it needed thinking about. Instead he just savored the shadow of Hirah. Tactical armor bulked out his lean frame. A helmet—likely kitted out officer style with micro receivers, re-broadcasters and enhanced reality—dangled from his hand and bounced against Hirah’s leg as he walked.

As Hirah stepped into the thin circle of light cast by Starlight’s abandoned haze lamp, Alad reached up and filched the smoke from Hirah’s lips, settling it between his own. He pulled a deep drag. Immediate and jarring, the adrenaline rush hit. Holding the smoke out and down so he could see it, Alad noticed the two green stripes at the base of the smoke. “Aren’t you supposed to be smoking the whites right now?” Green took you up, white brought you down and blues made you not care that your leg had been shot off. The medics had orders only to pass out whites on base.

“No.” Hirah plucked the smoke out of Alad’s fingers and stuck it back between his lips. “I need the greens to pitch me

up over. Otherwise I can't calm down. Whites, something in them makes me nuts."

"And you convinced Starlight to pass you greens when regs say set out the whites and keep the troops mellow?" Lots of soldiers tried, very few managed, to get that rule bent.

"Well, I had to prove it to her." He snorted, dropped the smoke and crushed the butt end out under his heel. "You know, medical necessity."

"Prove it?"

"Yeah, half a day on whites." Hirah grinned and it was almost scary. "I spiraled in one of those 'rare, but sudden' side effects." Shrugging, he snorted and added. "I tried to tell them. Anyway, broke her arm. Ended up with fifteen stripes and bread and water for two patrols. The review board determined it was the anxiolytics in the whites that did it. I did my penance and all was forgiven."

Thinking back to his short conversation with Starlight, Alad hedged, "I don't think she's forgiven you for that."

"Her?" Hirah burst into laughter. "Not hardly. The Army forgave me, she didn't. Last time I asked for painkillers for a headache, she told me to put my pistol in my mouth and pull the trigger." Holding out his arm, he snapped the inside of his elbow with his middle finger. "Usually takes her twenty or so tries to get a vein when she draws my blood for physicals."

"That's why you never piss off a medic."

"Well, if I take a round, she's a good enough soldier she won't let me die, but I don't expect Starlight to make me comfortable while I'm recovering."

"You know, you could have her up on charges for disrespect?"

"Alad," Hirah shook his head and stared off into the darkness where Starlight had wandered off. "I broke her arm, drugs or no. She has every right to hold a grudge. She's never disobeyed an order." With a short bark of a laugh, he turned his attention back to Alad. "If that's the worst it gets, I'll live with it."

Pulling one of his whites from the pack, Alad stuck it between his lips and crushed the tip to flare the charge. The first pull of smoke settled his heart rate down a notch. The second stripped the edge off waiting for battle. “So how the *pisk* do you relax?”

“Before you came on board?” Hirah grinned. “I stroked off a lot.”

“Can’t do much more than stroke off here.”

Hirah stepped in close to Alad’s body. “True.” The slightly oily scent of the armor mixed with Hirah’s musky sweat and crawled along Alad’s spine, plucking every nerve on the way down. “Wanna?”

Alad shuddered. “What?” He figured he knew, but he wanted Hirah to say it. There was something to having an officer admit the same vices as the enlisted men that stoked Alad’s burners. Plus, when Hirah spoke everything sounded reasonable.

“Stroke off, soldier.” Hirah kicked the haze lamp, extinguishing the light with the sudden kill switch.

The world dropped into darkness. Alad felt Hirah press against him. Their chest plates bumped together with a hollow click. Yanking the smoke from his mouth, Alad flicked it down at his feet and ground it out with his boot heel. Hirah kissed his cheek, the bridge of his nose, moving until he found Alad’s mouth with his own. Alad grunted. He reached down to pop the fasteners on Hirah’s fatigues. Hirah’s fingers fumbled with freeing Alad’s prick.

Hirah pulled them close and Alad wrapped one hand around both his own prick and Hirah’s cock. He twisted his fist around them both. Hirah groaned into Alad’s mouth. Their tongues fought, shooting fire into Alad’s chest. Quick, easy and flaming... damn good sex all around.

Their cocks rubbed together as Alad pumped. The wet slap of skin against skin almost drove him harder than the heat working into his prick. Alad ran his hand up and over the heads, both slick with jizz. Hirah reached down and grabbed Alad’s balls with one hand. The other he worked behind Alad,

sliding his hand under the back of Alad's fatigues. Then Hirah ran his fingers in Alad's crack. As Alad hissed with pleasure, Hirah toyed with Alad's ass. If they'd been in private and not waiting to hit combat, Alad would have bent over right then. They didn't have the luxury of a full on fuck. Still, his senses melded into nothing but Hirah and his mouth and his smell and his thick cock in Alad's fist.

Alad stroked faster. Everything burned with icy charges that slipped through Alad's veins. Their hips rocked to the pace he set. Hirah thrust through his grip, adding extra friction to the insanity.

Alad panted out. "I'm gonna cum." A retrieval tone barely hit his consciousness. Not his... Hirah's. Somebody wanted them. Fuck 'em, not now.

"Yeah," Hirah growled into their kiss, "cum on my cock."

"*Piss*, gonna." White hot cum boiled out of his prick. Alad jerked the last of the spunk from his dick. Then he grabbed Hirah's prick, using his jizz to coat the skin as he jerked. Hirah fucked his fist. Then Hirah grabbed his wrist, slowing Alad down. Hirah worked his mouth along Alad's chin. He shuddered and blew. Alad slowly pumped the cum out of Hirah's cock. Good, but too quick. They'd have to make time for more later.

Hirah panted and moved to kiss Alad. More urgent, longer and louder, the retrieval tone sounded again. "Shit." Hirah snorted out the curse. He moved back and Alad could hear him fiddling with his fatigues. Alad jerked his own pants up, tucked himself in and fastened them. While they were busting, his eyes had adjusted to the dark. He could see Hirah's shadow moving off toward MHQ. Since he had nothing better to do, Alad jogged up behind Hirah.

They both blinked as they ducked through the flap into the quick-set building and were assaulted by light. Captain Mark stood with his ranking officers around a topographical display. Hills, canyons and roads were highlighted with estimated positions of hostiles.

“Where the frag were you, Lieutenant?” Captain Mark didn’t even bother to look up from the virtual map as he spoke. “When I hit a call, I expect you to come running!” He snapped out the rebuke.

“Sorry, sir. I was—”

Now Mark rolled his head just enough to glare at them. “You were busting around, weren’t you?” Alad wanted to deny it, but he wasn’t half that stupid. The answer had to be written across their faces. Captain Mark stood and spoke through lips drawn into a hard, tight line. “I could care less if you’ve got your shorts down and your dick’s in his ass.” Jabbing his fingers first at Hirah and then Alad he barked, “I buzz you, you better come running. I don’t care if you have to stick it back in your shorts smelling like the latrine. I call. You run. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir!” Hirah and Alad snapped it out almost in one voice.

The captain’s quick nod told them they’d been chastised for now. “Get around the table. This involves you, Sergeant.” Blowing out a heavy breath, he returned back to the briefing they’d interrupted. “Okay, we have to get the demo crew out to the installation at Hidamot Shaft.” Captain Mark pointed to a compound at the intersection of several non-natural canals. As he spoke, statistics and information scrolled across various view screens hung on the walls. “The production there has been shut down for at least two quads. But hostiles have been using it as an ops base to stage raids and shelling into various cities. We take ‘em out. Demo takes it down.”

“So escort duty.” Lieutenant Winestadt spoke in her gravely voice.

“Yes.” Captain Mark confirmed. “We may have to clear. Recon says maybe fifty or sixty hostiles holding the fort.” He doled out various segments of the mission assigned to his unit. Turning to Hirah and Alad, he ran down their part. “Your troops make for the bridge just on the other side of this gorge. You’re to get a small demolitions crew to target and take it out so that the hostiles can’t retreat over it. Sniper positions are

calculated to be here,” he pointed at places on the map, “here and here. Two to four hostiles per site.”

“Good odds then.” Alad drawled.

“Yep.” Hirah snorted and flashed his feral grin. “Blood makes the grass grow.”

Alad snorted, “Nothing grows here.”

It took a bit to wrap the details up. Soon enough, Alad and Hirah were jogging back to the float boat. Troops already swarmed around, the deploy tones having hit their helmets the moment the meeting broke. From off to the left, three members of a demolitions squad rushed toward them. Two were basic humanoid. The third, a Disshad.

The Disshad held up one huge hand and waggled it over the top of his head. “Ah, Hirah! Alad!” A familiar voice greeted them. “I meet good warriors again.” Once he’d ambled close enough, Pemtch reached out and tapped the rank stamped on their armor. “Lieutenant,” he observed, “Sergeant, very good warriors then.”

“Pemtch.” Alad caught Pemtch’s hand in both of his own. “Demolitions. I’m impressed.”

Hirah smiled in greeting. “How’d you recognize us? Don’t all humans look alike?”

“Look alike, yes.” Pemtch waved his fingers in front of his eyes before tapping the tip of his squashed nose. “Smell alike, no. Is all you ever do is mate and fight?”

Yeah, that scent was probably blatant enough most humans could pick up on it. Alad turned it into a joke as they continued toward the float boat. “Is there anything else?”

“So will we see our friend Vormenta?” Hirah used the other tactic of changing the subject.

“No, she engineer corps.” The snort said Pemtch didn’t have a very high opinion of beings who built things instead of blowing them up. “Vormenta they no like combat. Fighting you, me, yes is fine. Big battles not so much.”

“So you’ll blow things up for us, huh?”

"I do." Pemtch slapped his chest. "I do good for your warriors."

Ninda already had the troops on board the transport when they jogged up the aft loading ramp. Ninda slipped into the bucket seat next to the pilot as Hirah moved up and strapped himself into the jump seat just behind them. With the troops and the demo crew, there wasn't enough bench space along the sides of the float boat. Alad stationed himself at the front while the troops stowed gear in the webbing pockets above their heads or below their butts. Corporal Mace buttoned the rear hatch then took the other standing position at the rear.

The vehicle vibrated as the engines fired up. She shuddered and then lumbered into the air. Heading into the wasteland toward the target, the float boat skimmed along a good ten feet above the rocky ground. There wasn't anything to watch out the windshield, they ran dark, the pilot navigating by instrument, not sight. Rocked by the gentle sway of the float boat, lulled by the murmur of the troops' hushed conversations, Alad dozed on his feet.

Somewhere in his half conscious mind, Alad heard it. Faint, almost out of the human register. A slide whistle scream heading towards them. Suddenly awake, Alad hung onto the lip of the pass-through from pilot cabin to troop rack and looked out the windshield. Dull, thick thuds sounded. Smoke welled in the road, blocking the light from the moons. Hirah, stationed in the jump seat behind the pilot, yelled into the man's ear, "Go, go, go, drive!"

Glancing back into the compartment where the troops sat tense, Alad yelled, "Hang on, it's gonna get rough."

As they pushed through the first volley of acrid black mist, more shells thudded around them. Mechanicals rattled under their feet. Another boom rocked the float boat. "Aha, big one!" Pemtch crowed with delight. Thumps of something loosed shook them. Fire chattered at them in four-four time.

"There's more coming." Ninda barked from where she rode shotgun. "More on the route!"

The pilot chanted, "Fuck, fuck." A plume of smoke and dust bloomed ahead of the float boat.

A mortar round went off, sounding like a crash-bay door slamming. The transport lurched. The pilot screamed, "Hang on!"

The float boat shuddered. Alad's stomach heaved as the transport dropped a good ten feet. He wrapped his hand into the webbing. "Brace!" Was all he had time to yell before they hit the ground. Alad's feet went out from under him. The float boat skidded, bounced then rolled. Alad slammed into the wall. The blow wrenched his shoulder. Pain shot down his arm. More bumps and jars bounced him around until finally the float boat shuddered to a stop.

"We're all right?" The lieutenant crawled out of the pilot compartment as troops released their harnesses. "Everybody good?"

Alad wasn't certain he qualified as good, but he wasn't out of commission. "Everybody out!" He ordered. They clambered out of the wreckage of the transport by way of the rear bay doors. Alad paused at the rear. Corporal Mace lay crumpled in among the gear in the webbing. His eyes stared at nothing. If Alad had to guess, a broken neck; probably hadn't had time to grab an anchor. Whatever it was, the man was dead. Alad spared a moment of memory and then went back to being a sergeant.

Jumping from the back of the transport he saw they'd come to rest in a rocky field at the base of the foothills. A couple of soldiers limped along. No major injuries, besides Mace, seemed evident. Could have been worse.

"It's good." Starlight sucked in hard breaths as she scrambled around, checking the troops who seemed injured. "We're good. Everybody's good."

The pilot crawled out of the rear bay doors. "Let's get back to the fucking base!"

Ignoring him, Alad roused a couple of men and sent them back into the transport for gear. Pemtch and his crew hauled their munitions packs out of the wreckage. Alad stepped in to

help. Pemtch jerked his head to look at the hills above them. Alad heard it a moment later. “Cover!” He yelled as rounds chewed the ground.

“They’re shooting!” Somebody wailed. “It’s an ambush!” Alad wanted to knock them on their ass—of course it was an ambush.

Ninda added, “That’s not good!” as she ran towards the rocks. Hirah and the corporals herded troops into the cover of the hill. Alad grabbed a pack and ran after them.

The fire didn’t even sound real... more like little kids’ toys popping. Only the volume and number of rounds fired said it was more. Once Alad’s ears adjusted to that, a discordant rumble of small artillery would hit. All the technology in the universe and still no one had a better solution than ground troops dragging hostiles out of their holes.

Dropping his ERS tactical-ballistic shield down, Alad set it for medium data flow. He didn’t need to know what the hills were called or what minerals made them up. He just wanted to be able to view the terrain for spots where hostiles hid.

His troops scrambled from cover to cover. The rattle clink of their guns and shells ejecting thumped in Alad’s ears. Yeah lasers, chems were great, but nothing beat the sheer primal efficiency of a gunpowder round.

A voice screamed across the com, “Sergeant Ninda is DOWN!”

“Ninda is down?” He heard Hirah’s request for confirmation.

The voice barked back, “Ninda is down.”

One of her troops moaned, “They got Sergeant Ninda!” Her unit, what bits of it were left clustered around Alad and Hirah, seemed ready to lose it.

Alad snapped, “Look at my eyes, you terminally dumb shits.” He held his fingers in front of his face. Although they really couldn’t see his eyes, Alad wanted to transfer their attention to him. “Look here, at me, not out there where you can’t see nothing but stars. You and you,” he slapped the

chests of two soldiers with minor wounds, “you’ve been hit. You can panic for two clicks and then I want you to go find Ninda. Get her to cover, stay with her until we get pulled out.” Then he turned his attention back to the rest of the troops. “Everyone else, too bad. Listen to my voice. This is what you’re trained for. Remember bravery is just not letting the other guy know you’ve shit your shorts too.”

“What did they send me?” Hirah growled. “A bunch of baby herd animals bleating for their mamas?” They, as the leaders, had to refocus the unit’s fear from flight to fight. “We got maybe a stadion to go to get to the bridge.” The tones in his voice, the way Hirah spoke, calmed and soothed better than a pack of whites. Alad watched the troops relax as they listened. “That’s our target and we can still take it out. *Pisk!*” He pointed to where Pemtch sat calmly with his pack. Alad had no idea where the other members of that crew disappeared to. “Demolitions is more a go than you. You know your jobs. You’ve got the skills.” Hirah’s voice stroked confidence back into them after the slight rebuke. “This is why we train. I know you could do a run like this in your sleep. I have confidence in you. You won’t disappoint me. Now get your heads out of your asses and complete our mission!”

“Sir!” Alad grabbed Hirah’s arm before he could move.

Hirah glared, “What, Sergeant?”

“That stadion is straight through a fatal funnel.” ERS fed him the parameters of the man-made canal. Sharp, steep sides of reinforced concrete rose to the height of two men. Above that the ragged hills loomed.

“You questioning me?”

“No, sir, I’m advising you of the risks.”

“We can sit here and be targets, or we can push forward and be targets.” Hirah jerked his head in the direction of the bridge. “We move!”

Sound logic as any he’d heard before. “You heard the man!” Alad ordered. “Break it out. On your feet. Let’s move! Starlight,” he called to the medic as she tended to a soldier’s minor wound, “staunch ‘em, stifle ‘em and let’s go.”

Hirah hit a go signal and yelled, "Alright move it!"

"Up the wall!" Alad barked as they ran toward the canal. Troops fanned out ahead and behind. "We stay in that concrete coffin and they'll ship you back home as meat sticks." The troops scrambled up the edges of the dike. Alad kept next to Hirah. Both Pemtch and Starlight hung a pace or two behind them.

Soldiers pushed ahead or dropped to their knees and fired depending on what they heard or saw. Men huddled against the rocks for cover. Every few seconds a round whizzed by Alad's ear. The constant snap-snap of rounds folded into an adrenaline-filled haze. Silences between volleys were shattering. Unconsciously, Alad's brain tried to sort the rounds into some sort of pattern—rhythm: snap, snap, snap, pop and repeat—except it didn't. A scream or an explosion would sound in the middle and throw him off.

"Where's the fire coming from?" Starlight hissed, ducking along behind Pemtch. "Where's it coming from?"

"I don't know!" Alad growled. At least Pemtch had enough sense to stay quiet. He wished he could say the same for their medic.

"What the *piske!*" Hirah yelped as a round blew apart a rock near his head.

Alad dropped to his knees behind a boulder, using it for cover as he fired back.

"You're gonna shoot him." Starlight wedged herself behind the rock and next to Alad's back. "You're gonna fucking shoot the lieutenant!"

Ignoring the irony of Starlight protesting possible injury to Hirah, Alad kept shooting. "Is there anybody behind me?" He asked her, more to remind the medic that she had his back. Hirah crawled back toward their position. Pemtch scrambled their way as well.

Peering through the ERS, Alad hunted for the telltale heat blooms from their attackers' weapons. Somehow they'd made it to the area of the bridge. Off to the left it hung over a

yawning canyon, most of which was lost even to his enhanced vision. The road disappeared on the other side of the hill where he huddled. Below, to the right, the sluice canal ended in a drop off to nowhere.

When another few rounds went off, he saw it. Above and to the left of them: a snipers' nest guarding this access. While Pemtch scuttled around behind Starlight, Hirah made it to Alad's side. Alad pointed out the sniper's position. "There they are... right there!"

Pemtch pawed Alad's shoulder. "Good warrior." Alad turned and slid down more so that his butt rested on his heels and his back against solid rock. Hirah hunched on the balls of his feet by Alad's side. "You keep those busy," the Disshad pointed in the sniper's general direction, "I take out bridge."

Alad didn't see how. Even the hottest charges Pemtch could carry in that pack wouldn't be enough. They'd need all of the explosives the demolitions crew carried. "You got something big enough to blow it?" Hirah asked, echoing Alad's thoughts. Since two of the crew were lost somewhere back in the battle still raging along the hill, Pemtch only had a third of what he needed.

"No." Pemtch wagged his big head in a Disshad's version of silent laughter. "But that rock is not stable. I blow that, mountain come down. I think will take quite a while for enemy to clear bridge enough that they can use again."

Hirah slapped his thigh. "Let's do it."

Keeping low, firing as they moved, they advanced on the snipers' position. Hirah tapped Alad's helmet. He pointed right, directing Alad and Starlight to take the more obvious and exposed route toward the snipers. Then he signaled that he'd be circling around behind. Alad nodded his understanding. They'd distract the snipers and allow Hirah to take them from the rear.

As Hirah moved off, Alad edged over and fired. He kept the bursts short and intense. Covering fire, his role was to distract the snipers' attention. Starlight added the chatter of her gun. They both kept watch for Hirah. Behind them, Pemtch

prepped his charges. Clicks went by as they traded fire with the hostiles.

He saw it through the ERS system, the movement above the snipers' position. "That's it!" He hissed and hoped like *pisk* Starlight heard him. "Cease fire."

The snipers kept shooting. The shadow above them leapt. Hirah disappeared into their position. Screams sounded. And shots, but those rounds weren't directed at them. Alad was up and charging in. Using his long arms and legs to propel him up the hill, Pemtch scrambled off toward his objective. Alad didn't pay him much more attention, the Disshad had a job to do. Then, other than to note Starlight running behind him, Alad focused on the small arms fire and shrieks from the sniper pit.

Jumping over the rim, Alad caught sight of the carnage. Hirah knelt over the body of one of the snipers. Frenzied, Hirah jammed his ceramic knife into the chest plate between the panels. Blood covered everything. Each swipe of Hirah's blade splattered more. The other being was a motionless lump of armor and flesh. Bullet holes laced its form. Armor was only as good as how much of a body it covered. Even used to combat and carnage, Alad shuddered at the scene.

From above, Alad heard, "You can't be satisfied with just killing them." Starlight scrambled into the pit. "You got to make 'em paste." Like he'd heard her, Hirah stood and stepped back. Gore dripped from the end of the knife. "Lieutenant, let me see that arm." Blood seeped from under Hirah's shoulder armor. Starlight reached out, grabbed Hirah's shoulder.

He roared, spun and launched himself at her. Alad was knocked off his feet. Hirah's arm shot out. He grabbed Starlight and wrapped his hand around her neck. Still screaming, Hirah slammed her into the rock. His eyes seemed unfocused. His face was contorted into a mask of rage. Starlight, her eyes bulging, raked his arm with her left hand, kicked him in his gut. The fingers of her right fumbled with her med pack. She couldn't even seem to get enough air to scream.

Alad scrambled to his feet. He latched onto the lip of Hirah's collar armor. "Let her go, Lieutenant!" He yanked and it

was like pulling on a brick wall. "Hirah, let her go!" Throwing all his weight into the move, Alad twisted. He and Hirah tumbled to the side. Starlight scuttled away as they rolled. Hirah popped up. As Alad jumped to his feet, Hirah cocked back his arm. Alad barely had time to register the blow before Hirah's fist slammed into his face. He reeled back.

Shaking it off, Alad brought up his guard. Fuck, it was the fight in the swamp all over again. Except this time he didn't have any way to shock Hirah out of the state. He blocked the first blow, but almost didn't dodge the second. Hirah's knife skittered across Alad's chest armor. Starlight lunged from where she'd fallen. She slammed her fist against Hirah's thigh. He snarled and back handed her. As she flew back, Alad saw it. The quick-hit hypo from her pack stuck out of Hirah's leg. Hirah stared at it, like he didn't know what the hypo was. Yanking it out of his leg, he advanced on Alad. But, as he cocked his fist for another punch, Hirah's eyes rolled back in his head. He shuddered and dropped like someone cut the strings on a marionette.

Sputtering, "Filthy, nasty thing!" Starlight hauled herself off the ground. Then she kicked the lieutenant's collapsed form. "You stay with that," she spat again and glared at Alad. "You tell him, I'll just let him bleed out if he's hit." Fumbling in her field kit, Starlight grumbled, "Soldiering is one thing, but somebody's crossed all sorts of wires in that processor."

Combat rush screamed through Alad's system. "What'd you hit him with?" Fuck, he needed a white, or six.

"Insta-stun." She used the base name for a drug cocktail of disassociate hallucinogenics, anesthetics and anxiolytics. Medics carried the quick acting knock-out treatment for comatizing combative wounded. As she hauled out a smack patch, Starlight grabbed Alad's arm.

Hirah had cut him. Well, he'd missed, but if Alad hadn't been armored the blade would have sliced his chest. What the hell was wrong with Hirah? It finally registered that Starlight was pulling back his glove. "What's that for?"

“Pain.” She slammed the adhesive square down on the bare skin on the back of his hand. With another smack, Starlight broke the ampoules of narcotics, releasing them through contact into Alad’s blood stream. “You’re gonna feel it in a few.” She hissed and used her chin to point at Hirah. “Coma boy over there broke your nose.”

“Come, come!” Pemtch loped back over the ridge and dropped into the sniper pit. “We go now!” He tugged at Alad’s thigh. “Five clicks be out of range!”

As Alad knelt next to Hirah and grabbed his arm, Starlight asked, “What are you doing?”

He didn’t even bother to look at her. “Getting the lieutenant.” Trying to manhandle Hirah’s catatonic weight was almost worse than moving a dead body.

“Crazy man broke your nose. If I hadn’t downed him, he’d have killed you.”

“It’s not his fault.” Alad glowered at her. “There’s something wrong with him.”

“You’ve got that right.” She stared back, like he’d jettisoned his brain. “If you just left him, nobody would know.” She hissed. “They’d stamp the gold Bennu on his coffin and one less psycho officer on the rolls.”

Pemtch swung up the rock and called down, “Now, humans, now!”

Alad staggered to his feet, Hirah half draped over his shoulder. “I don’t leave an officer behind.”

“You don’t leave a crazy as shit officer or you don’t leave a crazy as shit officer’s dick?” Starlight challenged.

That caught him up for a moment. Which was it? Did it matter? One thing did. Alad staggered forward and growled, “I’m not leaving Hirah.”

“Four clicks now!” Pemtch roared. “Run!”

“Ah, I hate you.” Hissing, she slid up and pulled half of Hirah’s weight onto her shoulder. “This is for you, not him. You owe me big time, Sergeant.” They struggled up out of the

snipers' nest and across the hill. Pemtch loped around the rocks while Alad and Starlight staggered behind him with their burden. When the charge hit, the shockwave knocked them to the ground. Alad fell on Hirah. The lieutenant's body landed on top of Starlight. Even through the ringing in his ears and rumble of an avalanche in the background, Alad heard her mutter, "Big fucking time."

15:00hr

“Your services as a Presenter have been requested.” As was customary, Alad stood along the wall with the other members of Captain Mark’s staff, his hands folded along his tail bone, his feet slightly spread and his posture ridged. The troops had cleared out from their briefing. Now was the time the captain took reports and gave detailed assignments to his officers and non-coms.

“Yes, sir.” Hirah stood up by the captain, before the front-desk. “I’ve half been expecting it given the time frame.”

“What do they mean Presenter?” Alad whispered the question to Sergeant Ninda, who held up the section of wall next to him.

Ninda shifted, probably taking the weight off her knee where she’d been shot. “For the Tithing.” She referenced the yearly ritual of payment for the military’s services from the various guilds. Not every guild or system paid every year, but there was always a Tithing. “You’ve never been to one?”

The pomp and circumstances surrounding the events were almost legendary. Guilds tried to outdo each other on the elaborate banquets and staging. “No.” Few of the lower ranks ever attended, not unless they were part of some honor guard. As a combat monkey, Alad’d never even been on the same planet as one. “Not something a lowly sergeant gets to witness.”

“Watch’d from the nosebleed galleries at one.” Ninda kept her voice low. They really weren’t supposed to be conversing, but Mark was lax on that rule if you kept it low. “The generals don’t speak for themselves. They have orators who give their speeches for them. A couple of them like to have Preacher Man do the honors, you know, because of what he can do with

his voice.” Alad had figured out that Hirah had some kind of major vocal control. Nothing spooky or psychic, but just the way he spoke made you want to listen to him, agree with him. He could talk a general out of his pips.

Hirah’s voice broke through Alad’s thoughts. “I’m not sure I understand, sir.” *Pisk*, Alad kicked himself for missing something.

“The order says that you can bring an attendant at arms.” Captain Mark tapped the data screen. “At your rank, it’s not uncommon.”

“No, sir.” Looking confused, Hirah added, “It’s just that they’ve always assigned me someone out of the honor guard before.”

Captain Mark smiled. “Well, this time, I told them they could borrow you, but you might feel more comfortable with one of your own troops.”

“Very well, sir.” Hirah nodded. “I’ll go through the rosters and consult with my sergeants.” A quick jerk of his head indicated Ninda and Alad. “I’m sure there’s several soldiers on my team who would perform admirably.”

Now the captain looked pained. “You’re certainly allowed to look higher than that.”

“Traditionally, the attendant position is filled by a lance corporal or lower.”

The captain’s personal aid, Warrant Officer Baker stepped forward. “Permission to speak freely, sir,” he barked out, “and smack Lieutenant Gahage in the butt of his brain.”

“Permission is granted to my Warrant Officer.” Alad could tell Mark wanted to laugh, but didn’t want to do it in front of his staff.

“Hirah, *pisk*,” Baker moved in behind the captain. “That cult that you were raised in cut off your dick or something? I think they’re giving you a bit of a gift here.”

“What?”

“Big old civilian bed.” Captain Mark couldn’t rib the lieutenant without humiliating him, shaming him. The tease in Baker’s voice, since he was lower in rank, didn’t carry that same indignity. “Public baths,” he leered, “good food, free drinks. Sounds like a party to me. You might have a real good time if you hauled along that big piece of sergeant you seem to be attached to.” Ever since the offensive at Hidamot Shaft they’d been the butt of a few good natured jibes.

“With all due respect,” Hirah pulled himself up and crossed his arms defensively. “I take my duties as Presenter seriously.” Just because Baker’s taunting tone didn’t shame him, probably didn’t make it any less irritating. “I shouldn’t abuse that duty with my personal life. The honor of the position should go to someone who is deserving of it. Not that Sergeant Deming isn’t deserving...”

Captain Mark interrupted, “An honor was conveyed on someone deserving, Lieutenant.” Standing, he put his hands on the desk and leaned toward Hirah. “Colonel Miassy, of General LaMaoy Ataria’s staff, commed me to ask about you. There’s twelve men in this quadrant who are capable presenters. And for the three Tithings going on within a non-zonked range of our position... and they all want you.” He snorted and shook his head. “Now I could have gone off and held an auction, but I figured when a man with three of those little bright and shiny’s on his status bar offers to move the Tithing a system closer to where you are because he wants you so bad, I just roll over and play dead.”

Folding his hands behind his back, Captain Mark walked around the desk to face Hirah. “Now, you’re under my command, and it’s my right to bargain for you. And the Colonel, being a nice sorta gal, was pretty free with the favors.” Then he wandered down the middle of the MDO. “So we got some new equipment coming, a few nice leave packages to be rotated around, and I’ve picked out a good zone for our own to have a decent combat position that’s not on this hunk of sand.” At about the middle of the room, right in front of Alad, Captain Mark paused, turned, and smirked. “But you’ve served General LaMaoy Ataria a couple of times in the past. The General

asked, through Colonel Miassy, if there was anything that you wanted personally. And I did kinda mention that you'd gone and gotten yourself a bunk buddy." His gaze slid to Alad. "The Colonel asked if I thought you might like him along for the ride. So, you tell me if I've misconstrued the dynamic here."

"No, sir." Hirah conceded.

"Good, that's settled then." The captain clapped his hands together then brushed them together like he was wiping that chore off his hands. "And I am glad that your burners aren't jetting on half fuel at other times, or I'd have busted you back to buck-private." Pointing first at Hirah and then at Alad, he gave them their orders. "So, Lieutenant Gahage, Sergeant Deming, go get your gear." Hirah headed toward the door and Alad stepped away from the wall. They'd been, for practical purposes, dismissed. Captain Mark walked with them. "You'll be required to wear Full Combat Dress most times, but there'll be at least once you'll need Mess Dress."

"Ah, sir." Alad stopped in mid stride. "Permission to speak, sir."

Captain Mark patted Alad's shoulder. "What, Sergeant, you having honeymoon cold feet?"

"No, sir." Nervous, Alad swallowed. "I, ah, had to pawn my Mess Dress half a cycle back for meds." He hated admitting that. It was a violation of regulations that could get him stripes.

"That's inconvenient." A scowl darkened the captain's face. He turned to Hirah. "Lieutenant, you'll find you've got an expense account for the duty assignment. Get your aide proper dress. I'll zip a com to the Colonel. I don't doubt it'll be approved."

TOSZII KAURO, CIVILIAN CRUISER, DEEP SPACE - QC1, PC1, P2, D13

10:05hr

Three days out and Alad lay naked on his back, staring at the real-time images of open space. Every panel displayed the infinite expanse of galaxies. So long as Alad didn't look at the floor, it was as if the ship didn't really exist. Alad still couldn't get used to it, being surrounded by stars. Nobody ever put windows or through-views in military vessels. Or big, comfortable beds. Or room service. Civilian luxury overwhelmed him. The whole trip was just a vapor burn across his brain.

The powers that be hadn't actually moved the Tithing; the General's offer being more of an emphatic gesture than a real consideration. Still, logistically, they had a problem with transport. A troop ship was headed for the Rebmun system, near the Tithing point, but it was a coma crate. After favors and wrangling and he and Hirah cooling their jets in an Army comfort hostel, the General's staff landed them a vacant berth on a civilian vessel, the *Toszii Kauru*. It'd take slightly longer, by a day and a half, but the route took them straight into the right port and meant they didn't have to throw off a transport coma on arrival.

Dressed only in a towel, Hirah walked out of the small bathroom and into their tiny cabin. Behind him bloomed a gaseous nebula shaped like a glowing barbell and surrounded by a halo of red. "Are you ever going to get tired of looking?" Hirah sounded jaded and bored, but he hadn't argued when Alad left the retro-refractives on in their cabin.

"No." Above him, in ceiling screens, Alad watched the blue, pink and purple stars of an oyster shell galaxy slowly spin off-center around the milky white core cluster. "Usually I'm

zonked out in a transport. Other than a quick shuttle, I've never seen the stars and never like this." Alad lazied his head over, and stared just beyond Hirah's hip. Earlier he'd had the labels up just to see what was what. One far away system had caught his attention and he'd memorized it. Golden gasses swept about in the illusion of an infant's face. He pointed at one of three bright stars near the jaw. "That's Betamous Prime and Betamous Secundus."

Hirah didn't look or respond right away. Finally, he glanced over and mumbled, "That is."

"Krtayurga orbits those." Alad prompted his memory.

Hirah answered the question Alad hadn't actually asked. "My home system, yes."

Sitting up, Alad asked, "Do you miss it?"

"There is nothing to miss."

"What, you don't have people who you left behind? The war hero returning from exile as a lieutenant in the Grand Army?" Alad had never asked why Hirah was sentenced to death. But given what he knew, Alad figured maybe a fight that got out of hand or a passionate cause. "Rub everyone's faces in it at least?"

"What, Alad?" Snorting his derision, Hirah sneered. "Do you want to turn me into some noble hero? A dissenting voice among the crowd? I was condemned for base reasons, nothing noble or heroic." Hirah sat down heavy on the end of the bed and stared at his hands. Finally he looked up at Alad. "I betrayed my people for someone I thought I loved."

"Betrayed them?" This was what Alad had been dying to know, dreaded discovering, for cycles now. "How?"

Hirah gazed off at the stars, his home galaxy. When he spoke again, his voice echoed with loss. "Merely by being with him. We are a closed people. If it were not that we needed the protection of the Grand Army, there would be no contact allowed at all. We must suffer the military for protection and we must suffer the merchant guilds to raise money to tithe. We only have contact with outsiders on very proscribed terms.

Only the pure, the upstanding may interact with the army and the merchants.” He flopped back on the mattress and ran his hand up Alad’s thigh. “And I betrayed that and I was sentenced to death for it. I managed to commute it to exile in the Grand Army.”

“Do you ever want to go home?” There’d been times when Alad had been homesick. He figured it hit everyone at some point.

“What’s the sense of wanting what I can never have?” Hirah didn’t stop touching him. The contact seemed to sooth him as he spoke. “I am dead to my people, my family, my sons.”

“You have sons?”

“I did my duty. Two, if they still live, children often die before majority. Adults die in droves as well. Our world is harsh. Our people mine the most inhospitable and dangerous regions. They raise crops only to watch them wither and herd animals to see them swept away. A planet of fire storms and floods and earthquakes. It is test of faith to survive where others would not. Of course, such an active world has its benefit: minerals, metals and gases that command a high price on the market.”

“So you had a spouse and children.” Alad hadn’t ever considered really what Hirah’s life was like before the army.

“No. I have children, but I left no partner among my people. The boys’ mothers sought to raise their standing by bearing children of the Primacy. The castes are not as rigid as it would seem. The ways to navigate between the castes are limited and structured, but there are services of faith and devotion that are allowable. My own mother was such a woman.”

Alad stretched out next to Hirah. “So you were born as what... a chit in some society swap-meet? What did your father think?”

“My biological father?” Hirah rolled his head to look at Alad. The expression on his face was an unfathomable mixture of pain, relief and sadness. “I only met him twice. He was an old, old man by the time I was born.” Like it was the most

reasonable thing in the world, being a possession, Hirah explained. "I was seen as an asset to my mother's family. My mother understood this, raised me to understand it. It was my place in life, and they treated me well, my half siblings and her spouse were kind enough. As much as I remember of them. I was taken to my position when I was five or so."

"They took you away from your family so young? Why did your mother allow it?"

"Because I was Abdal." As though it were obvious, he laughed. "I no more belonged to her than to my father. I was a child of the Primacy. I devoted my life to it, served them every moment I breathed."

"After all that devotion and faith and *shudo*, you threw it away because you loved somebody?"

"You're full of rather personal questions today," Hirah grumbled.

"I'm bored out of my tank on this ship, even with the stars. There's only so much enjoying myself I can swallow. I should have just told them to put me in a transport coma."

"You'd have been too sick to serve when we reach the destination."

"I know." Alad rolled over, up onto his elbow. Looking down into Hirah's face, he grouched, "I'm still bored. And I'm still waiting for my answer."

Hirah huffed. "I did not have many people who loved me in my life. Were gentle with me, took care of me, yes, but it was their duty to do so. There was nothing for him to gain by loving me and a great deal to lose if we were caught. The man I betrayed my calling for was one of two people in my life on Krtayurga who cared about Hirah," he tapped his chest, "and not the handful of honorifics that came with my name."

"Who was the other?"

"My body servant, Sey." A great well of sorrow swelled under that simple statement.

"Body servant?" Alad had never heard that particular term before.

“He was orphaned, without any family they could find.” Hirah rubbed his face with his hands. “The Primacy allowed him to serve me.”

Alad couldn’t quite hide the distaste in his voice. “They made him your slave?” Very few things offended him. That did.

“In a manner of speaking, yes.”

Alad spat the question, “What manner?”

“What would you rather have had, Alad, that they left Sey to starve on the streets?” Hirah defended it without overt emotion. “He slept where I slept, he ate what I ate, he was clothed with the same clothes as me. While I was at my lessons they taught him to read and how to be a warrior. These were things that a boy borne to his caste, one of the lowest, would never have otherwise achieved. It raised him. His heirs would have been Tashian, two stations below mine of Udbhata. I’m sick of discussing myself.”

Alad still couldn’t swallow it. “*Pisk*, I mean slavery.”

“I said, no more!” He shifted on the bed and grumbled, “I’m tired. I need to turn off the panels and try to sleep... there won’t be much opportunity at the Tithing.”

“You’re relaxed enough that you can sleep?” Alad could feel the tension in Hirah’s body where they pressed together, the edge of his hip against Alad’s thigh, Hirah’s shoulder where it bumped Alad’s elbow and arm.

“I said try.” Hirah glared at him with those cold blue eyes. “I’d kill for a smoke right now.” Alad felt the same way—they’d both been relegated to pills while shipboard. Then Hirah snorted. “You could always help me relax.” He purred the words out in a way that tickled down Alad’s gut and into his balls.

“Don’t use that voice on me.” Even though he protested, Alad tugged at the towel wrapped around Hirah until it fell open.

Hirah ran his hands over Alad’s chest. “What voice?” He smirked.

“That totally reasonable.” Even though he scolded, Alad didn’t mind being manipulated into a good bust-up with Hirah. “Totally distracting way you talk.”

“It’s called persuasion, Alad.” Hirah walked his fingers down Alad’s sternum. “You just have to figure out how someone needs to hear things then say it that way.” He kept the touch moving lower across Alad’s belly. “It’s a skill like any other.” Alad’s prick swelled in anticipation of the feel of Hirah’s hand. “While most boys were out playing with toy weapons, I was learning how to debate, influence and manipulate The Children with words.”

Not quite as subtle, with either words or movement, Alad reached down between Hirah’s legs and wrapped his hand around the hard prick he found. “Even if I had that training,” he murmured and leaned in to press his lips against Hirah’s throat, “I don’t think I could mange to do it as good as you.”

“There is some natural talent involved.” Hirah hissed. His back arched slightly. “But you know how to persuade the troops to do what you want.” Tugging on Alad’s arm and thigh, Hirah pulled Alad on top of him. “You know how to sway me into giving in.”

Alad grunted as their cocks bumped. Then, rolling his hips against Hirah’s, he teased, “That’s ‘cause you want to give in.”

“Like I said, you have to figure out what people desire.” Hirah lifted his hips off the bed. His dick rolled along Alad’s hard cock. “Right now, I need this.” He slid his hand behind Alad’s neck and drew him down into a rough open mouthed kiss.

Alad adjusted his weight, straddling Hirah’s body. As they kissed, Alad rubbed his balls over Hirah’s dick, his own cock trapped between his belly and Hirah’s warm skin. Kissing and humping like that worked chills into Alad’s joints. He shuddered. Alad worked his tongue into Hirah’s mouth. Three days without smokes had changed Hirah’s flavor to something mellow and spicy.

Whatever it took, Alad would do it to keep this going forever. Not the sex, damn burning though that was, but being

with Hirah, consumed by thoughts of him, hearing that warm, throbbing voice until he died or Hirah did or they both went down together like soldiers.

Pulling Alad hard into his body, Hirah rolled them until he was on top. He rubbed his prick hard against Alad's. The ache was nearly unbearable. It kept him grinding through the rough contact, only their sweat to slick the friction. Alad ran his hands down Hirah's back, making him arch and push their cocks together. When he caught Hirah's ass in his hands, Alad used that leverage to speed up the pace. Not that Hirah needed much motivation. He humped Alad like a man starving for dick.

Heat welled up in Alad's gut. It burned out through his thighs, his balls and his prick. With a grunt, he shot. A few moments of his brain misfiring went by before Alad realized Hirah lay panting on his chest. Frag, together, that didn't happen too often. Alad ran his hand across the fuzz on the back of Hirah's skull. "That wear you out?"

Hirah snorted, "Maybe enough." He rolled off Alad's chest and for a moment they both stared at the stars. Then Hirah elbowed Alad. "You going to catch some sleep with me?"

"No." Alad sat up and swung his feet off the bed. "I'll leave that to you." Alad stood, scrounged for his clothes and quickly dressed. Hirah yawned as Alad killed the through-views. "I'll get something to eat. Maybe hit the training room for bit. Give you a couple hours." Hirah didn't respond, probably already out, as Alad slipped from the room.

Alad wandered the ship for a while. He'd seen it all. Most of the civilian activities made him uncomfortable. He found them stuffy and not terribly exciting. Since the training room was occupied by a group of females doing some form of meditative dance, Alad figured he'd head up a few levels and grab some food.

Watching the stars slip by, Alad chowed down on a meat-filled bureklo. This one held some form of savory, edible flower stuffed inside the soft bread pocket. It was about the only thing he recognized as familiar and palatable at the ship's

buffet. The dining hall, normally noisy and jammed, took on a deserted air between traditional meals. Since Alad's stomach still operated on military time, he and Hirah generally managed to eat in relative privacy.

A scrawny, sallow being moved through the dining room until he stood next to Alad's table. Alad's hope that the intruder would move on vanished when it asked, "May I impose?" A bony finger, almost as long as the rest of its arm, touched the back of one of the chairs. "Share your meal?"

Alad glanced around. Every table within twenty of his sat vacant. He rose a few inches out of his seat, as politeness dictated. "Sure, I guess, *Nambya*." Since he wasn't certain where the being rated in rank, he used the all purpose honorific for military dealing with civilians. Adding, "Please join me," Alad sat back down. He actually preferred to be left alone, but they told him to maintain his best behavior on this assignment... so he figured that meant being civil where he otherwise might tell someone to go take a swim in the afterburner wake.

It settled into the chair, both sets of knees folded backwards when it sat. With a roll of its knife blade shoulders, it adjusted the light drape of cloth covering its torso. "Much thanks." Although Alad had no bead on the thing's sex, he hated referring, even mentally, to other beings as *it*. Because it seemed more male than not, Alad arbitrarily decided the intruder was a he... at least until he knew better. Outrageously long, bony fingers picking at some pretentious excuse for a snack, Alad's tablemate seemed absorbed in his food. Maybe his customs dictated that their race didn't eat alone. If he wanted to sit there and be quite, Alad could live with it. Still, his back-hinged knees jiggled and Alad tried to ignore the rattle of the table top and the click of his claws on the floor. Every few clicks, the being would glance up at him, his huge Adams apple would bob in his scrawny neck. Alad hoped he wasn't about to get propositioned or something. There were soldiers who drilled anything that moved. Alad, however, had a definite preference: basic human and male.

After swallowing another bite of his bureklo, Alad decided to jump in with both feet. "Is there something you want to ask me?"

"Yes, very much." He sounded relieved that Alad spoke first. "I am Be'ah-je." Then Be'ah-je paused and seemed like he was waiting.

Shooting somewhat blind, Alad added, "Sergeant Alad Deming, Grand Army, Twenty-Nine Suns Division..."

Be'ah-je cut off the rest of Alad's introduction with, "Very much thank you, Sergeant Alad Deming." He swallowed again a few times. "Your companion is not here."

Although at a loss without visual and verbal cues, Alad figured that might have been a question. "Yeah, the lieutenant's catching up with the inside of his eyelids back in our rack." Be'ah-je blinked and smacked his hard lips together before dropping his mouth open. He stared. Alad stared back. Then it clicked, Be'ah-je probably didn't understand military slang. "He's asleep in our cabin."

"Forgive me again, but you were here earlier and so was I. No prying was intended." Be'ah-je's fingers tapped the table in a nervous drumbeat. "May I ask, did this lieutenant called Krtayurga home?" If that question wasn't prying, Alad wanted to know what Be'ah-je would consider an interrogation.

Cautiously, Alad answered, "Yeah."

"Do you know if he resided in the city of Uffren?" Alad's eyes narrowed. Why was Be'ah-je all fired up and poking in Hirah's past? As though he sensed the question, Be'ah-je stuttered out, "I am intruding. Let me explain. My family is of the Water Guild and when I was younger we lived for a time in Uffren. There was a man there. One of the Garrison Chiefs who I remember some. His name was Hirah enAbdal." Although for all Alad knew Hirah might be the most common name for boys, that did set Alad back a pace. "Of the Garrison, he was not as distant as others. Sometimes he would smile at us, the children. The others we were terrified of. Him, not so much."

If it was his Hirah, Alad wanted to hear what Be'ah-je had to say. He prompted. "You remember him because he smiled at you?"

"No." More tapping and swallowing. Maybe it wasn't nerves... Be'ah-je's species might just have temperament that read that way to humans. "I remember him because I thought he was dead."

"Dead?" That did line up some with the lieutenant's history.

"When I was there, it was the reason my family petitioned to be removed to another posting, there was a day where there was a great commotion in the quarter. And they came and rounded up all fifty of us, the guild members and their families, and they took us into Uffren. I'd never been outside the compound walls and I was mad at my parents for protesting that the younger people should be left behind. So you will see why this marked my memory, yes?"

"I think so."

"It was not far into the city. I remember it was very beautiful, the city buildings of white, green and red stone—none very high because of earthquakes. The roofs were all tiled in green and blue glaze and they shined under the suns. They, our guards, brought us to an outdoor arena and kept us on a raised balcony away from the people." Be'ah-je only had to bend his wrist so as to tap his concave chest with those long fingers. "I, as young as I was, thought it was a very strange place to take us. Rubble from many collapsed buildings was piled everywhere. It looked like the whole city had come and was in this one place. And then they brought Hirah enAbdal to the center." His voice went very soft and Alad had to lean in to hear him. "It looked like he had been beaten, I don't know though because we were very high away. Those with him said many things in their own language and there were others who repeated it up through the crowd so all would hear, I think. The guards told us that he had been convicted of being familiar... with one of us and so we must watch his punishment."

That definitely lined up with what Alad knew of Hirah's past. "Punishment."

Be'ah-je closed his eyes and bobbed his head. "Those with him, walked away. For a little time Hirah enAbdal stood there. Then someone threw a piece of the rubble. Not small. Something that would take two hands to lift. Then more began throwing and Hirah enAbdal ran. His people chased him, hitting him with the rubble and my parents forced us down so we wouldn't see anymore." When he opened his eyes again, even Alad could read the sadness there. "But I did hear our guard say that he hated when they ran because then you had to follow the blood through the city to find the body. Then we were taken back to our place behind the gates. Hirah enAbdal never came again, so I knew they had killed him. It invaded my sleep for many years." Be'ah-je rocked back in the chair and brought one leg up to scratch the back of his bony head with his toes. "So you see, earlier I heard you call this one you are with Hirah and although it was long ago I remembered..."

"So someone you thought was dead is here and you wanted to ask."

"Yes. Is it he?"

"I don't know." Alad stared off at the stars again. When he found Hirah's system, the galaxy seemed a little dimmer. "I know him as Lieutenant Gahage Hirah. I've never heard anyone call him enAbdal. He says he was Abdal." Even though he didn't need to, Alad offered an explanation. "Tonight was the most he's ever told me about who he was before he joined up. He was sentenced to death, but that's the only way his people ever get off planet. I don't know anything more, really."

"I understand." Be'ah-je stood. "You are on your way to the Tithing?"

Most everybody on board, from what Alad'd overheard the past few days, was. "Yes."

"Well, perhaps I will have a chance to ask him myself then." Be'ah-je bobbed his torso in what Alad thought might be a parting bow. "Very much thank you Alad Deming." He added before heading out.

Alad forgot to respond in kind. He stared at his plate, uninterested any more in eating. Although he hadn't told Be'ah-je about Hirah's confession, it made sense that the lieutenant had been the one Be'ah-je had known. How many people in the Primacy got sentenced to death for being close to an offworlder? Especially with how Hirah described how limited the contact was between his people and the rest of the universe. Being pummeled almost to death by stones, that might break someone, tear a wire loose in their head. Maybe he should ask Hirah if Be'ah-je's account was true. Somehow, Alad doubted he ever would. If Hirah wanted him to know that, Alad would wait for him to tell him.

ANABEESH, RACINE SECTOR - QC1, PC1, P2, D18

17:68hr

“How long does this last?” Alad leaned in and whispered the question to Hirah. They’d been standing for hours listening to various merchant guilds pontificate about the importance of trade, supply lines and a bunch of *shudo* Alad couldn’t care less about. The glamour of looking off the dignitary’s balcony over a crowd of thousands come to view the Tithing quickly paled under an aching back, cramping calves, and sweating through the leather and armor of his combat dress uniform.

His posture martial, his demeanor poised, Hirah stood slightly in front of Alad and to the left of the gathering of high ranking officers attending the event. Red leather four paneled kilt brushing his calves, segmented spine armor and knee high black boots... Alad would have enjoyed the view more if there was any chance of getting Hirah out of that armor before next pay cycle.

Hirah turned his head slightly. Neck armor, emblazoned with the flaming gold Bennu rising from its own ashes, partially obscured his profile. “What?” He hissed back.

“How much longer?” They both kept their voices down so as not to draw attention from the General’s staff officers.

“Until it’s time. How you suffer for the army, Sergeant.”

Alad groaned, softly, but didn’t drop out of parade rest. He figured the civilians suffered through by drinking and eating and making this whole spectacle into a party. At least, since he wasn’t drinking, Alad didn’t need to piss. It kept the standing at modified attention mildly uncomfortable as opposed to outright unbearable. Of course, much longer and he’d pass out from dehydration. Polite applause pulled him out of his thoughts.

Good, four down, Alad tallied the speakers in his head, how many more to go?

There was a pause while the crowd worked the ovation out of its system. Alad felt it. The army, at least the contingent present, prepared to move. The General stepped forward toward the speaking platform. Hirah would speak, but the General and his staff would stand behind him.

Ever so casually, in a movement that belied the importance of the gesture, Hirah lifted his hand to hip level and held it palm down. The General stopped in response to the recon signal. Hirah spoke, his voice low, thrumming with expectation. "We wait." Alad was suitably impressed that a General obeyed his lieutenant. He must have thought very highly of Hirah.

As clicks went off the clock, they waited. A hush settled over the crowd. Alad tasted the anticipation in the air. Hirah watched the sky behind them—south east—the direction of the setting sun. The crowd shifted, grew restless with every moment.

Hirah drew in a breath. Alad tensed. The sun dropped an *etch* more. Bloody fingers of light hit the line of the roof. They blazed gold. Hirah strode forward. Alad scrambled to keep his assigned place. Hirah charged up the podium stairs. As he skidded to a stop at the lip of the dais the sun caught the metal flashing embedded in his armor. Light flared around him, bathing him in a halo of radiance.

Hirah flung out his arms, palms wide, fingers spread, and bellowed, "We are from fire reborn!" The crowd hushed as if Hirah had stolen their collective breath. "The burden of peace falls on those who do not fear death!" His cadence swelled with each word he spoke. "And to keep the peace we must be, at all times, prepared for war!" A frenzied roar swept up from the crowd below.

His shoulders relaxed as Hirah waited for the sound to subside. Hirah dropped his gaze and bit his bottom lip in a showing of both emotion and control. Slowly his hands came down until it looked like he cradled a fragile burden in his spread hands. He looked up. His eyes seemed to focus on each

person. Again the crowd fell into silence as though he willed it upon them. Softly, sincerely, he spoke. "Do not confuse the absence of war as being at peace." Phonics and view screens picked up Hirah's image, his voice, and amplified them for the masses. "Liberty is conceived in struggle." Emphasizing the point, Hirah clapped his hands together on the final word of each sentence. "Struggle forms the bedrock of hope." The volume of his voice swelled as he spoke. "Hope is the antithesis of fear." At each proclamation the crowd rumbled in agreement. "Fear," he drew out the word, giving it power, "oppresses us. Fear robs our children of their potential. Fear drains our will. Fear," he paused, dropped his voice to near a whisper, "destroys us." As though overcome with his own emotion, Hirah drew in a ragged breath. "For peace to succeed," Hirah framed the concepts with his hands and belted out, "for liberty to survive, we cannot fear war." Wild applause erupted below.

Hirah stepped back from the lip of plinth. Looking up, he seemed to consider the darkening sky. Once more he hit the crowd with that pointed gaze and they quieted. "When we are children we look to our parents to protect us." The words and his voice sounded eminently reasonable. The undertone said *I only tell you what you already know*. "We do not fear because we know they are there." With his right hand poised before his chest, Hirah stepped forward. "We trust them." Turning the palm up, he held out his hand. "They are the vigilant." Then he held up both hands as though pushing something away. "They keep harm at bay. They protect us," he brought both hands back, palms turned toward his chest then turned them toward the crowd and thrust his hands out, "from the world beyond." Letting the sentiment penetrate, Hirah fell silent and left it there, the pause, the thoughts weighing on the crowd's minds. Expectant they waited, hardly breathing in anticipation of his next words. It was a release, almost, when Hirah spoke again. "We do not fear even death," he punctuated his points with the beat of an outstretched palm timed to the words, "for we accept that our parents would take it upon themselves and save us from it." Another outburst of sound and emotion welled from

the masses. Alad marveled at the control Hirah's voice and actions had over the gathering of beings.

Now Hirah stepped forward, moving again to the absolute edge of the open balcony. Hirah lifted his chin and pulled his shoulders back. "And though soldiers walk hand in hand with death... we do not fear it." His voice dripped with the contempt he had for dying. "To live in fear of death is to die every day," he spread his hands and grabbed at the air, the rhythm of his actions matching his cadence, "every hour, every click." He spread his arms and turned his palms back toward the officers aligned behind him. "We accept death." He pulled the acceptance into his chest with his fists and repeated the acknowledgment and acceptance, driving home the point. "We accept chaos." The crowd roared with approval at each declaration. "We accept the role of vigilance. We accept your trust!" While keeping his left fist clutched against his chest, Hirah thrust his right hand out, "And we will keep harm at bay! You depend on us and we will protect you." Hirah stilled and waited for the cheering to subside. Then, giving each word of the next statement its own distinct emphasis, "You need not fear. Because only when you no longer fear can you live. We take death," he clawed his fingers and raked them back through the air toward his body, "upon ourselves so that you need not fear it."

He let the wild, emotional response work itself through another long pause. Hirah paced for a moment, giving the crowd movement to dissipate their ovation. Passing Alad, his face turned slightly so the crowd would not see, Hirah winked. He played them like an instrument and Alad sensed Hirah loved his music. It took barely a breath, but it meant more than a thousand declarations of faith and devotion to Alad. In that one instant, Hirah made Alad a partner instead of an observer.

Then, as though a thought had just struck him, Hirah stopped, turned back to the audience and held out his left hand perpendicular to the ground. "It is a commitment." Hirah leaned forward. "A commitment that we," again, although gentler this time, and turning some with the gesture, indicated the officers behind him before drawing his open hand in and

covering his chest, "are willing to die for." He pumped his fists in front of his chest on every hard syllable. "The steady dedication of our lives so that you have hope."

Hirah stepped to the edge, his hand balled in a raised fist and his face a mask of anger. "So that peace succeeds." It was as if he threatened anyone who would bring these truths harm. "So that liberty flourishes." His voice, thrumming with barely repressed emotion, rose, "We fight war that you may live in peace." Almost yelling, he threw his arms out and up and spread his fingers wide. "We are reborn in fire so that you may live in peace." A cheer burst from thousands of voices.

Hirah seemed to fold in on himself, drawing his hands down and close to his face. Like he struggled with a concept, he stared at his hands for a time. It was as though he gauged the pauses so that the throng could have release. When they quieted some, he raised his face to the crowd. "Peace... comes at a price. This price is not death," as he crossed his hands over his chest, Hirah offered a small, sorrowful smile, "for we who are reborn gladly pay that on your behalf. Peace is a commitment to those who protect it." Beseechingly, he held his hands out. "A starving soldier cannot protect you." A tragic expression swept across his face and he packed his words with haunting emotion. "A freezing soldier cannot be vigilant. A soldier without weapons has nothing with which to keep harm at bay." If he didn't know better, Alad would have sworn Hirah was about to break down in tears. One of the general's staff did and Alad wondered how many below joined that man.

Taking a deep, hard breath, Hirah seemed to collect himself. Again he held out his left hand to the crowd. "When your child asks if it is safe to sleep, you can say yes," eyes fixated on the audience, he swept his right hand back to the line of uniforms behind him, "because there are those who are not afraid to be reborn." Abruptly he twisted and switched his hands. "And when you wonder if you will have food on your table you will know yes, because there are those who are not afraid to be reborn." Now he brought both hands forward and lifted the words up with sweeps of his palms. "And will you have light and heat and live in your comfortable home surrounded by

family, it is because there are those,” he balled his hands into fists, “birthed in darkness, toiling in cold, who have eschewed such comforts and love so that they may be reborn.” He thrust his right hand at the twilight sky and his eyes drew the crowd’s gaze with his toward his fingers. “And when you look up to the stars in the night sky and you wonder how this all can be...” he pulled his hand back to his face, drawing their focus with it, “you will know it is because of those who have been tempered by fire,” he cut the air with his hand in tempo to his strong steady words, “reduced to ash and been reborn as the sword of peace!” The responsive, explosive ovation from the gathered masses was wild and deafening. Alad marveled.

Hirah backed away, fading from the crowds’ view into the press of military officials behind him. Once he slipped behind the General’s entourage, Hirah turned and clattered down the steps. Alad hurried to catch up to him.

They passed through an arch into the Honor Hall, rows of black and green stone columns marching like soldiers almost to the edge of their sight. “You had them worshipping you.” Alad couldn’t hide the pride in his voice... he didn’t want to hide it.

Hirah stopped. The rumble of applause broke like far off ocean waves. Looking back, through the arch, the General and his staff were almost visible. “I had them worshipping their vision of me.” Hirah’s voice minimized and belittled his own accomplishment.

From what Alad could see, the General and his staff basked in the ovation as though they’d created it. “Isn’t that the same thing?” Well, that was Hirah’s position as presenter. Make the Army look good.

“Is it, Alad?” Hirah shrugged. His dark face and light eyes seemed to mirror the dissonance in his question.

“Some. I mean.” Alad bumped Hirah’s shoulder with his fist. “No, I know a different person than that.” He did. “But, you do the same thing on a smaller scale with the troops. I’ve seen you. It’s why they call you Preacher Man, after all.”

In a question loaded with galaxies’ worth of questions, Hirah asked, “And what do you call me?”

Alad didn't even have to think. "Hirah. Mine." He stepped in close to Hirah's body. "You blast me with what you can do, but I don't fear it. I trust that you don't manipulate me."

"Why?"

"Because you include me in the joke." Alad told Hirah he knew and saw the wink earlier. The smirk on Hirah's face told Alad he was pleased and a little chagrined. "And the rest is... well it's you. I go with my instinct. That instinct tells me that the Hirah, up there," Alad pointed back to where the Generals and Colonels and Staff Officers stood basking in the praise Hirah earned them, "is a master of manipulation." Alad reached out and wrapped his hand around the back of Hirah's head. He pulled him close so that their foreheads butted up against each other, "But the one who wakes up next to me, bleary eyed and grumbling, is the truth." Alad breathed in the scent of soldier, of Hirah. "That Hirah is the truth and wants to be with me."

"He does. I do." Hirah looked relieved, like he'd actually worried that Alad couldn't separate him from the role he played. "Can you suffer through a little more of *that* Hirah, before you get *me*?"

"Duty comes first, Lieutenant." Alad hoped his smile told Hirah he understood, completely, the duty that bound them both. Then, the grin slipping wicked, he added, "Busting it up comes after."

"I promise it will."

At the sound of boots marching across a stone floor, Hirah and Alad parted. They peeled off to stand not quite side-by-side and at attention. Almost as one they slammed their left fists into the center of their chest plates. Given who it was that approached, they both added the slight incline bow of deep respect. General LaMaoy Ataria swaggered toward them, a grin filled with white teeth cracking an almost ebony face. Washed out and pale behind him, Colonel Miassy pushed a strand of brown-blond hair behind her ear, the com unit evident and apparently in use as her mouth moved like she spoke to invisible attendants.

“So, Lieutenant,” the General held both hands wide as he approached them. His combat dress armor was all gold trimmed in black. His kilt, breaking as he walked, flashed the gold Bennu stamped on black leather with every step. “When are you coming onto my staff?”

“Well, sir, ah...” Hirah backtracked like he knew if he stepped into that field it was studded with mines.

“Stop.” The General’s grin spread wider, “I know, you like the front.” Almost reluctant, he shook his shaved head, “Can’t say I blame you.” His smile held a longing... like for that of lost glory. Hirah and General LaMaoy Ataria locked eyes for a moment. What seemed like understanding passed between them. Then the General swiveled to focus on Alad. “What about you, Sergeant?” He barked out the question.

“Sir,” Alad struggled to come up with some answer, “I’m just a combat monkey.”

“A damn good combat monkey.” The General’s fist tapped Alad’s chest plate. “And a damn good sergeant from what I hear.” The bump turned into a pat on Alad’s jaw. Smirking, the General slung his glance at Hirah. “What do you think, Lieutenant Gahage?”

Seemingly far more poised and prepared, Hirah beamed. “I think I’m honored to have someone as competent and brave as Sergeant Deming under my command.”

“You, both of you, remind me of the old honor codes.”

“Sir?” Hirah spoke the question for himself and Alad.

The General shook his head, “When service meant more than just duty to the Army, but honor, devotion and sacrifice for your commanding officer.” Like he thought on something deep and more weighty than Tithings and banquets, the General added solemnly, “Soldiers bound their fate to that of their officers: live together, serve together, die together.” Alad realized he was referring to the Grand Army in the years before conquest, legends of soldiers risking themselves, their men, their families in unyielding service to their officers—sending their children to death as decoys and spies, killing themselves at any hint of dishonor.

Then he snorted and shook it off. "I don't have to tell you, Lieutenant, if you decided you needed a change in scenery." The General's touch moved to a fatherly grip on Alad's shoulder. "You could bring anyone you wanted with you. Do I?"

"When I decide to, sir," Hirah thumped his breast plate again, "you'll be the first to know... and I appreciate the extended offer." He even added a slight bow. Then, Hirah's eyes scanning the nervous assembly behind the General, added, "I think your aides, however, are orbiting at terminal velocity about the banquet we need to be getting too."

The General barked out, "Sergeant."

"Yes, sir!" Alad's spine stiffened and his hands snapped behind his back as he fell into parade rest.

The general, in a show of camaraderie Alad neither expected, nor was prepared for, latched his meaty hands behind both his and Hirah's necks and steered them through the hall. "Be prepared to be bored off your butt for this evening." His guffaw echoed around the stone columns. "I swear, civilians couldn't light a decent rocket if you built the damn thing for them and handed them a start-stick."

19:31hr

The party they wound up at lived up to the General's prediction: stiff, formal and stunted... Alad had attended Army funerals with more life. Beings swarmed in knots of conversation, pretending to tolerate each other. Frag, everyone had to be willfully blind if they didn't see the unbridled tension swirling through a room of golden mirrors, polished stone floors and lavish banquet tables.

Alad stuck to various raw strips of meat on boiled grains. At least he could vaguely identify the stuff as edible. Blue, orange and green ova deposits used as garnish muddled the waters a little, but Alad figured they wouldn't put out anything that could actually kill a human as finger food. At least the rot-gut rated top A.

As Alad took a bite out of something remotely grass-fed tasting with shredded brown, peppery flowers on top, a question hit him from behind. "How are you finding the Tithing, Sergeant Alad Deming?" Alad turned toward the unfamiliar voice that spoke his name. His mind immediately sorted the being into the female category, although as usual he could have been dead wrong on that. Golden robes swirled around a bony form at least half a head shorter than he was.

"I know you?" He sputtered, trying not to choke on the morsel of food and at a loss why anyone would pick out a lowly sergeant to speak to. "We've met?"

"No." Alad had no way to sense what emotions played across her pale mauve, shield-shaped face and a gash of a lavender mouth. He felt uncomfortable and pinned by her huge almond eyes of faceted purple. "You don't know me and we've never met." Two slick swaths of black velvet-looking skin split from the center of her head, dividing and subdividing down her

long back, creating the illusion of a fall of luxurious hair. Except the hair moved—on its own—and Alad kept finding himself distracted by the small flicks and twists. “I, however, know of you. It is my business to know of you. You are Sergeant Alad Deming of the Twenty-Nine Suns Division, with the Grand Army in the Maytanis Command.” She reached for his arm with a five fingered, symmetrical hand, each finger opposable and tipped with a broad, triangular split pad. Alad’s brain kept trying to fit it into his vision of a human hand... and not succeeding. “You are, I surmise, from many things, lover to Ubdhata Tzadok Gahage Hirah.”

When she touched Alad’s bare skin, it tickled like brushing the fur of some tiny soft creature. “Who?”

“Lieutenant Gahage Hirah.” She tipped her face and turned it towards a grouping of military and guild members surrounding the General. Hirah stood to the left of the General, his role as Presenter apparently granting and demanding his attendance on the man. “Once beloved son of the Primacy, Garrison Chief in the city of Uffren.”

“How do you know that?”

“It is my business to monitor the military and the members of the guild who speak with them.” She smiled. Well, Alad guessed that terrifying turning of the corners of her mouth up and out equaled an attempt at a smile. “You had an interesting conversation with a Water Guild Scion, Be’ah-je Emhawy.” The tendrils of her hair tensed at the tip and then relaxed... Alad’s brain sorted the gesture into a non-committal shrug category. “This I learned of, and then I had an interesting conversation with him.”

All of what she said and hinted at rolled into a memory from Alad’s life before he joined the Army. “You’re *kucek*.” Alad damn near spit the word.

“Of course.” Again the almost unconscious tense-relax motion of her tendrils echoed counterpoint to her words, “I would expect a son from the Guild of Weights and Measures would know.” Her fingers drummed a soft rhythm against his

skin. "It is strange you did not follow your siblings into your mother's guild."

Alad gave her a human shrug, "Do I look like a money lender to you?"

"No." Various tones resonated from her throat and, if Alad had to, he'd peg the sounds at amusement. "But I have a curiosity that my information cannot answer." Her whole face dropped slack for a click and then piece by piece reanimated. "Nothing significant happened to drive you into the heart of the Army. Did you leave because you feared you had no head for numbers?"

This time, Alad didn't even bother to hide his disdain. "I would be a very poor soldier if I couldn't calculate risk, odds and a thousand variables in my head." He shook his head and stared after Hirah. "No, it's more that I didn't have the temperament for that life. And right now, based on all the things I know about the *kucek*, I really doubt you give an *etama* about me, but you think that I am your way to get to Lieutenant Gahage." Even though he spoke to the *kucek*, the agent for the Secretary of the Trade Guilds, Alad watched Hirah. Something, someone, had captured his attention. The lieutenant stared across the room as though he'd seen his own double.

"But you talk to me still." Alad barely registered the question.

Absently scanning for what caught Hirah's attention, Alad responded, "My mother used to say, 'People will tell you it is dangerous to talk to the *kucek*.'" As though he were tracking someone through the crowd, Hirah backed away from the General's entourage and walked to his right. "But it is far more dangerous not to... because then they start to wonder what you have to hide."

"Your mother was wise." Her touch drifted up Alad's arm.

"My mother was very paranoid," Alad pushed her hand off his arm, "but it worked out well for her, in her position."

Then Hirah bolted. Now oblivious to the *kucek* and their conversation, Alad shot off after him. He ducked and wove through the crowd like he was dodging mines lacing a field.

About halfway across Alad lost sight of Hirah. Given the direction, the crowd dynamics of movement... well there were two doors. Alad picked the nearest to the directional line of sight where Hirah'd been heading. Almost bumping half a dozen beings, Alad rushed through the doorway into a cavernous hall of gleaming white stone. Cloisters marched along the left side of the hall.

Alad passed veterans on their retirement detail as security patrolling the passages. Alad hurried along, glancing down each sub-gallery. It'd be a frag-burst if he'd picked the wrong door.

He heard Hirah before he saw him. The familiar voice, but filled with strident, defensive tones vibrated with an answer—the words of which were lost—even if the impact wasn't. Alad slowed, dropped to a walking pace. He came up to maybe the fifth or sixth portal. As he peered around, Alad saw Hirah's back. A man stood glaring at Hirah. Pale skin, red hair rolling loose about his shoulders and deep, dark eyes... well, all of it aligned itself to handsome on Alad's scale. But handsome in that haughty, imperialistic air of *I know I am*. That attitude, alone, took the man down a few notches in Alad's mind.

The next words Alad could make out came from the red haired man. "Why aren't you dead?" They dripped with contempt and hate; enough to make Alad's skin crawl.

"I escaped my sentence." Hirah sounded like a little boy trying to talk his way out of punishment from his parents. Alad's heart cringed at the tone, something he'd never heard before.

The man spat, "You were supposed to die," as he turned his back on Hirah and stomped away to stare off the terrace at the lights of the city.

Hirah followed him like a pet craving his master's attention. "What?"

Alad almost died inside watching. He was frozen. Alad couldn't move to help, yet he couldn't back away.

Over his shoulder, like Hirah wasn't even worth looking at, the man sneered, "Neia enAbdal told me you would die."

"They sentenced me to death." Hirah stepped closer, his hands spread like he was pleading. "I escaped, Micahle. I understand it's hard to believe..."

"You understand?" Now Micahle spun, his whole body radiating contempt. "You never understood anything." His hand cut the air like a blade. "A blind little *eshat* scrabbling for crumbs when, if you'd opened your eyes and understood, you could have had more influence, more power than you could have imagined." He advanced on Hirah. For the first time ever, Alad watched his lieutenant give ground. "Neia was right, you were too stupid, too focused on honor and your dick, the small things, to see the bigger view. You ruined everything for me." Micahle's voice dripped poison. "I lost my posting and my position! Krtayurga, with its gas mines and metals, is one of the six biggest, richest postings for the Alluvial Guild. Do you know how long it has taken me to rise anywhere near where I was?"

That seemed to snap Hirah out of the spell. Sputtering with indignation, "You lost comforts." Like he couldn't believe what he'd heard, Hirah bellowed, "I lost everything I knew! I nearly lost my life!"

"And of course," Micahle snorted his derision, "the only one who lost nothing, Edda Neia. Do you think she laughed at us both? I know she did." He jeered. "She'd say, 'Just a little longer Micahle,' then she would tell me, 'bear it a little longer so you can tell me what he discovers.' She promised me at the end I'd be rid of you." Micahle laughed and the sound echoed hollow through the room. Hirah looked like he'd been shot.

"And then, when she was done with you, she said if I just let it slip once about *us* to another Garrison Chief then I wouldn't be pestered by Gahage Hirah and your annoying, persistent declarations of devotion any longer." Micahle rubbed his temples with the butt of his palms. "She played me too. Never told me it'd get me kicked off planet." Micahle huffed and snorted up a laugh. With a last glare he added, "I guess the army's as good as dead." Then he turned away and headed out onto the veranda.

Hirah shook. As Hirah started after Micahle, Alad finally rushed forward. "Hirah?" Hirah turned to him. Confusion, pain and rage all warred across Hirah's face. "What, who was that?"

"So it is you." the voice of the *kucek*, caused them both start. They looked back almost in unison as the *kucek* glided into the room. "Ubdhata Tzadok Gahage Hirah."

"What are you doing here?" Alad figured she must have been right behind him the whole time.

"I have been looking for him." She pointed to Hirah. "We have. For a while. It is very hard to track soldiers. The Army doesn't believe in sharing that information with us."

Regaining control, Hirah asked, "Who are you?"

Alad answered. "She is *kucek*." Then he had a question of his own. Looking off to where Micahle had gone, he stuttered out the question. "Who was that?"

"That man," Hirah shoved one arm out like he was pushing someone away then he rubbed his hand against his face. "Micahle is the reason I was punished."

The statement and the gesture didn't line up for Alad. "He is why they slit your nose?" It seemed like far more from the conversation he'd caught.

"No. This is petty." Hirah touched his nose with his maimed hand. "A minor punishment for becoming attached to someone." He must have seen Alad's confusion. "As Abdal, you are only allowed to love the Primacy. It is your mother, your father, your lover. They bring you women or men like they bring you food. For falling, they whip you and mark you."

"What do you mean?" Alad still floundered, trying to chart from point A to point B and ending up on the wrong side of the galaxy. "They tortured you and then tried to execute you?"

"No, this was because of Sey." Looking drained, Hirah shrugged. He laced his fingers behind his head and began walking, heading vaguely in the direction of their quarters... at least as far as Alad could trust the recon map in his mind. "I

was one of the pure children. I was not supposed to love anything but my duty, my faith.”

Quickly, Alad fell into step with Hirah. “But you did.”

He nodded. “I never saw my family except on days of worship. I was raised among the Abdal.”

Alad sensed the *kucek* behind them. He wanted to tell her to go swim in the afterburner wake, but he didn’t want to distract Hirah. Instead he just walked and listened.

“I studied, I learned war and politics.” Another shrug, a deep breath, and Hirah dropped his hands behind his back; parade position. A soldier’s comfort, the routine of motion, Alad knew it well. “The one person I saw everyday was Sey. He was perhaps two or three years or so older than I.” The bootfalls echoed through the stone passages. Alad could barely catch the rustle of the *kucek*’s robe. Hirah continued, “I came within the halls of the Primacy when I was five. He was there my first day when I cried for my own bed, he was there when I won praise from my tutors and he was there to ease my pain with words when I earned reprimands. And when we were older it wasn’t words that eased me.”

“How old were you?”

“When it began,” Hirah looked down at his boots as he walked, “I barely had hair, hadn’t reached my first purification. They forgave me a lot since I was so young.”

“Forgave?” Alad sputtered. “They slit your nose.”

Hirah paused. “And whipped me publicly.” He turned his gaze straight onto Alad. Those cold blue eyes seemed frosted over with pain. “I stood on the public grounds for three days. But I was not cast down. I bore the scar of my indiscretion, but kept my station among the Archimandrite.”

Alad reached out, touched the back of Hirah’s hand. “You’re missing two fingers... what was that punishment for?”

Looking at his hand like it was a foreign, alien thing, Hirah laughed. “Stupidity.” He started to walk again.

“The sentence for being stupid is they cut off your finger?”

“No. I cut them off myself.”

“*Axx ya!*” Alad grabbed Hirah’s shoulder, forcing them to stop again and Hirah to look at him. “You what?”

“I cut them off myself. As proof of my love.”

“For Sey?”

“No, Sey was long dead by then. My punishment for that first indiscretion was shame, Sey’s was death... by my hand.” He swallowed hard. “They sentenced him to die, held him down and told me to do it. I think they believed that in my heart I did not want Sey’s attentions. It is the common punishment for someone who forces a child. But that was not us. He was not any less of a child than I was. I couldn’t carry out the sentence. I went berserk, tried to fight. So then they held me down and killed him before my eyes. They held my face next to his and I watched him die. His blood covered me. I wore it for days while I suffered my punishment.”

“How? I mean...”

“Don’t ask any more.” He gripped Alad’s hand, still clasping Hirah’s shoulder and squeezed. “I’ve told you more about it than anyone ever. It’s done. He’s dead. I grieved. I can’t bring him back and I am dead to my people as well, so what does it matter.”

A silky voice sounded right at Alad’s side. “The other does matter.” It nearly made Alad jump out of his skin.

“Ah yes,” Hirah glared, “the *kueck* is still here to remind me.” Then he brushed off Alad’s hand and began to walk again. Almost like he knew she’d follow, Hirah kept talking. “You bleed into the background like a perfect spy. Is your sole purpose to goad me into purging my life before my subor... before Alad?”

He wasn’t wrong, the *kueck* kept at his side. “Frag her.” Alad jogged up to Hirah. “I want to know.”

“This,” Hirah held up his maimed hand, “was for Micahle, who you witnessed laughing in my face tonight.”

“You cut off your fingers for him?”

“Yes, he was a stupid choice in lovers.”

“Why?” Alad couldn’t imagine maiming himself for any civilian. “I mean, other than he’s an ass-head?”

“Micahle was unclean. An offworlder. I was a garrison chief responsible for patrolling the restricted settlements and keeping those such as him in line. One of the most influential posts on the rise through the Primacy. The Primacy’s governor of trade is usually selected from one of his staff. His staff is selected from the garrison commanders. Only those who’ve served as chiefs may rise to command.” Hirah snorted. “The Sacerdotal infrastructure licked my dick clean when I took a piss. Because they all needed what I had access to.”

“But, why, you know, maim yourself.”

“Because Micahle accused me of infidelity—twice.”

“You cut off your fingers ‘cause he thought you were getting it on the side.”

“No.” Denying Alad’s assumption, Hirah shook his head. “I confronted him about evidence I uncovered in an investigation into illegal texts and other imports... a black market in ideology as it were. And he told me, he accused me, of not caring for him if I believed that he would be a part of it. It was my act to ask him to forgive me for not believing him. I took risks for him. I was caught, with him. This time it wasn’t forgiven as youthful stupidity.”

“They sentenced you to death because he turned you in... at Edda Neia’s instigation.” The *kucek* reminded him.

“I was lucky.” Ignoring her, Hirah looked at and spoke to Alad. “I managed to make it to the wall of the offworlders’ compound, slap my hand on the gate and scream to be recruited.”

Be’ah-je’s tale, it fit in the big picture now. “I heard that you ran, I guess it makes sense.”

“Ahh, that’s the Primacy’s deal with the military. Criminals, outcasts, anyone that the Primacy deems unworthy to live... if you manage to outrun your sentence, well if the military regime

will have you then we're dead to our people anyways." He offered Alad a rueful smile.

"Very touching, it's good that you remember these things." The *kucek* stepped in front of them. "But, I need your help, Hirah enAbdal."

Hirah's smile twisted into a tight line. "For what?"

"Neia enAbdal is still a threat to us." She touched his chest. "The Union of Guilds."

Hirah snorted then asked, "And what do I care about the Union and Neia?"

"Because she still engages in smuggling." Twice she tapped Hirah's chest plate. "You were almost onto her. She used Micahle to destroy you. He won't turn, because he stands to loose as much as she does. The *kucek*, the Secretary of Trade, needs what you know to stop her."

"I'm not a civilian any more." Pushing her hand off his chest, Hirah stepped back. "Your problems with smuggling don't concern me." The words brushed her off more than his touch.

The *kucek* goaded, "She tried to murder you."

"Micahle tried to murder me." Hirah's tone spit venom. "I trusted him, I put my faith in him. Micahle betrayed me."

"With your help," she insisted, "we could put him away."

"What would that give me?" The laugh Hirah dredged up was laced with disbelief. "Satisfaction that he spends a few years in some penal colony?" As he stepped around her, Hirah sneered at civilian justice. "He's spoken of his family to me. They have enough money, enough influence, it won't be a hardship." He grabbed Alad's arm and pulled him down the hall.

The last thing Alad heard from the *kucek* was, "I will not let it end here."

He twisted and glared over his shoulder. "Everyone, everything I've ever cared about has been taken from me... will you do that to Micahle? Kill him?" When she didn't answer,

Hirah snorted, "I thought not." Alad had to wonder if Hirah really understood the reach and the power of the *Kucek*. Now that they knew where to find him, Hirah would be hounded. They might persuade the Army, at least for the duration of the tithing, to turn him over to their hands. If they wanted his cooperation, they'd find a way to insure it.

On the walk back to their quarters, Hirah and he didn't talk. Alad assumed that Hirah's thoughts were absorbed with the meeting with his past. Alad wasn't so certain he'd be as calm right then as Hirah seemed to be. In fact, he was fairly stunned at how controlled he'd been, given what Alad had witnessed of Hirah's rages. Maybe it was because he hadn't gotten physical. That seemed to be one of the flash points for him.

Alad kept thinking back to the General's off-the-cuff comment and Hirah's parting shot to the *kucek*. Yeah, the General had promised if Hirah went with his staff, he'd bring Alad on too. But that promise drove home the reality that they suffered their service at the need of the army. An army that half the time didn't know where all its troops were and who was attached to what command.

At any time, either one of them could get swapped out to another command. They could end up systems apart. Alad knew he'd signed up for the show, gave his body and life to the army, but that was before Hirah. Dying in service, well that was an acceptable risk, that was life for a soldier. But to have everything taken away on a bureaucratic whim, that ranked as unthinkable. The idea worried at him like a pack of Pace-Keepers on his heels.

He'd made fun of it with Ninda, but it made sense. A soldier who swore fealty couldn't be separated from his officer by less than death. The old oaths were still honored, revered in fact. Steps had to be taken so that the bond would be acknowledged. Alad knew that much, if not exactly what steps. Someone in the local headquarters would know.

As they stepped into their room, Hirah snapped the catches on his neck armor, ripped it off and threw it across the room. "Why did that *saye piss* Micahle have to show up!" The shoulder and chest plate went flying next. "And then that filthy *kucek*,

digging up things!” The remaining bits of armor received similar treatment. “Help us so we can slap him on the wrist. Blast them all to last pay cycle!”

Alad drawled out, “I was wondering where all that rage went.” He shucked his own Combat Dress with far less vehemence.

“What?” Hirah spun to face Alad. Already he was down to his boots, a tight black undershirt and red leather pants. His over-blouse hung limp off his sharp shoulders.

Unsnapping the two panel black kilt from his uniform, Alad draped it over a chair. “I would have thought you’d kill him, Micahle.” He popped the silver catches running from his throat and down the left side of his torso. “You backed down pretty quick and that’s not like you.”

“It was a long time ago.” Hirah yanked the red topshirt off before tossing it on the pile with the rest of his uniform. “Too long to hold a grudge.”

“That doesn’t sound like the Hirah I know.” As Hirah’s sergeant and his attendant, he should have seen to securing Hirah’s uniform. Instead he pointed out, “How about you pick that *shudo* up so you can wear it again.”

Hirah growled, “How about you get on your knees and let me drill that ass?”

That definitely sounded like the Hirah he knew. Alad teased back. “On the bed or on the floor?”

“I get a choice?” Hirah moved in close and ran his hand up Alad’s arm. All that anger seemed to refocus into desire. “On the bed, hang your ass off the end.” Alad went hard just hearing the desperate edge in Hirah’s voice. “I get more leverage that way.”

Alad grinned and backed up the few steps to the bed. Drawing out the show, he slowly popped the fasteners on his pants. The leather sucked on his skin as he pulled them open with his thumbs. He slid his thumbs back along the waistband and pushed the pants down. That wet, hot sound of leather peeling off his hips made Alad shudder.

“Don’t take them all the way off.” Hirah hissed. He worked at his own pants. Alad could die at the sight of that dark hair fanning up Hirah’s abs and across his chest. Running one hand up his pec, Hirah rubbed his nipple with his palm. It was Alad’s turn to suck in his breath. Hirah grinned, like he knew how much Alad wanted it to be his tongue.

He moved close and wrapped his hand around the back of Alad’s neck. Then he pulled him down. Alad took the invitation, leaning in and sucking that hard nub into his mouth. The hair on Hirah’s chest tickled his cheek. He pulled back. Twice he flicked his tongue over Hirah’s nipple. Hirah twitched. Then Hirah used the grip on his neck to pull Alad away.

Scrambling up onto the bed, Alad positioned himself: aft end in the air, knees spread on the edge of the mattress. He tugged his pants down as far as they would go. Hirah moved between his legs. Something cool and viscous dribbled down the crack of his butt. Alad shivered. Hirah must have grabbed the lubrication from nearby... they tended to keep it close at hand. Hirah’s thumb swirled the lube around his hole. The pressure increased. Alad took a deep breath and pushed into the touch. Hirah’s thumb slid inside. Alad grunted while Hirah worked the gel into his ass.

It didn’t take long for Alad to loosen up. Not like he was a virgin or anything. Alad dropped his chest onto his arm, “Quit playing around and bust me.”

“A sergeant ordering a lieutenant around.” Hirah pulled his thumb out of Alad’s ass then hauled off and slapped his butt. “What’s the Army coming to?” One of Hirah’s knees settled on the lip of the mattress next to Alad’s. It felt like, as Hirah settled between his thighs, that the other leg supported Hirah’s weight on the floor. Hirah rubbed his prick over Alad’s ass. His balls bumped Alad’s sac.

Alad moaned. He’d have demanded more, but then Hirah would tease him harder. Instead, Alad used his body to beg. He slid down a bit, which pushed his ass higher. That did it. The head of Hirah’s cock kissed Alad’s hole. Not even trying to breach it, Hirah bumped that tender spot with his dick. Alad

hissed in frustration. The hiss changed to a groan when Hirah grabbed his hips and pulled Alad onto his slick, hard cock.

Alad's fists balled into the sheet as Hirah's dick spread his ass. The burn felt as intense as the first time they'd busted. The pressure drove any hope of sane thought out of Alad's brain. He was a mass of raw nerves all focused on the dick in his ass. Bucking back against Hirah he urged him to pound. He could take it hard. He wanted it hard.

Hirah used the grip on his thighs to haul Alad an *etch* or so back. He crushed his pelvis against Alad's cheeks. Then Hirah pulled back until only the head of his prick stayed inside Alad's body. Alad reached back and wrapped his fist around his own cock. As he started to stroke, Hirah slammed back in. Maybe five times, Hirah repeated the withdrawal, wait and thrust. Alad grunted each time. It shredded him inside and out.

Then Hirah pummeled his ass. His dick drove deep. Alad used his free hand, palm driven into the mattress, as leverage to force himself back. He urged Hirah to fuck him harder. Hirah's balls slapped just above his own bouncing sack.

Alad heard Hirah moan. His fingers clawed into Alad's skin and his movements went jerky and erratic. Cum filled Alad's ass. A few more thrusts and Hirah pulled away. Alad's knees slid off the bed. He rolled over so that his back and butt rested on the mattress. Sweat plastered Hirah's chest hair to his body. Alad shuddered at the sight of it. Musky cum and sweat filled his senses. Jerking his prick with one hand, Alad reached down to fondle his balls with the other. Sparks shot down the back of his knees. Hirah bent over. He sucked the head of Alad's dick between his lips. With a groan, Alad arched his back. Fucking Hirah's mouth, Alad blew. It was almost painful as he shot his wad. Hirah took it all, kept sucking until there wasn't anything left.

Hirah pulled off and licked his lips. "Refill me on that a few times." He smirked as he stood. By the sound of his steps, Hirah must have walked into the head. That was confirmed when Alad heard the water running. Alad felt boneless. It was a damn good thing he was already lying back. He doubted he had the strength right then to get up.

The sound of the tap cut off and Hirah walked back into the room. Alad lifted his head just enough to see. As he moved, Hirah threw a damp towel at Alad. It landed on Alad's chest. "Clean up." Then he bent down and began tossing his discarded armor back up onto the bed. Alad sat up and wiped himself off. For the time being it would work, but he was going to need a shower and a trip to the head in a bit. Hirah's belt flew up from wherever Hirah was on the floor and hit Alad in the chest. Snorting, Alad pushed it off him. He got up on his knees and yanked up his trousers. The ceremonial dagger that all officers carried, Hirah's knife, caught his attention.

He reached out and plucked it off the mattress. A few cuts and a few words and nobody would take him away from Hirah. That was how you did it, at least according to the legends. He was a soldier, snap decisions, ones that affected him for a lifetime, were Alad's bread and butter. He looked at the knife. He looked at Hirah and he decided.

"Gahage Hirah." Half naked, his leather pants still gaping open, Alad knelt on the bed. His right hand clutched Hirah's ceremonial knife. As Hirah stood and turned, Alad pulled the blade from the sheath. Black ceramic seemed to suck the light into its core. Alad looked up and held out his left arm. He swallowed down the fear. Then he spoke, "Your honor is my honor." Alad drew Hirah's blade across his left forearm. Blood welled into the shallow cut. He placed the knife on the sheets between his knees.

Terror stamped Hirah's face. "Stop. You can't do that." Every soldier knew the basic ritual. Variations were used when you were inducted, when you reached rank, at military parades.

"Why?" Alad looked back at his arm, blood dribbled from the cut. "We can stay together this way."

"I'm not high enough rank." Hirah's protest sounded panicked.

It was a tremendous commitment, but Alad wanted Hirah to know that he wouldn't be taken away... Hirah wouldn't lose him. Alad dredged up a legend from his training. "The Droyande Brigade."

Hirah stepped up to the end of the bed. "What?" Sweat ran down Hirah's clenched jaw. "Ancient military history?"

"All of their officers were lost or had abandoned them." Cutting the drama out of the story, Alad reminded him of the brigade's claim to fame. "One sergeant was all that was left. To a body, the soldiers swore their oath to her. Held Droyande for thirty-seven days. They followed her for the rest of their lives."

"You can't do this, not now." Like his brains were about to burst out, Hirah clutched the top of his head. "If I do something stupid, you'll share in the shame."

"You won't do anything stupid." Rash, maybe, but Hirah was never stupid.

"Those fits I have." Swallowing, protesting, Hirah threw that at him. "Why Starlight hates me, why your nose is out of place. When those happen you'll be punished too."

Those were nothing. Alad weathered that storm and came out okay. "That's why you need me with you. So I can keep you from hurting someone who doesn't deserve it." He would be there again and again and as many times as Hirah needed him to. "Let me do this, the Army can never separate us then. We serve together until death."

"Alad..."

Maybe there was something more to Hirah's protests. "Is it that you don't want to be together?"

"No." Hirah barked out the denial like he'd been hit in the gut. "That's not it. It's extreme, it's above and beyond your duty."

"We serve in the Grand Army." Alad picked up the knife again. "Our lives are extreme." Repeating the slash on his right arm, Alad looked into Hirah's eyes. "Your cause is my cause." Again he set the blade down. After a deep breath, he picked it up with both hands and turned the blade so that the tip faced his chest. Alad ran the knife down his sternum, from the base of his throat to his navel. Blood trickled from the cuts. "Your death is my death."

Hirah stood above him, his face stoic yet still flooded with emotion. Alad knew, somehow, that words every cadet learned and few ever used except to substitute the Army for the person overwhelmed Hirah. Hirah crawled up onto the bed, touched the cuts on Alad's skin reverently, and brought the blood to his lips.

For awhile he seemed completely overwhelmed. He trembled. Hirah closed his eyes and a hard shudder ran through his frame. Alad almost thought he wasn't going to respond... that Hirah didn't want his service, his loyalty.

Then, reaching out to slide his thumb along Alad's chin, Hirah spoke the answering oath. "I shall never ask you to abandon your honor in my service." Hirah's voice almost broke saying the words and his eyes opened to gaze at Alad. For once the control of emotion and speech seemed to leave him. He took the knife from Alad's hand, slashing his arms in a match to Alad's marks. Again, substituting himself for the Army, Hirah gave the return pledge, "Your life is mine and I will treat it with the same sanctity as I value my own. I shall never ask of you any sacrifice I do not ask of myself. And if time comes," Hirah drew a thin line of blood down his chest with the blade, "that you give your life in service of me, I shall write your name with stars on the rolls of heroes."

Prostrating himself to reinforce his oath, Alad bent forward. Breaking from the core of the ritual, Alad laid his head on Hirah's thigh. It let Hirah know that this went beyond a mere vow of service. Alad smelled leather and soldier. This was his pledge to Hirah for forever. That he would follow him into battle, into death. Wherever Hirah led him, Alad would willingly go.

"Don't bow, Alad." Hirah's grip on his shoulder forced Alad up and back. "You shall always stand beside me." With a deep breath he added, "Until I release you from your oath." That wasn't part of the vow. Soldier's served until they died, unless their officer died first. Sometimes, on a death bed, the commitment was discharged. It kept soldiers during the Conquest from suiciding. That must have been what Hirah

referred to. Alad didn't want to dwell too much on it anyway. He was with Hirah and no one would separate them in service.

05:10hr

Alad eased around their room as he dressed in the early morning dark; his regular buckled boots, fatigues and uniform blouse—all black. Feeling naked without a weapon, he tucked his knife into the boot sheath. It wasn't exactly regs, but he guessed it wasn't as bad as walking around the Tithing with a loaded pistol. He'd leave that to the vets on retirement detail. As he slid his arms into his overjacket, Alad watched Hirah sleep. Hirah had been up half the night, finally drifting off to a restless sleep somewhere near dawn. Even with Alad's ability to snooze through complete chaos, he'd had difficulty with how Hirah tossed about.

Scanning the schedule, he double checked that he, or Hirah, wouldn't be needed until evening. They weren't excluded from any of the various sub-events happening around the Tithing—a hand full this morning, far more in the afternoon. Most, if not all of them, were boring enough to rate a pass. Well, the late morning spread set out in the finer areas of the public bath might be alright... if there was a way to skip all the dignitaries and do food, booze and a hot soak. Tonight's banquet, however, called for more speeches. That required the full military entourage attending General LaMaoy Ataria—specifically Hirah in top form.

Hirah could sleep in.

Alad could take care of business.

Down toward the bottom levels the Honor Guard had set up a command post. Alad headed there. Active duty personnel used it for a message center, commissary and rack during the Tithing. They also scheduled the Veterans for security duty in order to earn their pensions. Even with a digital map on his takepad, it took Alad a few wrong turns through the compound

to find where he needed to go. Long, open stone halls meandered along the cliff overlooking a green-blue ocean. The place had once been a palace or temple... Alad couldn't really remember which. He did remember being told that most of the massive building was carved straight into the rock.

The warren of rooms serving as HQ bustled with soldiers. A bit of searching netted him the desk of the Officer of the Day. The name plate on the desk announced a captain with a string of consonants that must equal a name. "Sergeant Alad Deming." Alad parked himself in front of the desk and saluted. "I need to see about registering an oath, sir."

The OD glanced up. The five arms Alad could see paused above various touchpads and data terminals. One held an oddly shaped vessel filled with something viscous and smelling vaguely rancid. "Excuse me?" It took a bit for Alad's mind to sort the insect-like features and hard blue skin into male or female... finally he decided it was a he.

Since this was a Tithing and in a metropolitan area, varied accommodations were easier to obtain. It meant a far greater diversity of species and subspecies in the local military population. "I need to register a loyalty oath, sir." Alad repeated, in case he'd been misunderstood.

The OD blinked all four sets of eyes. "You mean," when the words registered but Alad didn't see the OD's mouth parts moving, Alad's brain misfired, "like a pre-conquest oath." The breathy *voice* issued from somewhere beneath the desk. Alad didn't even want to try to figure out how the OD managed to speak.

"Yeah, a loyalty oath. I'm supposed to register it," Suddenly unsure, Alad hesitated. "I think."

"Hey, Vermisha," the OD called to a corporal sorting assignments, "do you have any idea how to register a loyalty oath?"

Vermisha swiveled her head around without moving her body. "Isn't there supposed to be a mark or something, sir?" Her fishbowl eyes went wide and the color of her skin cycled

from red through orange to yellow. "I'd have to look it up. It'll take me a few clicks."

"So, son, you're taking an oath?" The rumble voice behind him made Alad turn. The speaker appeared to be either pre- or de-evolved humanoid. Big, shaggy and thick featured, but humanish. The rank insignia indicated Warrant Officer, ret., while his name patch read, *John*.

"Captain Hmmmhmnn, sir," even after hearing the name Alad wasn't sure he could pronounce it. "I'm not finding it in the standard regs."

The OD hissed, "It's got to be here somewhere," and scuttled over to Vermisha's side.

Since Alad didn't really need to comment on the search he answered the big man's question. "I, ah, did so last night." He and Warrant Officer John were relative equals in rank, so Alad didn't bother with any real formality. "I want to register it," he snorted, "and no one seems to know how."

"Not used much anymore." John's eyes dropped to half mast and his tongue wandered around the inside of his cheek. "Haven't seen one in ages and ages, not since the battle of Dlehtf. I remember there's a mark on your skin." Even for a non-human and a veteran he looked older than dirt. And if he'd actually been at that battle, he'd outlived a typical human by four generations. "Sir," slowly he swung his head to look at the officer and his assistant still searching through lines of text, "why don't you try the Code of Ethics?"

Wow, Corporal Vermisha managed an exact duplication of a human sneer, "That's a criminal code."

"Can't hurt." John shrugged.

The OD chittered something. This time his mouthparts moved. Then the same breathy voice issued from the lower parts of his anatomy. "How do we know the officer in question wants you to register an oath? What if the officer declines your service?" Alad was stumped on that.

"Well, son," John thumped Alad between his shoulder blades and belted out a deep guttural laugh. "You better hope

he does.” Then he answered the captain. “As I remember, sir, if the *officer in question*,” he managed a fair imitation of OD’s raspy little voice, “doesn’t want the loyalty oath, it’s his right to kill this man. It should be in the code.” John cocked his head toward Alad and pursed his lips together for a moment. “Did you go through the whole thing?”

Unfastening the extended cuffs of his uniform blouse, Alad rucked up both sleeves. The thin scabs cut across his forearms. “Yeah, moon, sun and stars.”

The OD and his assistant debated portions of the code between themselves. Apparently, John had been hot on target with his suggestion. The veteran ignored them. Instead, John drew himself up to his full stature. “It is an honor.” He slammed his huge, bare—it’d be difficult to cut a retirement uniform sleeve to circle those biceps—left arm into his chest and bowed slightly to Alad. “Good luck, Sergeant.”

Two hours later Alad walked back toward their room. He held up his left forearm and rubbed it. Although the Honor Codes mostly dealt with morality offenses, dereliction of duty, and punishments for breaking military protocol, that’s where they’d located the regulations dealing with registering oaths. Stamped in red into his skin, just below the service bar code on the back of his arm, the burning wings of the Flaming Bennu. His service code was now forever linked with Hirah’s. The whole process overwhelmed Alad.

As he rounded the corner heading toward his quarters, Alad caught sight of someone standing in the hall. Gold robes and that silky not-quite hair... the *kucek* from last night. Apparently, since she waited by the door to their quarters, she was looking for Hirah to pester him more. Why couldn’t she take the hint and go swim in afterburner wake?

“Good morning, Sergeant Deming.” She must have seen him at about the same time.

He slowed as he approached. “Ah the *kucek*.” Alad grimaced. “Not a sight I want to see before breakfast.”

“Please, last night I think, we did not get off right.” She waited for him to come up in front of her before adding. “I am

Chesna Hayass of the Secretary's Assay. I have been instructed to secure Lieutenant Gahage Hirah's cooperation."

Alad snorted. "I'm not sure you'll get very far."

"I have my instructions." Her voice was smooth and measured, but even Alad couldn't mistake the threat in the next sentence. "You understand you are to cooperate with the Secretary's office." She spread her hands and the little black tendrils down her back did their slight lift. "I must speak with Hirah enAbdal."

"You can try." Alad tapped his fingers on the door lock. He was tempted to tell her what Hirah said the night before, but decided she could just deal with his wrath on her own. When he pushed open the door, the room seemed too quiet, too empty. Little things caught Alad's attention.

The bed was made. The drapes were pulled open and early morning sun shown through the room. The door to the bath stood open and no sounds came from inside.

What caused Alad's gut to chill lay on the bed. Across the foot of the bed, Hirah's Mess Dress uniform was laid out with military precision... in the funeral style: boots on the floor, leather trousers, kilt and over-jacket stacked just so. On the chest of the jacket sat Hirah's cap with the flaming Bennu on the peaked front and flames running across the bill. His combat dress sat racked in the case next to the boots. On the covers, to the left of the uniform, lay Hirah's dress dagger.

Alad didn't have to be a neurosurgeon to understand the import. Hirah had decided on a course of action he didn't plan to return from. Alad should have seen it; his lieutenant was not the type of man to just let something like Micahle's betrayal go. Now, Hirah's caginess with the *kucek*, his trying to dissuade Alad from the oath, and the restlessness all fit.

Seemingly oblivious to the import of the scene, Chesna stared at the view screen in their room. She turned to Alad and pointed. "There's a message."

A small indicator icon flashed in one corner—Alad's rank and name underneath. Terror, beyond any battle he'd ever

fought, welled up and sank its fingers into his chest. "Alad Deming," he could barely speak, "retrieve message."

A static picture of Hirah, his service ID, came up. "Alad." Hirah's voice was clipped, efficient; the voice of a man committed to a course of action. "Your service is no longer required by me." Sucking in a deep breath, Alad shuddered. He knew why, or guessed why, the cut and dried message. This communication was copied to Headquarters and their captain. "I release you to serve others as you have served me." Somewhere in amongst Hirah's effects would be a personal note on red paper... if Hirah had had time to locate any. The nearly lost art of writing the death script to one's chief retainer, by tradition, had to be handwritten. "I am sorry," caught Alad. Hirah's tone seemed more personal. "I couldn't tell you what I must do. But you understand. Any other time, I would have had no hesitation." Alad doubted Hirah meant that as a personal farewell. "I hid my intentions from you. I know you would have died before letting me do what I must." It was a plea to the army to understand, to spare Alad the disgrace, the punishment, Hirah would bring on with his actions.

"Alad Deming," the *kuvek's* strange touch drifted across the back of his neck, "he is saying farewell to you." Alad sucked down the panic, the sorrow... he had to think. "Hirah enAbdal did not confide in you?"

"No."

"Do you suspect," her hand drifted across his shoulder and she moved up close next to him, "as I do, that he seeks vengeance on Micahle?"

"I don't suspect." Alad managed to get it out without sounding as completely panicked as he truly was. "I'm certain of it."

"We must stop him." Alad's thoughts echoed her words if not, he suspected, for the same reasons. "I cannot let Micahle die. I need his confession; I need him to incriminate others." Alad allowed himself the hollow victory of realizing he was correct. "Help me stop him, Alad Deming, and I will help you save him."

“My mother,” Alad ground the words through his teeth, “said trusting the *kucek* was like trusting a *mychabhin* poison beetle not to sting you to death.” Turning slightly, he glared at her. “The *kucek* always stay with their nature.”

“Of course,” she almost purred, “you have so many options at this moment.”

It was taking a path through a mine-field or an active shelling... all choices rated equally abysmal. “What do you want?” The options stung him.

“Tell me where he is.”

“I don’t know.” He didn’t know, but he could guess. “He’s hunting Micahle.” Alad swallowed back the bile. “Active recon. The halls here are patrolled by retired military veterans. And Micahle, after last night’s reception, would not likely let him into his quarters. Hirah will be seeking somewhere crowded, where Micahle will be unguarded, both mentally and physically. Hirah will approach him as he did last night. Supplicating, submissive and passive, this time it will be a ruse. When Micahle’s guard is down, Hirah will strike.”

“We cannot let him succeed.”

While their goals diverged, their objective coincided. “We cannot.” Alad agreed.

Chesna stepped away from Alad and barked at the view screen. “Local map, real time, highlight Tithing related events for current date, morning.” A schematic of the local area with seven illuminated spots over buildings and gathering places appeared on the view screen. One was a good half day’s travel out. The six remaining scattered throughout the city. Chesna held her hand over the gold sensor panel at the side of the view screen. “Secretary’s access, Chesna Hayass read level *sovaide*. Sample.” A small hazy blue cloud emanated from the panel and around her hand; testing various genetic and stress indicators to verify identity. Because of the nature of the compound and its use for dignitaries and government activities, they’d kitted the rooms out with secure terminals. “Security code, e9t·00h·49·99·ssof. After access, reset security code to secondary.” Alad was impressed with the redundancy of

security and Chesna's apparent higher level access... because you didn't have to go through this major dance to view public transport routes. His guess, the system likely monitored both he and the *kucek* for trace pheromones and vocal tension, anything that might indicate possible coercion. "Locate subject Micahle Enil oElaw, Alluvial Guild Scion." The rest of the map dimmed. Only the spot over the public salt baths remained bright.

"Can you pinpoint him within the baths?"

"No. I haven't actually located him. I've located his Tithing access through the system. He has to be scanned to be allowed into the area of the private party. Now if we knew where your lieutenant was."

Alad sat down heavy on the edge of the mattress. He waved toward the screen. "Well, pull him up."

"I can't." Every tendril on her head stiffened. "The military blocks our access to that information." Alad guess Chesna, and probably the Secretary's office, was none too happy about that. "I can only access civilians and guild members."

"I think I might be able to." Alad pulled his takepad from his fatigue pocket and set it on a table. "Because I'm attending Hirah at this event, I may be allowed to connect with his codes." A few swipes of his fingers and he'd configured it for jump-connect. The tiny screen flashed the confirmation signal for an established connection. "Jump connect terminal. Overlay BaseFinder."

"That is interesting," Chesna glanced over at him with those gem-like eyes, "a sergeant can locate a lieutenant any time he wants."

"Not usually." He huffed. "But, I'd be a piss-poor attendant if I couldn't find my assigned officer to deliver messages and such. Especially since I'm bound over to him now." He shrugged. "Okay, let's see if this works. Sergeant Alad Deming, Twenty-Nine Suns Division, Maytanis Command. Honor attachment request for location: Lieutenant Gahage Hirah, Twenty-Nine Suns Division, Maytanis Command." After enough of a pause that Alad began to doubt his access, a

string of characters indicating Hirah's service code appeared on the screen. It was located near an open park where some athletic games were being held in honor of the Tithing. "Well, he's not where Micahle is."

"I wish we knew where he was going next." Chesna paced, the black tendrils down her back tense and vibrating. "Try to connect with him and talk him out of this."

Alad got hit with an idea. "Property locate necessity. Reverse route for Lieutenant Gahage every fifteen clicks between oh-five-hundred and current time." A string of time stamps illuminated where Hirah had been: three of the Tithing events. If Alad had to guess, given how long he'd stayed at each location, Hirah was conducting a methodical search for Micahle. With that level of focus, Hirah didn't want to patch up old wounds and forgive the man. "Frag. I wish we knew where he was headed next. I mean, I know he's searching for Micahle, but he could head to any of the three nearby locations next."

"Well, we have your takepad. We shall head into the city and keep track of him through it."

"No, the takepad's not a combat model." Frustrated, Alad ran his fingers over his scalp. "It has limited jump-connect capabilities. Half a stadion out and the search function I'm using won't be accessible."

"Well, I'll alert security to look for him and we should be fine."

"You can't." Alad jumped up. If security got to him, everything would be over. "I have to get to him first. If the army gets wind that he's stalking a civilian to kill him, they'll crucify him."

"How bad can the punishment be?" Chesna seemed to weigh the risks in her mind.

Unfortunately, Alad realized she didn't know the true issue. "That *is* the punishment for attacking a civilian outside the theater of war. They'll crucify him and me too. That's why he said he was releasing me. So I don't have to be stapled to a banner's cross-bar and be put on display while I die."

“But if security stops him before...”

He cut her off. “The army makes little distinction between intent and act.” The only option was for Alad to get to him first. Then he’d have to try and justify the whole death statement. Maybe with Captain Mark’s help they could paint it as a simple suicide attempt and not a homicide-suicide threat. Better meds and observation than death. “He’s obviously committed on a course of action. For that crime, they’ll give him the same punishment.” His family would have been appalled at his brazen defiance of the Secretary and the *kucek*. What choice did he have? “Civilians must always believe that the army protects them. They will have to use him as an example.”

“Alright. We know where Micahle is. Come, we’ll head there. Hirah eventually will find someone who knows where Micahle is so we don’t have much time.”

Alad tried to think as Hirah would. “He probably won’t ask. He’s in uniform. If he asked someone they’d probably contact Micahle and tell him a soldier was looking for him. It’d ruin the element of surprise.”

07:69hr

As Alad pulled his undershirt over his head, Chesna reminded him again, “You must not let Hirah kill Micahle.”

They stood on the upper terraces of the public bath, where patrons disrobed before descending the winding staircases into the open cold plunge below, or moving off into the warren of tunnels leading to various natural thermal streams tucked away in the mountain. “I know.” He growled and tossed his shirt into one of the cubicles. An old man seated off to his right, with an alms bowl between his feet, would watch patrons’ clothes and possessions. Alad didn’t want to disrobe, but strolling around the baths in full uniform would likely cause a disruption.

They planned to station themselves near Micahle and keep an eye out for Hirah. When, and if, he arrived, they’d find away to distract or neutralize him. Worst case scenario, Alad figured he might be able to take Hirah down and plead drunken brawl later. “Save Micahle and I will save Hirah... you.”

“A promise from a *kuccek*.” Alad glared.

“A promise from Chesna, descendant of the Refonad.” Alad had even less clue as to Chesna’s actual gender. Her nude body was smooth and sexless. “I need him alive. I must have what Micahle knows.” She placed her hand on Alad’s chest. That same, uncomfortable tickling sensation as the last time she touched him crawled through his belly. “Save him, I save you both.”

Alad was about to respond when a scream echoed out of one of the tunnels. *Pisk*, that could only mean one thing. And that one thing meant they might already be too late. Still in his fatigues and boots, Alad headed for the stairs. He careened down the treads three at a time. Below and ahead beings, in

towels or nude, ran from a tunnel. Alad jumped the rail and dropped to the floor. He had to push his way through the fleeing crowd. Several times he jumped into the shallow stream just to make headway.

"Tell them what you did to me, Micahle." He heard Hirah's harsh voice before he saw him. "Tell them!"

Dripping, Alad crawled out of the stream onto the wide ledge. As he rounded the corner, the tunnel opened out into a large cavern. "I can't." Micahle whined and Alad focused in on his voice. "I can't."

Hirah'd established a defensive position with his back to the wall. Both men were naked. What must have been Micahle's towel wrapped around his knees where he knelt. Hirah, one knee pressed into Micahle's back, held him tight around the chest—his arms pinning the other man's to his side. A little trickle of blood ran down Micahle's throat and mixed with his sweat. The tip of Hirah's combat knife pressed into the skin under his jaw.

"Do it." Hirah hissed. "Or I slit your throat."

A silent crowd watched from the other side of the room. Alad figured they were too startled or fixated by the violence in their midst to run. When Hirah jabbed the blade a little harder, Micahle screamed. "I turned you in to the Primacy." He babbled as the reek of piss running between his legs flooded the room. "I tipped them off so they would catch us together."

Hirah hissed. "Why?" His eyes wore that same vacant cold stare as they did in close combat.

"Because they'd kill you." Tears ran down Micahle's face. "They'd silence you."

Alad almost felt sorry for a grown man reduced to such abasement. He had to figure out a way to get to Hirah... not just physically. Hopefully, since he still seemed in some control, reason hadn't left him.

"Tell them why you wanted me silenced."

"You were getting too close. Neia enAbdal told me to get rid of you. I'd managed to throw you off twice, but I couldn't

forever. There was too much at stake, we had get rid of you. I turned you in to the Primacy and they sentenced you to death for being with me.”

“So you tried to kill me.” Hirah twisted the knife in the shallow cut.

“Yes.” The word came out as a high pitched scream.

“Tell them, Micahle, what you were hiding. Tell them what was worth my death. Tell them before I kill you.”

“Smuggling.” Micahle whined it out between gritted teeth. “We were smuggling.”

Lips right against Micahle’s ear, in a parody of a lovers’ embrace, Hirah hissed the next question. “Into Krtayurga?”

“Everywhere.” Micahle trembled. “We were connected everywhere, that was just part of it.” His frightened eyes sought out members of the crowd. Focusing on one human, a grizzled older man with soft features, he pleaded. “Help me, Avrar, I have made you wealthy with my contracts.”

“And I wish you had not.” The man pressed himself farther into the wall as if he wanted to remove himself from any taint of Micahle. “They all now bear your stink.”

“Neetiazw,” He screamed toward a squat, yellow being with wrinkled skin and a sour expression. “We have, our business, I brought you favor from three guilds.”

Neetiazw didn’t physically withdraw. Still he grunted out, “Be assured I will look at each of them to see what you have stolen from me.”

“No one stands with you.” Hirah’s wrist flexed, twisting the knife so that blade pressed against skin. “See your ruin written on their backs.”

Plan or no plan, Alad had to act. He ran forward, yelling, “Hirah.” He dropped to his knees a few feet away. If he tried to wrest the knife from Hirah’s hand, there’d still be time before he got there for Hirah to slit Micahle’s throat. Instead, he begged. “Don’t do this.”

Hirah blinked like he was trying to remember who Alad was. “Why shouldn’t I?” Hirah sneered. “He deserves to die for what he did to me.”

“Because he wanted you dead, out of the way.” Alad hoped there was some reason there, some part of Hirah that would listen to him. “If you do this, finish it, they will march you to the blood grounds, make you kneel like an animal and he will get what he wanted.”

“But he will be dead as well.” Hirah laughed and the sound sent chills running over Alad’s skin. “I will have vengeance.”

Somewhere, off in the tunnels, Alad registered the pounding of troops. “That you won’t live to savor.” Military or civilian, it didn’t give him much time. In a situation like this, if they got a shot, they’d take it and kill Hirah.

“Such is life, Alad.”

So he did recognize him. That gave Alad something to work with. “You hate me so much?” He eased forward. “So much that you will make me stand as witness to your death? By destroying yourself as he intended, that is how you honor me? Or am I nothing?”

Hurt registered in Hirah’s eyes. “You are everything.” He didn’t let go of his grip on Micahle or remove the knife from the man’s throat, but at least he was talking with Alad. “This is my honor.” He took a deep breath and smiled at Alad. “I understand. There are some sacrifices that I cannot ask you to make. This is one of them. I release you from your oath.”

Alad held up his forearm, the one with the Bennu stamped into his skin. “Do you see this, the mark on my arm?” He growled. “We had to find a veteran who knew of it. No one has seen it in generations. This mark says that if you die, I must die too.”

“I released you.”

“You cannot release me. The Army has bound me to you. Your fate is mine. Do you wish me to die, Hirah?” Alad reached for the knife in his boot. Maybe that might do it. “If that is your wish, I will gladly do so.” He pulled the blade out.

Wrapping both hands around the handle he pressed the tip into his skin just below his left nipple, where he could feel the indentation between his third and fourth rib. If he angled it right, a puncture would hit his heart—the soldiers’ suicide blow. “Tell me and I will make it so.”

Hirah’s eyes were wide. “Alad...” He still held Micahle in a death grip.

“I share your life.” Alad sensed Chesna nearby. He flicked his gaze to her and saw that she, somehow, held the civilian troops back with her presence. That was all the attention he could grant her.

“I forbid it.” Hirah’s order sounded like the lieutenant he was. “I refuse to let you throw your life away with mine.”

“That is not your decision any more.” All he had was defiance. “It is recorded and marked on my flesh. The Army will make me honor it. I understand. It is worth that sacrifice so that you may have your revenge on such a worthless piece of *shudo*.” Alad sneered. “Kill him with your own hands... Micahle who didn’t have the balls to raise his hand to you. A man who is so terrified he’s pissed himself. If you want me to share in your punishment, being disgraced because you killed a civilian while he’s naked, defenseless in a public bath—”

“A truly humiliating and shameful way to die, isn’t it?” Hirah managed to laugh. He didn’t sound as confident as before.

“It is.” Alad agreed. “A shameful way for a *warrior* to end his life. Give that piece of shit to the *kucek*. Let them deal with him. You have proved yourself and revenged yourself.”

“There will be no mercy for him.” Chesna spoke from across the room. Alad heard her move forward. “He betrayed our code. Do not betray yours for one such as him.”

“I lost everything.” Sadness and hate mixed in that one sentence.

“And I promise so shall he.” She coaxed with her tone. “The Primacy, they did not care to help us rectify what he has done. You died. He was banished from your home world. For them it was over. But your voice can rise from death. You

started that investigation. He tried to kill you so you wouldn't complete it. Betrayed your trust and your love so that he could spy on you, send you in the wrong direction, mislead you. Don't let him succeed. With what I have, with what you found, and what he did to you, they will strip him of everything. He will be put on trial before the Arsenal and the Guild Halls will stand and watch and hear all of it. They will parade him through the streets, seize his property, and banish him to the hell of a workhouse. He will pay far more dearly than simply by dying."

"Please, Hirah." Alad begged. "Don't honor him with a soldier's death at the hands of his enemy. Let him live as a disgraced coward and criminal. Ruin him, not yourself. I promised to serve with you. Let you command me. Take your battles as my own. If you die this way, as a criminal, convicted, executed, my honor dies too."

"I release you." Alad saw the tremble of indecision in Hirah's hands. "You're free to follow who you wish."

"You cannot release me." Alad shuffled forward on his knees. "I swore the old code." He set his own knife down and slowly reached out. Wrapping his hand around Hirah's wrist, the one with the blade, he reasoned with a soft voice. "I am your man." He eased Hirah's hand away from Micahle's throat. "If you die, I must die with you. Will you kill me too? Is his life worth mine?"

"No." Hirah whispered as he released Micahle. Micahle screamed and bolted, almost running Alad over. Alad ignored him. He scrambled to Hirah, wrapped him in a fierce hug. It took six civilian troops to pull him away.

12:19hr

They'd been confined to quarters. The aftermath had moved in a blur of civilian authorities, military police, and the *kucek*. It almost killed Alad to see Hirah in shackles. So much that he barely registered the same disgrace for himself. The best he could say was that he'd kept Hirah from being shot down like an animal.

Of course, now he got to watch Hirah stare out the window beside the bed. At least he'd stopped pacing like a caged beast. Alad stepped up behind him, pressed his chest against Hirah's back. "Things will be fine." Alad didn't truly believe it, but he had to say something.

"No." Hirah twisted to face him. "We're going to die."

"I'm sorry."

"What," Hirah ran his hand up Alad's chest. "That you didn't let me kill him? You're right. His blood wasn't worth it. He didn't deserve a quick death. They'll humiliate him. The *kucek* will torture him to find out who Micahle conspired with." With a snort he added, "I wish I could live to see it."

Alad rested his forehead against Hirah's. He twisted his hand around Hirah's fingers and pressed that touch into his chest. "At least you weren't so far gone into blood lust that you couldn't hear me."

"I will always hear you." Hirah whispered against his skin. "I am the one who must say sorry." His voice hitched. "I shouldn't have let you swear fealty. I should have let you be angry instead of dragging you into death with me."

"I follow where you lead." He kissed Hirah, long, hard and frantic. Hopefully it said everything he didn't have words for. That there was no need for apologies. There was no regret.

He was where he wanted to be, where he needed to be, for however long they had left.

Alad drew the kiss out, savoring the feel of Hirah's lips against his own, the taste of Hirah's mouth, the feel of his tongue fighting with his own. He wanted to experience all of it. A final memory to sustain them. Once the army decided their fate, they wouldn't waste time in carrying out their sentence. This might be the last they had. Alad slid his hand down, popped the fasteners on Hirah's fatigues.

Hirah's prick was full, already slick with desire. Alad wrapped his hand around that thick cock and stroked. Hirah grabbed the back of Alad's skull, pulling him harder against his mouth. Somehow, his touch felt as desperate and needful as Alad.

Hirah groaned and pushed Alad back. Shoving his fatigues down as he moved, Hirah turned to the window. He pressed his hands against the surface, presenting his butt to Alad. Nice and taut, his ass just begged to be sucked. Alad dropped to his knees and pulled Hirah's cheeks apart. Then he ran his tongue along the crack of his ass. As Alad shoved inside that tight hole, Hirah's flavor exploded. Damn, he tasted good. Hot and heady, the taste of a warrior seeped into his system.

Hirah shuddered and pushed back, urging Alad to fuck him with his tongue. It felt so good to bite his balls, his ass. Warm flesh slid in Alad's hand as he reached around to tease Hirah's pulsing cock. Hirah writhed and moaned, "*Pisk*, yes."

Alad broke away from kissing, sucking and biting to glance around. On the shelf, next to the bed, where Hirah'd left it the night before, Alad found the lube. He had to stop stroking for a moment to grab it and drizzle it over his hand. Then, greased up, Alad slid two fingers into Hirah's ass. Alad fucked Hirah's hole with his touch. Probing, rubbing and searching, he opened Hirah up. Hirah shuddered. He groaned and bucked against Alad's hand.

Bent over, butt thrust high in the air, Hirah looked stunning. Alad trembled with anticipation. Standing, he shoved his own fatigues down and pulled himself out. A shudder hit him as he

drizzled the gel over the head of his cock. After rubbing the lube over his skin, Alad grabbed his aching prick and slid it along the crack of Hirah's ass. His spunk left a slick trail down Hirah's flesh.

Alad pushed against Hirah's tight hole. Hirah rocked back into the pressure. Sweat coated his back. With a groan Alad shoved inside. The muscles of his stomach froze and thawed a thousand times over. Tight, slick heat gripped him and he growled out "Hirah!" Pushing past the resistance, Alad buried his cock with one long, deep thrust in Hirah's ass. For a moment he stayed there, deep inside Hirah's hot body, savoring the feeling of being surrounded. Then Alad pulled back. He looked down to where their bodies met—Hirah's hole stretched tight around the shaft of his prick. Another shudder rocked him. Sharing it all, sharing everything as equals, as lovers, as soldiers who would soon die together.

Then Alad watched as Hirah's ass devoured his cock. As Alad's prick slammed into Hirah's hole, he leaned forward and nipped at the back of Hirah's neck. Fingers searching, Alad found Hirah's cock and stroked. That hard dick throbbed, hot against Alad's hand. The heat as he spread Hirah clawed through his frame. Alad's cock burned with the heat of Hirah's body. He was coated in sweat as Hirah bucked against him. Each thrust drove him deeper into Hirah's ass.

Hirah moaned, his grunts becoming more strident, more urgent with every thrust. Biting his lip, Alad slammed into his tight hole. Hirah's body clamped down on Alad's prick. White hot cum boiled over Alad's hand as Hirah shouted out. Wracked by convulsions, Alad lost control. Exploding, burning from the inside out, he yelled, "Fuck!" as fire tore through him.

Trembling, Alad stumbled and sat down heavy on the bed. Hirah, his forehead pressed against the glass, rolled his face to stare at Alad. Sweat beaded his skin. "Maybe," he panted out, "they'll let us suicide."

"Quick death?" Alad managed to dredge up a laugh. "Preferable, I guess." They didn't talk about anything much after that. There wasn't anything to say. They were together. They sat shoulder to shoulder. Alad's hand draped across

Hirah's knee with Hirah's grip covering his hand. Silently spending their last hours watching the sun drift down into late afternoon.

About the time Alad started to wonder if they were going to be left to starve, the door to their room burst open. They struggled to their feet as Colonel Miassy stepped inside. "Lieutenant Gahage Hirah. Sergeant Alad Deming." She greeted them with a curt nod.

Hirah's saluted and stepped forward. "I was wondering when you were going to come."

"Colonel Miassy, sir." Alad added his own salute. "I would have thought they'd just send the MPs."

She didn't respond. Instead she held open the door. "Would you please come with me?" Alad thought it was awfully polite for an order, but didn't doubt it was one. They moved out into the hall. Four veterans from the security detail stood waiting. Again, Alad wondered where the actual MPs were.

As Colonel Miassy started walking, a familiar being with lavender skin and gold robes stepped away from the wall and fell into step beside the colonel. "I believe you've met Chesna Hayass."

He and Hirah followed, bounded by their four guards. Hirah, snorted, "You could say that."

The rest of the long walk was made in silence. They passed gallery upon gallery thronged with spectators. Alad felt like a sacrificial animal being led to the pyre. Their escort finally led them into a large hall that once may have been a throne room. Now it played host to a hastily convened military tribunal. Five of the most senior officers in attendance, including General LaMaoy Ataria, his dark face impassive, stood upon a raised platform of stone. Behind them an open vista of the sea, lit with late golden sun, spread across the waves. It promised the freedom Alad knew they'd lost.

A blue rug, the color of truth, lay on the steps leading to the officer's dais. Witnesses called against them would stand there. It was empty. Alad wondered where Micahle was. The right of

accusation belonged to him, normally the victim stood on the field of truth while the proceedings moved forward. Even if the man had some explaining to do about his own confession... that was a civil matter, not the army's, and he had the right to be at Hirah's trial.

Civilians and military personnel lined the walls. A square of red cloth, signifying justice, had been spread below the platform. Colonel Miassy stepped up, to the left, onto the first step and turned to face them. She, apparently, would act as their prosecutor. The *kucek* stood just below her as was the Secretary's prerogative. After all, Hirah had attacked a Guild member.

Following Hirah, Alad started to step onto the red cloth. Hirah stopped and turned. "Alad, stay back."

"No." He hissed. "Your fate is my fate."

"You did not do this." A desperate air crept into his whisper. "You can distance yourself by standing behind me." Although they would both die, Alad realized Hirah was trying to save him the worst of the punishment. If he did not step onto the cloth, the army might just hang him instead of subjecting him to the slow torture of crucifixion. "I will not let you sacrifice your honor for something I did of my own will."

Alad stepped onto the cloth. "I will keep my honor by standing with you."

"Lieutenant Gahage Hirah." The general's booming voice caused Hirah to turn and Alad to look up. "You are here before us for the crime of attacking a civilian, what say you?"

Hirah stood at attention. The bearing of a soldier settled onto him. Alad was never so proud to be in someone's service. Even, without pleading or fear, Hirah answered. "I did so, sirs."

"What defense do you offer?" Hirah had a right to speak in his own defense. Not that such defenses ever mattered much. The army never moved toward conviction without being certain of their ability.

Again he spoke. "I have none, sirs."

Colonel Miassy spoke next. “Chesna Hayass, the Secretary’s Office has requested to intervene.”

“Yes.” The *keucek*, bowed. “Honored Tribunal, we have.” Alad suddenly felt like he stood in some play. Every move and word felt oddly scripted.

“It is out of procedure.” But the general sounded as if he expected the breach.

“We understand that, your Honors.” Hours had passed since their arrest. A lot of hours left a lot time for negotiations. A tiny hope that they might live fluttered through Alad’s gut. “If you allow my questions before you pronounce sentence, I think you will understand the Secretary’s request.”

He repeated, “It is out of procedure.” The protest sounded hollow at best.

“He attacked, attempted to kill, a Guild member under the Secretary’s jurisdiction, during Tithing.” Either Alad looked for hope where none existed, or Chesna was a better actor than the general. “We could petition to have jurisdiction removed for such a crime.” Given what he knew of the *keucek*, Alad was inclined to believe that she was a performer. “In a few cycles, as two able soldiers rot in the brig, the matter will come for debate. Perhaps by next Tithing we would have a decision.”

The general paused, as though he were thinking. What he did not do was confer with any of the other ranking officers. Finally, he nodded. “The tribunal grants the Secretary’s request.”

“Lieutenant Gahage.” Chesna faced them. “What is your full name?”

“Gahage Hirah.”

She smiled with that weird up and out maneuver of her mouth. “Your name before you joined the Grand Army.”

Confused, Hirah looked toward the general. Alad sensed Hirah was as suspicious of the whole thing as himself. “The questioning by the Secretary’s advocate is allowed, Lieutenant.” General LaMaoy Ataria extended his hand toward the *keucek*, directing their attention back to her. “You must answer.”

Hirah spared a confused glance back at Alad. Alad only had second to answer with a slight shrug. Hirah pressed his lips tight and seemed to really weigh the question. Then he slowly answered. "Ubdhata Tzadok Gahage Hirah enAbdal."

"You were Abdal, a Sidesman, of the Primacy of Krtayurga, correct?"

"Yes."

"Were you sentenced to death by the Primacy?"

"Yes."

"In what capacity did you serve the Primacy, just prior to your death sentence?"

Hirah started to protest, "I don't see..." Abruptly he stopped and responded. "I was third garrison chief of the city of Uffren, in the offworld restricted sector."

Chesna stepped down and toward them. "Who was your superior in that position?"

"First garrison chief, Ubdhata Edtatl Edda Neia enAbdal." Alad could feel the suspicion flowing out of Hirah's attitude, the way he held his body.

"How did you first come to know the man you attacked, Micahle Enil oElaw?"

"He was a member of the Alluvial Guild assigned to Uffren to monitor the trade of minerals, ores and gases."

"Just before your death sentence, were you involved in any investigations?"

"I don't see..." Again the protest died on his lips.

Colonel Miassy instructed. "Answer the Secretary's question."

"Yes."

"What investigation?"

"Smuggling." Alad's hope faltered. Maybe they just wanted to record Hirah's statement under oath before he died. That might be the reason behind the elaborate charade disguised as a tribunal. "Heretical texts and contraband."

“Had you informed your superiors of your investigation?”

“I had told them I had leads and suspicions. And that I felt I was nearing those responsible.”

“And during your investigation did you meet Micahle Enil oElaw?”

“I met Micahle at that time, not as a result of the investigation, but during the same time frame.”

“You started a relationship with Michael, an intimate relationship at that time.”

“Yes.”

“Why are you missing the first joints on your fingers?” Chesna pointed to Hirah’s left hand. “I remember you told me that you cut them off because Micahle accused you of being unfaithful, because you accused him of being a part of this smuggling.”

“You want the whole story don’t you?” Hirah huffed. Alad guessed his patience faded fast. “You said you’d get it from me... so I guess you need it before I die.” His growl echoed Alad’s current suspicion. “I wanted him. What else can I say? And I was blind. I’d find references to him in my investigations... I’d confront him... and he’d lure me out with sex.” Instead of waiting for questions and prompts, Hirah fed her the story she apparently wanted. “I should have known. I was stupid for not knowing.” Contempt for the man he had been flowed under Hirah’s voice. “But I had so few people to believe in me. That final day, I remember. I went to him. I found a token, one I’d given him, on the person of a smuggler. I guess my rank badge was worth something off world. I’d already cut the joints off my fingers. What more could I give him. After all, the code keepers of the Primacy counseled me. Ablations of faith were expected. They told me to scar my face or my body in ways that didn’t impair function. Everyone assumed I’d maimed myself in devotion.” A hard bitter laugh swelled up from Hirah. “But there was proof. Proof that he was involved. I took the badge and I went to Micahle and I asked why this base person held a token of my love. He laughed at me.”

"Ultimately that relationship resulted in your death sentence, is that correct?"

"You are always correct." Hirah snapped. "It is a transgression punishable by death to have a relationship with an offworlder."

"Several days ago, on the first night of the Tithing, I observed you having a very heated conversation with Micahle. Do you remember that conversation?"

"I don't understand what that matters." Hirah grumbled and fell silent. Alad understood how this all humiliated Hirah. Finally, before another officer could prompt him, Hirah answered. "He said, 'Why aren't you dead. She promised that you'd be dead.' Then he said, 'I had to put up with your infantile sexual obsession, just to keep you away from her, and then you got me exiled. She promised I wouldn't be bothered again by you.' And so I was sentenced to death, apparently on as a plot by them."

"To death by stoning?"

"Yes."

"But you made it to the gates of the city and were allowed to join the army?"

"Yes. This is all you wanted of me." Again, Hirah growled. "You got it from his mouth yesterday."

"Do you remember, on your transport off Krtayurga, speaking with a Zibctor of the Secretary's office?"

"A *kucck*? No." Alad was as confused as Hirah sounded. "What I remember is having half the bones in my body broken, being in intense pain, when I wasn't unconscious." Another bitter laugh sounded. "If I said anything it was probably screaming for the death of whoever betrayed me. What I remember is, I promised myself, if I survived, I'd find a way to revenge myself on them... and then Alad talked me out of it." The first hint of a plea for mercy crept into Hirah's voice. "He should be forgiven because of that."

Chesna ignored him. "Do you know you shouted, repeatedly, for vengeance?"

He snorted. "I probably did."

"The Secretary," Chesna folded her arms into the sleeves of her robe. She bowed to Hirah. "Accepts your claim of vendetta."

Colonel Miassy argued. "He is a soldier, he cannot claim vendetta against a civilian."

"He was under the Secretary's jurisdiction at the time." Chesna did not turn to face the officers. "He called for vendetta in those first hundred hours before the Secretary's agents turned Hirah enAbdal over to the military. He was a civilian."

Another officer cut in sharply. "He was not a civilian at the time of the attack."

"The Secretary has asked that I impose on his behalf and remind the tribunal that we have jurisdiction of the issue of vendetta." For all the drama in their words, how they spoke, Alad sensed no actual conflict between the participants on the stage above them. "We accepted it. We recorded it." She drew her hand out of her sleeve and swept it across the room, indicating the viewing citizens. Then she turned to the assembled officers on their raised platform. "As this is a Guild matter, you have no authority to condemn this man... unless you wish to take it up with the Secretary himself. We would hate to strain relations over the issue of an attack on a smuggler."

"I think that won't be necessary." The General managed to suppress the twitch at the corner of his mouth. He took a deep breath and boomed out. "Lieutenant Gahage Hirah, this Tribunal finds that the act you stand accused of is not within our jurisdiction. The Army will cooperate with any proceedings the Secretary's Office wishes to institute."

"As we have already found this to be a matter of vendetta," Chesna's words rang out as commanding. "We decline to prosecute. We do, however, request that you make the lieutenant available for any further proceedings."

"Understood." The General inclined his head toward where Hirah and Alad stood. "As such, Lieutenant, you are remanded back to your unit. Sergeant, you're free to follow your officer."

As they watched, stunned, the officers filed off the dais, Colonel Miassy, accompanied by the *kucuk*, walked over to where Hirah and Alad waited. "Lieutenant Gahage." They both saluted her. "The General wishes to remind you that this little *detour* does not excuse you from your duties tonight. I suggest your retire to your quarters and get dressed." Then she smirked. "You'll have to wait until after to celebrate just how much the Secretary's office wanted you kept alive."

Instead of responding to the snipe, Chesna spoke to Alad. "Sergeant, I am a person of my word." She offered up her disturbing smile. "I am honored, Hirah enAbdal, to have met you and find someone who instills such loyalty in others."

After the Colonel dashed off to attend the General and Chesna retreated toward an enclave of Guild members, Hirah mumbled to Alad. "Why do I suddenly feel dirty?"

"Politics." Alad answered dryly. "It's an ugly sport." Since there was nothing more to be done at the tribunal and they had orders to prepare, they started the walk back toward their quarters. An hour ago, Alad didn't envision he'd be walking anywhere without an escort of guards. Just before their door, he finally asked, "So what now?"

His hand on the door, Hirah paused. "Now, Alad?"

"What happens now?"

Hirah shook his head and almost laughed as he pushed through the door into their room. "I think the General is waiting for us." Alad followed, shutting the door behind them, and then moved to stand beside Hirah at the window. Lights flickered in the city below, across the water and in the heavens above; earth and space melding into one.

Taking a deep breath, Hirah grabbed Alad's bicep and squeezed. "Come and stand by my side while I make the Army look good. And then, maybe, in a few days we'll sort out what actually happened." After another, deeper and ragged breath, Hirah used the grip on Alad's arm to pull him into a hard hug. "Alad..."

Overwhelmed, Alad shook. He pressed his face into Hirah's neck, reveling in the chance to be held by him again. "Yes, Hirah."

"Thank you for your loyalty." Hirah whispered the words into the skin behind Alad's ear. "Thank you for your duty. It takes a brave man to follow his officer into death. It takes a braver man to go against his officer's wishes and talk him out of a dishonorable course of action."

It was Alad's turn for a ragged breath. He pulled back enough to stare Hirah in the eye. "Can I ask one small favor?"

"Anything." Hirah hugged him close. "Anything at all."

As he wrapped his arms around Hirah, held him just as tight. "Don't make me have to make that choice again." He laughed. "Battles I can stand. Give me a gun and let me kill something for you. Let me leave the persuasion to you." Then he kissed Hirah and drowned himself in service.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

JASON EDDING grew up in Maine and his family lived in several towns, mostly in the southern and western part of the state. He spent his time reading and when he wasn't reading, he was imagining the things he read. When he was around 9 or 10, he began writing one page short stories that sometimes became two or three pages.

Jason has a love of animals, especially cats. Combined with this love and a desire for higher education, he went to school to become a veterinary assistant. It was after graduation that he began to write seriously, and now that's how he spends all of his free time. Jason is currently seeing where the muse takes him but has plans to return to the Dark Robe Society world.

"Writing isn't work," Jason says. "To me writing is an absolute joy. It's like creating a world from nothing and hoping there's something in it that others will find enjoyable too."

Jason would love to hear from readers, you can find him on the web at

<http://jasonedding.books.officelive.com/default.aspx>

JAMES BUCHANAN, author of over ten novels and single author anthologies, lives in a 100 year old Craftsman in Pasadena with her SexyGuy, two demon spawn and a herd of adopted pet dogs, cats, rats and fish. Between managing a law practice with SG, raising kids and writing books, James volunteers with the Erotic Author's Association and Liminal Ink as well as coordinates the newsletter for the ManLoveAuthor's co-op. James has spoken and read at conferences such as Saints & Sinners and the Popular Culture Association. In the midst of midlife crises, James bought and learned to ride a Harley – it went with the big, extended-cab pickup. James has been a member of CorpGoth since 1993 and been known to wear leather frock coats to court. If you don't

find James at the computer working on her next book, you're liable to find her out on the bike.

Visit James on the web at:

<http://www.james-buchanan.com/>

<http://eroticjames.livejournal.com/>

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/eroticjames/>

THE TREVOR PROJECT

The Trevor Project operates the only nationwide, around-the-clock crisis and suicide prevention helpline for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth. Every day, The Trevor Project saves lives through its free and confidential helpline, its website and its educational services. If you or a friend are feeling lost or alone call The Trevor Helpline. If you or a friend are feeling lost, alone, confused or in crisis, please call The Trevor Helpline. You'll be able to speak confidentially with a trained counselor 24/7.

The Trevor Helpline: 866-488-7386

On the Web: <http://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

THE GAY MEN'S DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PROJECT

Founded in 1994, The Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project is a grassroots, non-profit organization founded by a gay male survivor of domestic violence and developed through the strength, contributions and participation of the community. The Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project supports victims and survivors through education, advocacy and direct services. Understanding that the serious public health issue of domestic violence is not gender specific, we serve men in relationships with men, regardless of how they identify, and stand ready to assist them in navigating through abusive relationships.

GMDVP Helpline: 800.832.1901

On the Web: <http://gmdvp.org/>

THE GAY & LESBIAN ALLIANCE AGAINST DEFAMATION/GLAAD EN ESPAÑOL

The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) is dedicated to promoting and ensuring fair, accurate and inclusive representation of people and events in the media as a means of eliminating homophobia and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation.

On the Web: <http://www.glaad.org/>

GLAAD en español:

<http://www.glaad.org/espanol/bienvenido.php>

If you're a GLBT and questioning student heading off to university, should know that there are resources on campus for you. Here's just a sample:

US Local GLBT college campus organizations

<http://dv-8.com/resources/us/local/campus.html>

GLBT Scholarship Resources

<http://tinyurl.com/6fx9v6>

Syracuse University

<http://lgbt.syr.edu/>

Texas A&M

<http://glbt.tamu.edu/>

Tulane University

<http://www.oma.tulane.edu/LGBT/Default.htm>

University of Alaska

<http://www.uaf.edu/agla/>

University of California, Davis

<http://lgbtrc.ucdavis.edu/>

University of California, San Francisco

<http://lgbt.ucsf.edu/>

University of Colorado

<http://www.colorado.edu/glbtrc/>

University of Florida

<http://www.dso.ufl.edu/multicultural/lgbt/>

University of Hawai'i, Mānoa

<http://manoa.hawaii.edu/lgbt/>

University of Utah

<http://www.sa.utah.edu/lgbt/>

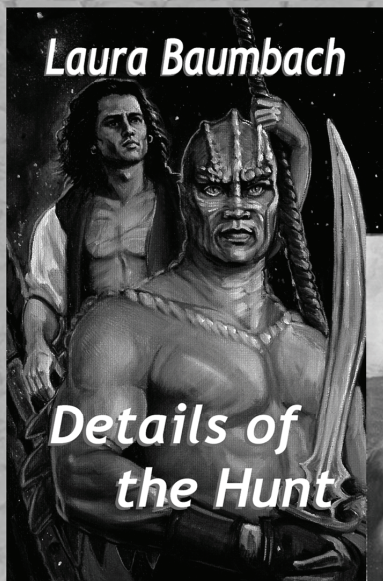
University of Virginia

<http://www.virginia.edu/deanofstudents/lgbt/>

Vanderbilt University

<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lgbtqi/>

FROM EPPIE-AWARD WINNING LAURA BAUMBACH



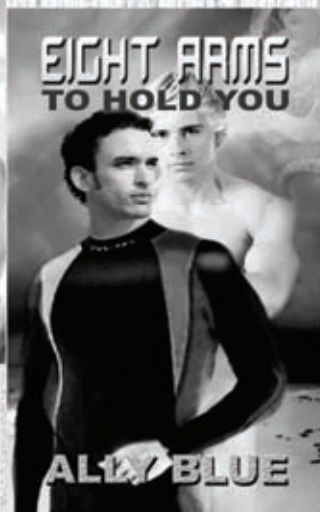
MLRPress.com

AVAILABLE AT LOCAL BOOKSTORES, THROUGH BOOKAZINE, INGRAM & ONLINE

From Ally Blue ...



ISBN# 978-1-934531-62-4



ISBN# 978-1-608200-19-1

MLRPress.com

AVAILABLE ONLINE, AT LOCAL BOOKSTORES & THRU INGRAM



Stimulate yourself.
READ.

www.manloveromance.com

THE HOTTEST M/M EROTIC AUTHORS & WEBSITES ON THE NET

