

SPACE ESCAPES

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace against a cosmic background. The man, with dark hair, is seen from the back, wearing a dark, textured jacket. The woman, with blonde hair, is facing him, wearing a light-colored, possibly white, dress. They are surrounded by a nebula of orange and yellow light, with numerous bright, multi-colored stars (blue, white, and yellow) scattered throughout the scene.

JASON EDDING • ANGELA FIDDLER

Spaces Escapes
by Angela Fiddler, Jason Edding

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CONTENTS

[Dark Robe Heart](#)
[Vestine Station](#)
[Dead End Pike](#)
[Vespez](#)
[Voyage to Jupiter](#)
[Europa](#)
[The Domed City of Ural—Europa](#)
[The Borgen](#)
[Ganymede](#)
[The Bright Side of Midnight](#)
[Chapter One](#)
[Chapter Two](#)
[Chapter Three](#)
[Chapter Four](#)
[Chapter Five](#)
[Chapter Six](#)
[Chapter Seven](#)
[Chapter Eight](#)
[Chapter Nine](#)
[Chapter Ten](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[About the Authors](#)
[MLR Press Authors](#)

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Dark Robe Heart: Dark Robe Society 1 by Jason Edding
The Bright Side of Midnight by Angela Fiddler

Dark Robe Heart

Dark Robe Society 1

Jason Edding

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Vestine Station

Some time in the future, when Earth is overcrowded, the moon has been colonized and the outer reaches of the solar system are touched by the hand of man, Jack Harrow throws off the yoke of his masters, The Dark Robes, and escapes on a journey that will take him five hundred million miles from his home, to a small white-blue moon, Europa.

Jack Harrow had just turned twenty-five-years-old, this time. He refused to count all the clones his brain had been transplanted into. If he did that, his age would be closer to four hundred. He liked his new body; this one looked quite different than the last few. It wasn't just the change in eye color. He had always had blue eyes, but the green this time suited him, he thought. Perhaps it was the more athletic build, or the size of his penis; yes, he had stipulated that addition in his request. However, he thought there was something else, entirely. His thoughts seemed somehow more fluid, clearer, like he had more than just the one microchip inserted in his brain. He was almost certain that wasn't it, but it was something he just couldn't put his finger on.

The lunar subway train ride to Vestine Station was interminable. He had barely been able to keep his eyes open for the entire journey. He was only able to do so by forcing himself, so he could watch for the threat that stalked him. The agents of chaos, the Dark Robes, were always just one step behind. There wasn't any other alternative but to take the subway, however. It was crowded and a lot of people

meant safety, at least for the time being; it was much safer than the rover buses that bumped along the lunar highways. Now he was boarding yet another train for the trip to Lunar Station.

He wrapped his robe around himself tightly, re-securing the ties, with a sharp tug. He wore a suit underneath his own robe, albeit blue and not the gray of the monk order. He had removed his dark chasuble and replaced it with the lighter gray of the Outsiders. The Outsiders, those that had left the brotherhood, those that still lived, would be difficult to find, perhaps impossible. But he couldn't begin that search until he was away from the greater danger that lurked behind every corner, lay in wait behind every shadow.

He hadn't even been off Earth for three days when he had spotted one of their Dark Robe assassins in the crowded waystation. The assassin wore a shadow-black chasuble robe with a business suit underneath, trying to blend in, but Jack had spotted him immediately. That may not last long, however, as the Dark Robe assassins had the ability to shift, according to the minimal research Jack had been able to do on them. He was able to glean only a small amount of information, before he bolted from the compound. The killers had the ability to shift, because they have nanosensors, each less than half a micron in diameter, inserted and locked into the biological and chemical processes of certain cells; most being the cells of the face, eyes and hair.

They were not only capable of shifting their facial features, but they were also masters of disguise. They knew what to wear and when to wear it, depending on the circumstances of

their mission. They were also masters of conversation, and the ability to sway topics to their choosing was a genetic quality that all assassins were *born* with. Some like him, had been even further trained in this ability, often called diplomacy.

Up to now, he had been able to spot his former brothers in the swarmed stations, here on the moon and the space-port on Earth, but his ability wasn't as precise as he would have liked. Along with his diplomatic training, which began the very hour he was removed from the regeneration accelerator, his digital memory chips were also programmed with ways to discern a human from a clone, but it wasn't an exact science. He was still not safe from them and the moon was not a propitious place for anyone. However, he had better prospects for surviving three days on the moon than he had three minutes anywhere on Earth, because of what he had done.

Europa, the icy moon of Jupiter with one large city-colony at its equator, was his final destination. His stay on Earth's moon was only a stopover and thankfully a very brief one. It would only be a few hours before the real journey began. Europa Station, its nickname, or the domed city of Ural, its official name, was his only real option. He would have chosen Mars for its proximity to Earth, its overall beauty and the fact that the atmosphere was breathable now, and the climate temperate. Sort of like the Netherlands in early fall. But Mars was completely out of the question; he abhorred Mars because of its militant government. For the past one hundred years, the planet had become more of a military bastion,

where all Earth's super top secret and clandestine research took place. If not for that, the planet would be a perfect base of operations. So much closer to Earth, but he doubted those he sought on Europa would agree to make the move. It would be far too dangerous for them to be *out in the open* for the journey to the Red Planet.

Now, all he had to do was get to the Jupiter System alive. The train from Moon Station Granger to Moon Station Piker was going to take at least another day, and the damn Dark Robe assassin had boarded the train not far behind him. And if that wasn't bad enough, there was still one more train to Helsinki Station, for the voyage to Jupiter dock. All this while dodging the assassin that was shadowing him.

He had heard a tale or two about Helsinki Station. Back twenty odd years ago, the government of Finland was toppled in a coup d'état and several thousand refugees requested asylum from the government of Norway. They had been accepted, with one condition. Sign up for six years of government labor, and do said labor on the Lunar mining colony. Most of them had found that they had no other choice than to stay on the moon when their contract ended; the cost of travel back to Earth for a miner was exorbitant, to say the least. Jack wagered nearly three quarters of those refugees were now dead, and not from natural causes. Lunar mining was a dangerous, and frequently *deadly*, business.

Jack scanned the train car as he made his way to his seat. The Dark Robe had already shifted form, undoubtedly. It could be anyone, and unless he got up close, he would not be able to tell who it was. He sighed, scanned the car once more

and only noted one person who seemed to be showing him some interest. A young man who appeared to be about twenty-years-old or so, totally human, short blonde hair, and a perfect button nose. He looked like he'd been born in Lunar colony, himself.

Jack closed his observation window plate with a sharp yank. Something about the cold gray walls of four hundred feet below the moon's surface was not pleasant to him. He missed Earth already. Hene, his trusted friend of forty years, had told him Europa would be beautiful, though. Perhaps he would get used to never seeing the blue dot of Earth again.

He allowed himself to relax. He doubted the Dark Robe would attempt to take his life in a crowded train car. They didn't fear much, but letting the general public know for a fact they existed was against their edict. Their council would not be pleased.

Jack closed his eyes. Yes, the Dark Robe would wait, wait until he was alone. He would have to stay close to the terminal during the next layover. There wouldn't be any sightseeing on this trip.

He scanned the car one more time. The young blonde man was watching him again, no evil intent there. Jack could see the young man's hand pushed down the front of his blue cadet jumpsuit. Jack chuckled softly. Yes, he liked his new body and gave the man a wink in thanks for his interest. Too bad he had no time for a quiet rendezvous with him. He tapped his pocket, counting his credits. He had plenty for a private cubicle, but that would put the cadet in danger. *Too bad cadet, maybe next time.*

Now he allowed himself to rest. It would be at least a twenty-hour trip around the moon's far side. Then he could quietly, if possible, slip on board the Star Cruiser Vespez and escape the eyes of the Dark Robe. He thought it unlikely however that he would succeed at that. They had hounded him from the moment he had made his escape, and they even managed to find him in his dreams. Sleep took him. He hadn't slept in days, and now a dream invaded his slumber.

* * * *

The Society was founded in the year 2104. Clandestine by nature, evil intentions by design. World domination, the objective, from the mind of a brilliant but power mad genetic scientist. One Ernst Venderhem.

In the year 2104, Ernst Venderhem, a genetic research scientist for the European Genome Project, walked away from his work and was never seen again. He took his personal notes, the schematics for the embryonic regeneration chamber, the plans for integrating brain electrical patterns, and the first stage cell samples of human cloning.

The genetics program had made a breakthrough. A perfect human embryonic clone. They had irradiated it soon after, however. Ernst had attempted to steal those as well, but the security around that particular lab was tighter than any other place in the world. They couldn't allow any of this research into the hands of less than friendly neighbors.

He had fought vehemently against the murder of those embryos, but his protestations fell on deaf ears. The bureaucracy was blind to his vision for the future. The Hague

Laws, still in effect since the Great War, still forbade the cloning of viable human embryos. Ernst had no other choice but to walk away, but he would not do so empty handed.

In Ernst's mind, the evolution of the human species had stopped long ago. As far back as thirty-thousand years in the past, and if something was not done, something drastic and admittedly unpopular, the human line would cease to exist. He, and only he, had the intellectual capacity to know this to be true; who else but he had the vision to bring the human race into the future? He knew that, as the sun began to dim and swell a billion years into history, the human would still exist in the universe and be perfect. Just as he would.

He did indeed walk away, but with a plan, taking what research papers and disks he could smuggle out, and quietly left the country. He would be the first, a clone of himself and not only that, he had simultaneously discovered a way to transplant his brain into this new grown clone. He would live forever, effectively.

The cloning not only made a perfect specimen of a human being, but the process had a side benefit. While manipulating the genetic structure of certain brain cells, they discovered a dormant gene that when irradiated caused a curious side effect. When the same manipulation was performed on mice, they discovered that when one mouse knew where food was, it could 'stare' at its kin and they would both go directly to the hidden food source. They named the discovery *thought transfer enabling*. The true meaning for this effect, they assumed, was caused by the new cells being able to communicate with more brain nerve synapses and to connect

much faster than normal human dendrites; where normal human growth could not facilitate this *leap* in evolution.

During further tests with white mice, they observed what was obvious communication between two mice, but they did not know how it was being done. Under biopsy they still could not discover the key to their brain wave interaction. Under yet still closer scrutiny, using electroencephalography, they were able to pinpoint several key spikes in brain wave activity when the mice seemed to be communicating, even though they were separated by several feet and were obscured from viewing each other. But still, the brain waves could not be duplicated in *any* of the human clone test subjects. Something key was missing.

Ernst had plans for himself, but for it to work, he would need large amounts of cash, and a legion of clones behind him. Not ones built for war, but an army of clones created to bring his plans into fruition. He began with only himself and an aide. Together on a remote island off the coast of Norway, they began to build a society of clones.

Ernst siphoned large amounts of cash, using his technical computer skills and funneled it into a nonprofit organization he founded. With the funds, he built an imposing stone monastery on his island. Under the ruse of being a monastic order, wearing the dark priestly chasubles of the monks of Eastern Europe, they began to build what he would soon designate the *Dark Robe Society*. Ernst would be the mastermind behind the coming world conquest.

Brother Ernst, soon to be Father Ernst, had built his first clone from an embryo he had stolen from a research

laboratory in Germany. He would have used his assistant's embryo, but she suffered from a rare genetic eye disorder, which made her donation of egg cells impossible. However, even though she couldn't be cloned, her brilliant mind could be transferred to a clone, one young, vibrant and perfect. Her loyalty to him, and her brilliance in genetics, would not be lost and she soon chose the clone of an Olympic swimmer that happened to be at the right place at the wrong time.

Ernst was pleased with the first trials. Only five of the first cells died within a week. Progress was made in week two, when he successfully cloned a clone of the original embryo. That accomplishment was only the beginning of his successes. Within a year he had designed, and built, the first of many embryonic accelerators which produced not one, but two perfect human clones of himself. After just one year, they lay in their stasis chambers, looking very much like ten-year-old replicas of a young Ernst. He turned off one of the stasis chambers a month later.

LAW NUMBER ONE. The first law, the most important law, was that only one copy of a clone could exist at one time. Never more than one, not even of himself. One maturing viable clone remained, but it suffered from an inoperable liver disorder which they hadn't detected earlier in the process. Ernst 1a, died soon after.

Within a month, they had re-sequenced the DNA, and reproduced three more embryonic copies of Ernst, and these they watched even more carefully than the last. One died of renal failure in less than five months, another unforeseen defect. But the other two were maturing naturally, and on the

anniversary of their first year of 'birth,' one of them opened his eyes. The second stage accelerator had replaced the first by this time, and now the process in which it took to mature a clone was effectively cut in half.

During the process of cloning this time, the Dark Robe Society had grown in number. From two to two hundred. Mostly geneticists, disillusioned with the tight restraints that prevented them from doing *real* science, and other scientists who had desires to try things forbidden. These people were cloned immediately, engineered to remove any genetic defects that could be discerned. Sometimes this was not possible, however, and they were discreetly discarded. The donors were replaced as soon as they were viable and the humans were then euthanized. They also recruited non-scientific people, ones that would be used in clerical and security positions. All quietly and specifically chosen for their views on the future, their perspective governments, and their lust for personal power. Some of these would be genetically tested. Even fewer would be cloned, but eventually all that lived and worked on the island compound would be clones.

In effect, they had all been promised something. Effective immortality being first, power being second. And all had given over their bank accounts for the initial phase of building their new world.

LAW NUMBER TWO. Those who became members of the *Dark Robe Society* could never leave. Any that deigned to try and leave would be hunted down, reclaimed, re-cloned, or disposed of accordingly.

Within twenty-five years, just over four hundred clones were created on the island. Most of these now worked on the island, specifically as *cloners*. Ones who creates clones. In all that time, the Dark Robe Society had also grown in number, worldwide. Through inconspicuous kidnappings of intellectuals, heads of state, scientists and others deemed worthy of being cloned, they now had fifty thousand clones spread across the planet. No one ever went *missing* for long and no alarm was ever raised. The Society grew and the world never saw it happening.

Ernst Venderhem had achieved his first objective. After many trials and several hundred failures, the procedure for human cloning was perfected, at great cost. There were dozens of deaths and many more terminal mutations. At times, a clone would be accelerated too fast and be aged to such a degree, it would be awakened writhing in agony within its tortured body. Yet others were altered in such a way that they grew deformed and were bent into horrible things that did not resemble a human being at all. In year eleven, Ernst's brain was successfully transferred into his clone, a vigorous young man of thirty-five. His old body was encased in pyroxin, a clear, plastic-like substance, to keep his DNA from decaying, and was then placed under the dais, below the Grand Chamber.

During the fiftieth year of the society, the year being 2165, the Dark Robes began placing their members in key positions around the world. Bank executives, houses of parliament members, state department heads, and supreme court judges. Most, but not all, had been *taken*, cloned, replaced.

The Dark Robes silently, swiftly, and expertly gathered DNA from prospective targets, then returned with these samples to begin the switch. The cloning process had achieved perfection by this time, and they no longer needed to *gather* more donor embryos. The original, still in existence, had been cloned thousands and thousands of times. It was the progenitor. The mother of them all.

By this time, propulsion technology had made great leaps. The people of Earth were no longer going to the moon once every ten years. They weren't sending bulky, slow, unmanned space probes to Mars and beyond. In 2170, the first true ion drive was perfected. It wasn't like the first stage developments of the past, but far more energy efficient. A trip to Mars took a week, sometimes less, if the daring pilot had some chutzpah. Space had now become a much smaller place. The Dark Robes, Ernst Venderhem specifically, took the first steps into releasing the world from the confines of the Earth.

The first Star Liner, a hulking vessel twice the length and width of a nuclear aircraft carrier, was launched on its maiden voyage in 2192, on the seven-hundredth anniversary of the famous Columbus expedition. Owned and operated by OIL, a clandestine company fully controlled by the Dark Robe Society and the current Emperor of Asia Minor, a clone himself. The first passengers were the wealthy, and the most powerful people from around the world. By the time the vessel returned to Earth's orbit some seven months later, they had all been replaced by perfect clones.

* * * *

"Are you traveling to Jupiter?" The young blonde took the empty seat beside Jack and settled in. "Do you think it will be a long trip? I've never been." The voice was close, soft, yet deep and somewhat soothing. Jack woke with a start, his hand gripping the ironite dagger hilt in his robe, ready to plunge it into the heart...

"You have no idea how close you just came to biting the dust." Jack sat up, and let his fingers slip from the cold metal hilt. He had a better look at the young blonde man in the blue jumpsuit now. He could tell he was a recent military recruit. Fresh meat, fodder for some dumb ass military campaign on the other side of the system. But in this recruit's case, officer material, a cadet in training.

The blonde raised his brow, and he gave Jack a slack jawed stare. "Sorrrrrry, you looked like you were having a really bad nightmare." The young guy settled down in the seat next to Jack. "I was getting lonely over there." He jacked his thumb back at the seat he'd been in earlier. "You didn't uh, accept my invitation, so here I am." He grinned, the gold caps showing on his teeth.

"I noticed it *cadet*, would have loved to take you up on the offer, but—" You're a diplomat Jack, remember that, he thought.

"You're married, right?" The blonde sighed. "Always my luck, you know, here I am leaving Earth for the first time, haven't had a man for three months, itching to get off and give some head—"

"Cadet ... not in public, eh, there are ladies and children—" Jack didn't tolerate too much nonsense, his diplomatic training aside. This blonde may be a hottie, but he yapped far too much. Jack would never be able to stand him for long.

"Yeah? I think they're all sleepin' man. But sure, I know what you mean." The blonde sat back, stuffing his hands into his deep pockets.

"No, I'm not married; yes I liked your offer, but as I was saying—now isn't the best time for any man on man action, not of that kind." He patted the cadet's knee. Too bad, though, cute cadet, he thought.

The blonde sighed again, making a good show of his plight. "Yeah, well, maybe I don't want you ... huh, you look like a clone anyway. I can tell a clone." He snorted and started to get up.

Jack's hand shot out and grabbed the blonde's arm. "Cadet ... don't ever call me a clone." Jack said nothing else. The young blonde didn't move a muscle. Jack released him and sat back. "Good, now you just sit there and be quiet, and maybe I'll give you a little something on the trip to Jupiter." He wanted the cadet to stay beside him, at least he would be able to get some sleep, knowing the Darkies would think thrice about taking him out with someone sitting next to him.

The blonde snorted again, sighed and pulled open the storage compartment above his head, released an army surplus blanket from plastic tie rings, and covered himself with it. "Bad mood dude, but okay, I'll just sit here and be quiet. I won't say a word."

Jack started to drift. He had plans to make, and dreams would make his plans. His sleep was as restless as his clone brain, but knowing the blonde was beside him made him feel a little better when he woke. The blonde's hand had moved to his inner thigh, and his fingers were wrapped around his waking erection.

Jack smiled and noted the blonde was sound asleep. He looked around the car; most everyone was sleeping and the lights were dimmed for nighttime. He sat up, stretched and opened his view window, saw nothing but a gray blur, and closed it again. The train shuddered once, then again, and Jack realized they were beginning to slow. He would have to be quick about it.

Jack leaned down into the young guy's lap, pulled open the flap of his jumper and fished around until he had his fingers wrapped around his cock. Nice and firm, good and long, pulsing with blood. The guy had nice balls too, Jack noted, letting his fingertips dance across the oval eggs. Jack surmised the recruit had a full load that needed tapping.

"Uh, man, I was dreaming and there you are, making my dream come true." The blonde grinned down at Jack, then reached down and rubbed his head. Jack didn't mind the push, he opened his mouth wide and took the recruit's cock head into his mouth. He noted the sweet taste of cherries and had to laugh. The blonde was prepared, this hadn't been the first time he'd tasted cherry cock cream. He liked it, but preferred the chocolate mint.

He went wild on the cock meat, tonguing the slit until the cadet was squirming all over his seat. Good thing he had

some self control though. He at least kept his mouth shut, and his moans were muffled by his closed lips. Jack took his cock deep, letting his tongue press and dance up and down the shaft, while at the same time, he pulled the ovals out to play with. He pressed them against his fingers, and stretched the cock with his lips.

"Oh man oh man, I wonder what this would feel like if we were weightless." The blonde arched his back and gasped softly. His eruption was voluminous, powerful, and flooded Jack's mouth. Jack gulped down the fresh cum, noting once more the taste of cherries. He must have taken the pill form as well. Be prepared, wasn't that the ancient Earth's military motto?

Jack swallowed the rest of the cum, then pulled the dripping cock from his lips and wiped his mouth dry. "What's your name recruit? First time I've sucked a cock without first knowing the name attached to the cock." He laughed, looked around, and sat back in his seat.

"Edge Fland," the blonde said, grinning ear to ear. He offered his hand to Jack. The hand was smooth, unscarred, almost delicate, but in a masculine way, Jack noted.

"Pleasure, Edge, I'm Jack. Don't need to know my last, not important, not safe—for *you*." He suddenly wished they were alone. Although he couldn't see this young guy's ass, he just had a *feeling* it was hot. He would like to explore it, and not just with his cock.

Edge nodded. "Yes, sir, I had a feeling you were on the low down, keeping to yourself the way you were." Jack almost had the feeling he was about to salute him. Thankfully, he

didn't. "Yeah," Edge continued. "I'm going to Europa for training. Deep sea maneuvers." He gestured in the air like it was nothing special.

Jack nodded, and tried to appear as interested as he could, "Yeah? I hear the ocean on Europa is fifty miles deep, after you cut through the six miles of fucking ice sheet." Jack didn't care really, but he'd done quite a bit of homework on his new home. Folly for him not to have. What kind of four hundred year old diplomat would he be without the homework?

"Yeah? I didn't know that." The cadet shrugged. "Deep Six Base is where I'll be going to after a month of ice skiff training." The cadet seemed proud. Poor thing, wonder if he knew one out of ten Europa trainees died in the first week, Jack thought. He guessed he didn't know.

Edge leaned into Jack's lap without a word. "You sure helped me out," he said, pulling open Jack's robe. Then he took Jack's cock in his hand. "I like it though. Thought you must be one of those priests, with the robe and all." He wrapped his lips around Jack's cock head and took him fully.

Jack sighed, lifted his ass off his seat, and made sure his whole cock was pressed against the recruit's tonsils. "Mm, very nice, been too long for me."

"Mmm." The blonde moaned, now bobbing on Jack's rigid meat. Jack pushed his head down with both hands, until the cadet choked a bit. Now that's something he liked a lot, Jack thought. Then he began to hump his mouth with fluid strokes. The cadet took it all easily, must have been sucking off a few generals to land a position on Europa, dangerous or not, it was a high paying transfer.

Jack didn't take long. His own explosion choked the cadet more than once as his seed flooded his mouth. The recruit just took it, barely letting a drop slip passed his pressed lips. He swallowed all the cum and kept on sucking until Jack pushed him away.

"Whoa, can't handle too much sucking after I let loose." He patted the cadet's head. "That was good, really good." He sighed as the cadet wiped his mouth clean, putting his cock back into his robe.

"Thanks, Mister Jack, I'm usually pretty good, I can suck a cock for hours, you *sure* you don't want some more?"

Jack laughed, "I'm sure." He secretly wanted to tell him how old he really was, how many blowjobs he had been given in his life, but decided he would not bother. Edge Fland was a one timer, had only one life, no need to trouble him with his four hundred year history. But he certainly wouldn't have been bored by it, Jack thought.

Edge shrugged. "Well that's not all I can do—I like to lick asshole too. I love balls, but I love to suck a man's hole." He grinned from ear to ear again.

"Thanks Edge, I might take you up on that—some other time, see, if I were to let you do that here and now, well we'd make a real show and someone would spot us—" He would have gladly accepted that specific offer, had his situation not been so precarious.

The cadet laughed. "Oh yeah, yeah, you're right." He sighed and sat back, adjusting his once again erect cock. "Some other time then. I'll be on surface for a month, then be back on weekends, we can hook up."

Jack nodded. He opened the window plate, and looked out and noted the streaming guardrail lights, which meant they now approached the way-station. Good grief, I must have slept a good fourteen hours, Jack thought. Must be the steady humming of the train rails.

"I'm on some very important business," Jack finally said, even though he wished he hadn't. He liked this guy, Edge, but still wasn't sure if he wanted more than what they had just done. He grimaced when he sat back down. "Don't let me keep you," he said, giving him a thin smile.

"Oh, you *want* me to leave?" Edge laughed. "Okay I'm slow sometimes, but hey." He stood and held out his hand. "You were an interesting looking guy, I was feeling more alone than I thought, and I thought I'd try and make a friend, but...." He threw his hands in the air. "I'll leave you alone."

Jack shook his head, and took Edge's hand. "Sit, I could use some company anyway. Blame my parents for my coldness." Jack conjured up his best smile. He released his grip and patted the seat beside him.

The cadet leaned back and placed his feet on the back of the chair in front of him. "So, do you have a cabin on the cruise to big bad Jupiter, or what?" he asked. Edge smiled, had a seat and watched Jack slide up the window plate beside him.

Jack glanced at Edge and only nodded.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Dead End Pike

Dead End Pike, is what they called this place. The inhabitants. The lunar denizens of the edge of the dark side of the moon. It sat directly on the shadow, the lip, where you could just barely see Earth shine. It looked like any other lunar way-station to Jack Harrow—dismal and gray. Then there was the overly moist air, and the constant thrumming of ventilation ducts, air conditioners and oxygen generators. All in all, not the place Jack wanted to stay for long. Hopefully, it would be just long enough.

The cadet was at his elbow, hanging on him like a hook to a carp. He didn't care. He somehow felt protective of him and decided, at least for the time being, he'd allow him to stay close.

This side of the moon was a dangerous place. The rough and tough who could no longer handle the overcrowded Earth made their way here. They brought their crime with them. Drug lords, pimps, and murderers all flocked like vultures to Dead End Pike. Since the moon went independent, Earth had casually, and quietly shipped all the most violent convicts, under the guise of mine workers, to the moon.

Jack wondered why the Dark Robes hadn't taken up residence. There had to be a reason. Then again, they were all over the Earth, in the congress, in the courts, powerful, yet in the background like cockroaches in the walls. Waiting, lurking, coming out only in the shadow of night. Killing all

who opposed them. Killing those who might oppose them. No one was safe.

Jack didn't care anymore. He had taken care of more than his share of dark tasks. He just wanted out. He wanted to be free of them. He left his own dark robe behind, burnt to a crisp in the alley of his four million dollar estate. Replaced it with the gray robe of the Outsiders. But the Dark Robes wouldn't let him go. Not him, not one who had claimed seventeen clones at their expense and killed twenty of the order in his dash across Asia Minor.

"Where is our train?" Edge gripped his arm, bringing Jack out of his deep thought.

"Right over there, the silver train with the broken ramp." Jack replied. He noted the fearful look in Edge's eyes. "Don't worry, cadet, stick with me." He put his arm around the cadet and headed for the embarkment ramp.

Jack was getting used to having Edge as a companion. Not only was he a prime catch, out here in the cold of space, but the journey to Jupiter would be long and lonely without someone to travel with. He wasn't fooling himself, though. It had more to do with Edge being that one thing the Dark Robes hadn't been expecting. With Edge constantly by his side, it would give him that measured security he was hoping for. Time to figure out what their plans were for him, and time to get safely to Europa, where they could both, hopefully, blend into the population. Edge was in danger now, as well. Just being this close to him marked him for death. He couldn't exactly walk away from him and leave him to the wolves, now could he?

"This place doesn't look like it did in the digital brochure," Edge said, shaking his head. He clung tighter to Jack.

"Cadet, you should never believe a thing those recruiters tell you." He chuckled, and patted his shoulder.

"Now, you tell me." Edge sighed and hurried along with Jack.

They boarded the train, and Jack made his way to the third car, while Edge made a pit stop at the lunch car and got a tray of food for himself and Jack. The food looked good for a change, Edge thought, but it was still typical transit food, in this case grilled fish and what looked like instant mashed potatoes. Edge stopped with the trays, placing them on a table, before entering the passenger car. He looked around to make sure no one was watching him, then withdrew a small vial from his pocket. He popped open the vial, and gave the fish on one of the trays a thorough coating.

Just for Jack, for making him travel so far from home.

Jack leaned back and glanced at his timepiece. Just four hours from the spaceport, then perhaps he could begin to really relax. He watched as other travelers boarded the same car. Most were miners; some were artisans peddling their wares; others were criminals looking for an easy mark. Jack's hand was never far from his weapon.

Jack glanced around the car. The Dark Robe that pursued him would find it difficult to get to him. But he knew there was still a possibility that he would not be safe until he landed on Europa. The government on Europa was military, but still democratic, mostly. Any law breaking resulted in one of two punishments, death or deportation back to Earth, and once

deported to Earth, there would be no more space travel for you. The government didn't mess around with miscreants.

Edge tapped Jack on the shoulder. "Here you go," he said, holding out a tray for Jack.

"Ah, food, I hadn't thought of eating until we reached the cruiser." Jack took the tray, and pressed a button on the chair back in front of him. A small tray, concealed within, clicked and descended until it snapped into place. "Well, not very appetizing is it?" Jack said, placing the tray on the small table. He looked at Edge's ticket. "You're lucky Edge, your seat is only three behind mine." Jack gave him a cheerful grin.

"Yeah?" Edge grunted. "Well, who's to keep me from sitting in the seat next to you? I'm military you know." He flashed a grin back at Jack and sat down in the aisle seat.

He was learning fast. Military men had a lot of pull in space, Jack thought. Edge's military status might very well come in handy at some point during the long voyage. "True enough, but do me a favor—" He pulled him close and spoke softly. "Don't be drawing any attention to yourself when you're next to me. I don't need any more eyes on me." *And you'll stay alive longer*, Jack wished he could add. This cadet was too raw, and already a bundle of nerves. Giving him any more information was a bad idea. Bad for him, bad for both of them.

"Sure thing, righto, gotcha." Edge was quick, he just liked to pretend he wasn't. It helped when he was feeling exceptionally lazy. There were other reasons he was quick, of course.

Jack sighed, looking over his tray again. "Nope, this food doesn't look like it's worth eating."

Edge shrugged. "Looks good to me, you should eat, you're looking pale." Edge dug into his food, even eating the bones of the fish's tail. Jack grimaced. He wondered if the kid had grown up poor, forced to eat fish three meals a day. Fish had been a major staple transported from Earth to the moon up until the building of the dome over Mare Imbrium. Once the dome had been built, a lake biosphere had been constructed over it, and then a few million gallons of water had been transported by huge retrofitted cargo ships. Now the moon had its own supply of fish. Jack had always hated fish, especially the bottom feeders that made up the majority of lunar aquatica.

"Looks like it's smooth sailing from here, huh, Jack?" Edge plowed into his food tray, even consuming the eyes of the fish. He gave Jack a sideways smirk, taking note of the look on his face as he chewed on the eyes.

Jack tried his best to ignore the display. "I don't think so, besides, the Dark Robes—" He didn't stop himself in time.

"Dark robes?" Edge asked.

"Never mind, I'm just a bit tired." He pushed his tray away, and looked out his portal. He was not about to endanger Edge any further by explaining anything to him. He damned himself for letting that tidbit slip out. He was becoming all too relaxed around him.

"No, tell me," Edge said, leaning close. "What's a dark robe, other than a piece of clothing?" Edge gave a quick, playful tug on Jack's robe. "Why not tell me while I give you

some attention down here?" Edge tugged at the ties around Jack's waist.

Jack turned and looked directly into Edge's eyes. "Nothing for you to ask questions about Edge, *really*. I *suggest* you don't ask any more questions about that subject, again." Jack slumped down in his seat. "Make sure they take my tray, it stinks horribly."

In a few moments, brawny attendants had pushed and prodded the remaining stragglers into the car, and had them buckle up for at least the first two minutes as the train reached its maximum speed. He wondered what the train would look like if it missed a turn and hit a basalt wall at seventy-five-hundred mph. He somehow thought the buckle wouldn't much matter.

Edge nodded, "Sure thing." He smiled slightly and went to work finishing off his food.

The train began to move, slowly at first. A slight vibration underneath the seat. The window looked as if it was going to shake loose and crack. Death would have been quick at that speed, wind and pressure would have sucked everyone out the small crack and into the wall. A splash of red on gray. The vibrations soon stopped, and the walls outside became nothing but a gray blur as maximum velocity was reached.

Jack watched the blur go by, and still marveled at the technology they were able to bring to the moon. Magnetic train travel was outlawed on Earth two-hundred years ago, since the Oligarchy Island League (OIL for short) controlled the petroleum reserves and this would impact their profits.

But here on the moon, it was the only way to travel below the surface.

Edge finally finished eating and pushed his retractable table away from him, almost knocking the tray to the floor. He was slightly annoyed, but thrilled the game wasn't over just yet. He could probably kill him while he slept, but that would be far too easy. Besides, he thought, the game could very well get much more interesting on the cruiser. He was more than willing to wait. He slipped silently from his seat, casting one long glance at his sleeping prey. In the meantime, he would make his way to the communications alcove and make a transmission to his superiors on Earth seeking their orders on how to proceed. He hoped the order to kill would not be given.

When Edge returned, Jack was sitting up, wide awake and alert. "Where have you been?" Jack asked. He shook his head. "Never mind, we would both probably do well to use the bathroom before the next leg of the trip; I don't want you waking me up, asking me where the latrine is ... besides, I'm taking the aisle seat and you'll need to wake me to squeeze by." He grinned slightly at Edge, somewhat serious about the latter. "I'm beat and need a few hours of sleep before we arrive at the station," he said. He pointed at a white door at the end of the car, with a blue hexagonal symbol emblazoned across it. Jack made his way, scanning the many faces as he passed, but trying not to appear to be looking closely at anyone. Edge agreed and followed closely behind, glad the latrine was close since he hadn't had a chance to use one for the past twenty hours.

"So, Jack, how could you tell I needed to piss?"

Jack only chuckled.

Business done, Jack sat on the aisle, letting Edge take the window. He would need room anyway, in case the Dark Robe had followed. He didn't see him, but he knew he couldn't be far behind. He could even be in this same car.

The lights were dimmed overhead to allow people to sleep on the four hour journey. It would give Jack the chance to look around the car without too much notice. His cloned eyes were almost as good as a domestic cat's in full darkness.

It didn't taken Edge long to get comfortable. He was already sound asleep, his head resting on Jack's shoulder. Jack closed his eyes a moment, but decided he would stay awake and let Edge sleep for a few hours. It was good, this meeting up with Edge. He needed someone, needed someone he could trust. Edge could be that someone. That was something he had never had before. Besides, it would certainly make for an interesting month long journey to Jupiter. That is, if he allowed Edge to join him in his suite. Somehow, he doubted the young man would pass up on an opportunity to live it up in the luxury cabin aboard the flagship of the Blue-Star cruise line.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Vespez

Space was black. As dark as any night on Earth, or the moon's dark side. Jack and Edge stood on the waiting platform, along with a dozen or so others and watched the star cruiser being refueled and uploaded with cargo and baggage. Jack looked up through the thick domed glass and saw not a twinkle. He had thought he would see stars, but there was nothing.

"Nothing *special* is it?" Edge remarked, gazing up at the white and blue vessel. It was nearly two-thousand feet in length, with fins along the side splayed out like the giant wings of a manta ray. Even the windows looked like spots, all lit up along the vessel's smooth curves.

"It *is* the flagship, the newest cruiser, just commissioned six months ago," Jack replied quietly, scanning the crowd. He appreciated the ship, even though he knew who *really* owned it. Its beauty was only skin deep, for he was almost certain, deep in the bowels of this vessel were the instruments of war. He wasn't positive about that, but he would have time to discover its secrets during the voyage. Jack gazed back up at the shining white metal, tinged with blue. Yes, beautiful, perhaps deadly, and owned in part, by a subsidiary of OIL, the Dark Robes clandestine company.

Edge grunted. "You *ever* seen the space fleet's version?" Edges teeth began to grind annoyingly. He stretched out his arms. "They make this *thing* look like a kid's bathtub toy." He chuckled, and waved dismissively at the cruiser.

Jack shook his head. "No, never had the pleasure." He was curious though. Those ships were stealth ships, built in space, on the far side of Mars. How could Edge have seen one? Surely a simple cadet would not have had access to anything that important to the Dark Robe military juggernaut...

"Yeah, but this is *fast*, seven nuclear reactors and *ten* ion drives." Edge seemed to have changed his tune. "But there's something else top secret about the propulsion." He crossed his arms and bent his knees, to look up at the vessel.

Jack agreed. "Well there has to be *something* else, or a month would be a year ... right?"

"Let's go, it looks like they're letting people board her." Edge tugged at Jack's arm. For one who wasn't impressed, he sure didn't act like it.

The star liner Vespez was three times the size of the old USS Enterprise aircraft carrier from the 20th century. In fact, it was the largest manmade object ever constructed. It started out as a box in space and grew from there. The first forty shuttle launches brought thirty foot by ten foot boxes into space. There, they had been welded and bolted together. Once those were finished, oxygen generators were installed. Three years later, its maiden voyage to Mars took place. The Emperor of Asia Minor, a fifty percent owner of the company, had christened it himself.

Jack looked up at the sleek lines of the cruiser. Polished white, with a zig zag blue stripe along the entire side of the vessel. It reminded him of the old 787s in the museum in San Francisco. This beast had its long rows of clawed lander legs crunched into the surface of the moon, looking somewhat like

a giant metal bug, gripping its prey. Small windows, which he assumed were passenger cabins, were lit up with a soft white light. There were probably over seven thousand cabins on this one.

"It's fucking *huge*," Edge admitted. "Being this close to it, I didn't realize, but still ... not as huge as the space fleet's mammoth cruiser."

"It is at that," Jack replied, but he was in a hurry now to get on the ship, into his cabin. Jack took hold of Edge's arm and pulled him along to the entry ramp. They had already been processed by scanner as soon as they disembarked from the train. If they didn't have a ticket on them, an alert would have been sounded. No one was foolish enough not to have a ticket if they came this far.

Jack and Edge were shown by personal steward, to Jack's suite. As soon as Jack boarded, in fact, the steward had appeared, mentioning how glad they were to have him aboard. *"If there is anything at all he desired, come right this way, your suite is prepared."* Jack liked the treatment, but Edge was enjoying it far more.

They arrived at the lift, where the steward slid a gold framed metal card into a slot, then punched several keys. The security needed for entering the elevator to his suite was as good as he thought it would be. The star line liked to give their best clientele anything and everything they desired. He had made it quite a point to them that his security was his utmost concern, and he would pay more to get what he wanted. They had quickly agreed to everything he had asked for.

"How long until we launch?" Edge asked the steward, as they entered the elevator.

The steward quickly responded. "Just one hour until we lift off, sir." He gave Edge a quick smile. He was obviously a third generation clone, Jack thought. He had a blue ink template code, stamped just under his right ear. He wondered how many people realized the majority of star liner staff were actually clones. These were lesser clones, however. They were fairly cheap to produce and they were controlled from conception. They followed orders, ate little, and didn't need more than an hour's sleep a day.

One of the few things Jack had to thank the Dark Robes for ... unlimited funds. His cloning was the best, and his brain had been left unscrambled. His body had no flaws, and his life-span was far superior to any regular clone. This body he now inhabited would last another one hundred years. Perhaps longer, if he kept up a rigid exercise routine. He looked at Edge. Or giving Edge a good hammering in bed once a day would work just as well, he thought.

The steward punched in a code and the door to the suite hissed open. There was no doorknob or anything like it, Jack noted. "Sir, all you have to do is touch the door now, it will read your imprint and know you automatically," the steward said, leading them in. He motioned to Edge, "You as well sir, unless Mr. Harrow objects?"

Edge threw Jack a grin. Jack didn't appreciate his name being mentioned, but there was no point in hiding it now. He was out of danger for the time being, and Edge wasn't a threat.

"That will be fine," Jack replied, dropping Edge's bag on the plush rugged floor.

"Very well, then, I will leave you now." The steward went to the door and added, "If you need anything, anything at all, the green intercom button will alert me." And with that, Jack and Edge were alone.

"The first thing I want to do..." Edge said.

"The bed is mine," Jack cut in.

Edge laughed. "Funny you should mention the bed." He went to the next room. The suite was three rooms—the large entry room, with two red velvet sofas, two leather chairs, a desk, several lamp tables and a long bar, the bedroom that Edge had gone to inspect, and a bathroom, complete with a sauna.

Jack chose the leather chair nearest the oval observation window and sat down. He removed his boots and socks and let his bare feet sink into the plush golden rug. He sat back and let his muscles relax. He had kept them primed since leaving Earth, and this was the first time he would be able to lower his guard. He still didn't trust Edge. There was something not quite "right" about this. It was all too convenient for Edge to appear next to him while he slept on the transit and out of nowhere offer to blow him so casually. He was being played, but if playing was the game, he was the master. Diplomacy was a game, wasn't it?

Edge reappeared from the bedroom and Jack got an eyeful. "Well? What do you think?" Edge posed. Jack nodded and got up.

"You look ... fantastic, I was wondering how long it would take." Jack scanned Edge's naked body up and down. He was a perfect specimen of the human male. Perky nipples, well formed pecs, tight and ripped abdominals. His cock was resting over his hairy ball sack.

"I hope so. I was thinking," Edge began. "Any reason at all I should ever wear clothes while we travel to Jupiter?" He leaned forward and kissed Jack on the cheek.

"None whatsoever," Jack replied, accepting the kiss, and returning it with one of his own. He embraced the young man, sliding his hands down his back, until he had two handfuls of ass in his sweating grip.

"Good, I've always wanted to walk around naked, showing off to a hot man, turning him on all day, until he bends me over and fucks me." Edge laughed and mimicked humping Jack.

"Let's take a shower, I haven't bathed for a week," Jack said, giving Edge a quick peck on the nose.

Clean and dry, and sporting a nick on his neck from a dull razor, Jack gazed at his naked form. His short blonde hair needed a trim. He turned and looked at himself, tightened his butt cheeks and noted, with some pleasure, how well genetic engineering had made him so perfectly formed. He had requested limited body hair and they had done a superior job of giving him what he had paid for. His smooth ass cheeks made him look youthful. He wasn't by any means old, of course, but most human men began to get some hair on their ass by his age.

Jack cupped his balls and lifted them in his palm, then pulled on his penis until it hurt. The length was as he requested, although he could just barely see the scar left by the circumcision. As far advanced as science was, they had still not been able to genetically engineer a human male without the foreskin.

"My, my, don't you look handsome." Edge said, coming to stand behind Jack. He embraced him from behind, pinching his nipples and kissing his neck. Jack reached back and grabbed a handful of Edge's ass and pulled him close.

"You love my ass, don't you? I had a feeling you would have an appreciation for asses when I first saw you." Edge licked Jack's ear, blowing a soft breeze as he caressed the lobe with the tip of his tongue.

"Not all, but yours is about as perfect an ass as any human I have ever seen," Jack replied. He turned and took Edge into his arms. "But your cock ... is something to behold as well."

Edge grinned and took a step back, showing Jack his full erection. His balls were tight against his body, and his cock bounced with anticipation. "Show me how much you like it." Edge raised his arms over his head in a sensual, sexy, and erotic way that made Jack's heart quicken.

Jack took his cue, he had been around the block a few thousand times. He reached out to Edge and moved his hands down his smooth body, then knelt before him. Edge's cock was an inch from his lips. The head glistened with a dot of precum, one that was soon on the tip of Jack's tongue.

"Oh, and here I thought this trip would be spent sleeping and trying not to kill someone out of boredom," Edge sighed softly.

Jack pulled Edge closer, his cock sliding deeper into his mouth, until the head brushed against the roof. He wasted no time in bringing Edge to orgasm. After all, he had sucked enough cock and swallowed enough cum to fill an Olympic-sized swimming pool. He played with his balls with one hand, sliding a finger along his ass crack, and began to suck with a measured rhythm.

He briefly turned his gaze to examine the ecstasy on Edge's face. He was not disappointed. He was just in time to see the rapture taking hold of him. Edge bent his knees slightly, lurched forward, his hands grasping Jack's shoulders. He cried out briefly, a mouse of a whimper, and buried his cock in the back of Jack's throat. His orgasm didn't last long enough for Jack.

"Swallow it all, Jack, then fuck my asshole like I know you want to."

Jack took the cum, swallowed the last of it and dabbed at his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Your cum is sweet. Too good to waste. I think it's all the orange juice you've been drinking," Jack remarked with a wink. He stood and motioned to the bedroom. "Go lie down and be ready for me." Jack stood up and pulled on his cock, then hefted his full sagging balls.

"Your wish is my command, sir." Edge practically marched into the bedroom, forcing Jack to grin.

Jack looked in the mirror again, gave his face a quick splash of cool water, then turned out the light. Edge was face down on the large bed, the blankets pulled back, spread eagled and waiting. His butt was slightly raised.

"You want it badly don't you?" Jack asked, crawling onto the bed. He knelt and cupped Edge's ass cheeks, then leaned down and buried his tongue against his sweet and tight asshole. "Mmm, I've been wanting a taste of that since the first time I saw you." Jack wasn't kidding.

"Gahh, how did you know ... this is one of my favorite things?" Edge moaned and pushed his face into the plump white pillow. He bucked his ass into Jack's face as it was devoured and sucked. Jack lapped up his asshole, pushing his tongue into the tight hole. He couldn't get it in as far as he would have liked. He would have to work on the tongue exercises, he thought.

Finally Jack straightened up and positioned himself snugly against his lover. He gave Edge's ass a few quick, hard slaps and looked to see Edge gazing back to watch him. Jack smiled slightly, gave him a wink and spread his younger partner's cheeks wide, paused a moment to gather in the beauty, then pushed them together, admiring the perfect shape of his ass. Jack ran his fingertips from Edge's tailbone, all the way down his ass crack, until he brushed his hairy balls. He lingered there a moment, taking in the most perfect view imaginable, then he spit into his hand and slicked up his hard cock.

"Fuck me Jack, my last fuck was my commander, just before I got this assignment." He winked at Jack and arched his back. Jack chuckled and covered Edge with his body,

guiding his cock into Edge's tight hole, using one hand to guide him. He pulled out after a moment, and sat down again. Edge was tighter than he thought he would be, and needed a little more relaxing, relaxing that only a tongue could give.

Edge moaned, as he felt another flick of Jack's tongue. Jack moaned in response and lapped at the opening, warming it with his lips, a soft and prolonged kiss.

"Jack, you're a mystery to me," Edge said, looking back once more. He knew from the file on Jack how old he was. When he had been cloned. Where he had been cloned. He knew *everything*. Everything the Dark Robe hierarchy had wanted him to know, that is. But there was something about this man. Yes, man, that tugged at something within him. Something he had never felt before. He closed his eyes and turned away, pushing his face into the softness of the pillow. He calmed his thoughts, tried to locate the inner quietude he was trained with. And then, like a light suddenly being turned on and casting away the darkness, a flash of insight, or something else, came to him and he suddenly realized what that *something* was. It was love! But was it enough to keep him from killing Jack? Perhaps more importantly, would he surrender himself to this *something* and have it change everything? Was love worth it?

"I'm a mystery to myself sometimes," Jack replied, after a moment. He licked a finger and pressed it against Edge's tight hole. Edge smirked at the answer, but that turned into a smile that Jack could not see.

"Just so you know, Edge, when I fuck, I don't stop until I finish," Jack said, then slowly mounted him again. He covered him with his body, gently bit Edge's neck, just a nibble, and pushed his entire cock into the still tight crevice.

"Ahh, Jack, oh yeah man, yeah, yeah, no need to go slow." Edge once again, pushed his face into the pillow and began to moan as Jack began to pound the hell out of his asshole. Jack was still surprised at the tightness of his ass, it felt almost virginal. Had he been fucked as many times as he had claimed? Jack didn't think so.

Edge moaned loudly, and realized he wanted to drag this game out much longer than he had anticipated. It would be thirty days until they reached the orbit of the gas giant. Thirty days of fucking he would rather not pass up. He had lied about his sexual encounters. Lied about being fucked by his commander. He was a virgin for no Dark Robe assassin ever had sex. He was certain he was the first, but he knew it was a possibility when he was given the mission to kill the Dark Robe traitor. He moaned again, as the cock in his ass brushed against his prostate.

"Your commander must have only fucked you once," Jack said, his breathing heavy, as he pumped and rammed the tight asshole.

"He was a small guy," Edge lied, turning to watch Jack, and giving him an expression of glee. He was beginning to feel uneasy about having to kill him.

Jack grinned and kissed Edge's cheek. "He must have been small, your asshole is as tight as any I've ever had the pleasure of fucking." He continued to hammer Edge, and

didn't stop until Edge was moaning as loudly as he, then he thrust in deeply, once, and emptied his balls. The spurting didn't subside until his cum began to flow out of Edge's stretched hole.

"Damn, Jack, if I had known this was going to be so good, I would have made you fuck me in the passenger car." Edge laughed, and raised his ass and forced Jack's cock deeper into him.

Jack pulled out completely, and knelt, stroking his cock until the last of his cum oozed from the slit and dripped onto Edge's ass. Edge pulled himself up and turned around, gave Jack a quick grin, then lowered his head until his lips brushed the head of his cock. Jack stared in wonder as Edge opened his mouth and wrapped his lips around the still wet head.

"Ahh, Edge, sweet Edge," Jack moaned.

"Mm," Edge moaned, and deep throatated Jack's cock. His nose, buried in his pubes. Edge grasped Jack's balls and pulled on them as he sucked and cleaned his cock. He finished in a moment and wiped his mouth dry. "Very nice, Jack, that's the first time I've sucked a cock just after it was pulled from my ass." He chuckled softly and kissed Jack on the lips.

"You're one hell of a horny fucker, aren't you, Edge?" He had never been taken care of so perfectly ... like that ... no condom ... no complaints. There was more to Edge than meets the eye. Now, Jack had an even greater thought of Edge being by his side for the long haul. But for right now, he wanted to give Edge a little something. He stood up, his semi-hard cock swinging between his legs and pulled Edge to his

feet, then kissed his cheek. "My turn now," he said and wasted no time kneeling before the younger man.

Edge laughed, got up, his ass jiggling, as he vanished to the bathroom. Jack laid down and wiped his body down with a fresh towel he found in the bedside table. He sat up, wiped the sweat from his brow and stared after Edge. He knew who he was now.

There was something else, as well, he had fucked enough of his brethren to know when he was fucking one. Edge had not cried out with any discomfort as he slid his cock into his ever so tight asshole, not once did he complain about it hurting. Edge was the Dark Robe assassin sent to kill him. But why hadn't he? And more importantly, how had he hidden his true identity from him for so long?

Jack got up, walked to the bathroom door, putting his ear to it. The shower was running, steam already escaping from the small crack in the open door. He leaned on the wall and closed his eyes. He calmed his thoughts, thinking back. He brought himself back to the island of his *birth*. He had left the island compound just prior to a new discovery, but by then he was already under suspicion for his vociferous objections. So he wasn't able to learn more about what that *leap* had been. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he realized, admittedly with some doubt, that the leap had probably been nothing more than a new technique, or procedure, in the ability to shift facial features, or perhaps hair color. It didn't matter, he thought, whatever the leap was, he now knew his assassin—and didn't know what he would have to do about it.

"Well, now what?" Edge returned, still wet from his shower. He dried off his head and sat on the edge of the bed, dropping the towel. Jack turned and smiled at him. His dagger was only a few feet away in his robe, hanging up behind the bathroom door. He could just get it, come back. Edge would be dead at his feet. He didn't kid himself. It would probably not be so easy. He was a cloned diplomat. Edge, and all his assassin brothers, were cloned for killing.

"Sleep," Jack replied. He stretched out his hand and pulled Edge to him. He wouldn't kill him, at least not now. For some reason, Edge was waiting, but for what? He still didn't know the real reason the brotherhood wanted him dead. Sure, he had left them, broke rule NUMBER TWO, you never leave the brotherhood, but there was something else. He had already left Earth. That should have been enough for them, but they had sent an assassin, maybe more than one. Why?

"Why?" Edge laid down close to Jack, rubbing his quickly hardening cock against him.

Jack stared into Edge's deep blue eyes. Good thing you can't read my mind, Jack thought. "Because, neither of us has had a good sleep for days and..."

"And you want to sleep beside me at last?" Edge nuzzled Jack's neck.

"And I am very tired. Just very tired..." Jack kissed Edge, but for the first time, their kiss was not as good, because his heart ached and he knew he would have to make a choice soon.

Jack was sitting on a freshly packed earthen mound, a single weed poked through the dirt, reaching for the dismal

light the sun now shown. He looked up and saw a reddish brown hue coming closer; a cloud that took over the sky from horizon to horizon. The heavy air stunk with sulphur and noxious gases and the earth under him began to sink beneath his weight, just as a hand shot up, grasping at him to pull him down. Jack strained to stand against the cold steel grip of the claw around his ankle and looked to see a mark he recognized. He fell and reached for the hand, trying to pull himself free of it and knew at once it was the hand of another Edge. "Save me!"

Jack woke from the dream and looked to see Edge sleeping soundly beside him. He had a sickening feeling and a headache to go along with it. This dream felt all too real and he reached over and caressed Edge, careful not to wake him. As real as the smoothness of Edge's chest. As real as the thin line of hair that trailed down his belly, but he did not understand its meaning. Jack rubbed at his temples, and felt a foreboding that this was not the last time he would have a dream such as this one.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Voyage to Jupiter

A week on board the Star Cruiser Vespez began to make Jack feel *almost* human. He had been keeping a close eye on Edge, but had let him believe that everything was fine, that his guard was down. Edge had spent a lot of time out of the suite, traversing the ship, gambling in the casino. He had lost more than three thousand of Jack's credits. It was nothing to Jack, but still...

Jack opened the door to his view window, and looked out at the darkness of deep space. They had traveled some fifty million miles or so, then stopped. It was all routine, he had been told, just a precaution. The next leg of the voyage would put them in the asteroid belt, between Mars and Jupiter. A dangerous time for maximum speed travel.

He had an idea to kill Edge there, and toss his body out of an airlock, losing it amongst the asteroids and clumps of ice and rock. But first, he would have to leave the suite, which he had yet to do, and find an airlock. He was having second thoughts, several of them in fact. He still didn't know why the Dark Robes wanted to kill him so badly. Or why the Dark Robe assassin wasn't doing his job?

Jack closed the view window and sat in his chair in the dark, opening his white silk robe to expose his genitals. "Why?" he asked himself. He had slept like a baby each night, somehow knowing Edge would not strike out at him, even in his most vulnerable state. Perhaps it was the sex, he mused. They had fucked every night since boarding the ship, and the

night before Edge had practically begged him to fuck him again, just an hour after they finished a heavy fuck session on the bathroom floor.

The suite door opened with a vacuum hiss and Edge strode in, a crumpled brown plastic bag in his hand. "Guess what?" He gave Jack a mischievous grin.

"You brought back fast food?" Jack replied, stifling a yawn. He pulled his robe to cover himself, securing it with the long wraparound drawstring. He reclined against the nook in the arm of the chair, putting both feet over the other side to let his feet dangle in the warm air drafts coming from the wall radiator panel.

"Hah, not quite," Edge said, tossing the bag to Jack, who snatched it out of the air. Edge came and stood next to him and removed his boots.

"Ah, you finally made my credits back, eh?"

"Of course, I told you I'd win eventually. Easy game." Edge peeled off his short socks, quickly balled them up and stuffed them into his boots.

"Mm, I bet it was easy for you," Jack said. "Have you ever heard of a nanite? Tiny computers that can make a room sized computer look obsolete?" Jack watched Edge's expression intensely, but he hoped he had not given himself away. If Edge even for a moment suspected Jack knew who he was, one of them would be dead very soon.

Edge flinched ever so slightly, then shrugged. "Nanite? Sure, I think." He grinned at Jack. "I *did* go to school, you know." He turned away, pulled off his thin trousers and tossed them on the bed behind him. "Why are you asking

about that?" Edge laughed. "We're on a cruise to Jupiter, living it up in the most expensive cabin, the best food, *and* I just won some of your credits back!" He pulled off his silky white shirt and sat on the bed, facing Jack. His expression was not as telling as Jack desired, but it was enough. Jack's diplomatic training was garnered over four hundred years and he could now tell when Edge was lying through his teeth. "You know, it's nice to be out of my jumpsuit for a change. Thanks for the casual clothes, Jack." Edge grinned, reached over and patted Jack's shoulder.

Jack shrugged. It didn't distract his thoughts. He was sure now that Edge was a first-degree clone. Not as perfect as he was, but so very close. No one but another clone could tell he wasn't completely human, and even they would have a problem, as Jack had. He had fooled Jack and that wasn't an easy thing to do.

"Want this before I take a bath?" Edge held his cock and pointed it at Jack.

"No, I want something else first ... turn around." Jack loved Edge's ass, a bit too much.

"Oh, you sexy dog." Edge turned and bent over, spreading his ass cheeks wide.

"Mm, I'd rather have your ass natural. Washing it clean will ruin a great deal of the fun," Jack replied, honestly. He placed his hands on Edge's ass, rubbed the cheeks all over, admired the view, took in all the perfections. There was nothing imperfect about Edge's bottom.

"Come on, I'm excited and I don't want to wait any longer. I want your cock in my ass." Edge said, bending over and looking at Jack from between his legs.

"Sh," Jack replied, then pushed his tongue against Edge's anus and began to lick it up and down. "Mm, so tasty, so natural, so beautiful," Jack said, his own cock now an iron pipe, straining for release from his thin silk robe.

"I never knew how good it could feel to have a tongue on your asshole," Edge said, he had bent his knees, slightly, placed his hands on them and turned to watch Jack feasting.

"It's something I've always liked to do," Jack replied, spending a bit of time prodding, poking and attempting to insert his tongue inside the tight ring.

"You like the taste of a man's asshole, then, it's just not the act itself?" Edge didn't understand sex, he had heard about it, read about it, but never experienced it, until Jack. He didn't want to kill him until he had experienced more, for on his return to Earth his memories would be erased.

"Yes ... the taste ... the natural taste, it's something I go for, it drives me into a passionate lust, I can't describe." Jack said. He had finally slipped his tongue in half an inch, then pulled out long enough to respond. He dove in again, pushing his tongue deeper inside. Edge moaned, telling Jack he had succeeded. They always moan when the tongue goes deep, Jack thought, with a smile that only he was aware of.

"Fuck, I do like this, I suppose you would like me to do it to you?" Edge, craned his neck until he could see into Jack's eyes.

Jack grinned, took a nibble of his partner's ass, and said, "Yes, if it's something you would like to do..."

"Did you bathe yet today?" Edge asked, standing up.

Jack shook his head. "No, I was about to." He tapped his robe. "I was about ready when you came."

"Good, I want to taste you ... your asshole, the natural way. When did you bathe last? I've been hanging out in the casino too much." He chuckled, and stroked his hard cock.

Jack shrugged. "Yesterday morning ... it's been about thirty-six hours." He laughed, and stood up, then reached out and pulled Edge's cock, rubbing the pre-cum on the slit.

"Mm, then I will have it natural for sure," Edge said, laughing. He licked his lips. "Well, turn around and spread 'em."

Jack did so, bending his knees as Edge had done. He hadn't had his asshole cleaned for a long time. Edge knelt and kissed his ass from top to bottom, his hands roaming over it, squeezing, pinching softly. Edge cupped his balls and put his nose between Jack's cheeks. He inhaled deeply. "Wow ... I can tell." Edge said, then his tongue darted out and he began to eat Jack's asshole.

Jack moaned, and pushed his ass back into Edge's face, then gyrated his hips. Edge sucked his asshole hard, then pushed the tip of his tongue deeply inside and licked in a circle. Jack could barely handle the pleasure, his cock was throbbing and he felt close to exploding.

"Jack ... I think I've discovered a new love," Edge said. He wrapped his lips around the anus and began to suck on it hard, making sucking sounds.

"Edge, bed, now, before I cum all over this twenty-thousand credit rug!" Jack stepped away from him.

Edge chuckled, and wiped his mouth. "Fine, but let me do that again later." He got up, and pulled Jack to the bedroom.

Jack flopped onto the bed, on his back and lifted his cock to point at the ceiling, then pointed at Edge. "Sit right here." He told him, with a grin. Edge winked, stroked his cock and leapt onto the bed. He straddled Jack's waist and lowered himself, until he felt Jack's cock barely touch his wet asshole.

"This is new," Edge said.

"Yes, now after I enter you, lie on me and kiss me ... it'll be the best yet," Jack replied.

"Oh?"

"Yes, do it, push your ass down," he told him, and Edge began to push his body down, and he felt it immediately, the intense pleasure of his asshole being stretched. Jack's cock head slowly slipped into his hole, and he pushed himself all the way down.

"Oh, so good, so good." Jack breathed. Edge closed his eyes a moment, feeling Jack's cock all the way in his ass, then leaned over as Jack had instructed him, and kissed his open mouth.

Jack held Edge around the waist, then reached down and pulled his ass as he began to hump and ram his cock deeply in and out of Edge's tight anus. Edge moaned and bucked, kissing Jack furiously as his lust was set afire. Jack sucked the Dark Robe assassin's tongue into his mouth and pounded his ass without mercy. He did not want to kill this kid, but what could he do to avert his only option?

"Jack, fuck, I've never ... felt anything ... this good." Edge tightened his asshole around Jack's cock, then straightened up and began to bounce up and down.

"You have learned something," Jack replied, running his hand up Edge's sweating body. He was overwhelmed with the beauty of this man. All his inhibitions were melted away as lust turned to something else.

"Jack, are you thinking the same thing I'm thinking?" Edge stopped bouncing and pushed himself all the way down. He felt Jack's cock press his prostate.

"What am I thinking?" Jack replied, biting his lip. He was so close to exploding now.

"I've never loved anyone before, Jack."

Jack went completely still. He had heard of this before. But had never experienced it. He decided it was time. "I *know* who you are, Edge." He looked him in the eye. He rubbed his sweating chest, under his sweating armpits, then brought his fingers to his nose and inhaled, closing his eyes. If it was going to be the last thing he did, he didn't think inhaling the scent of this man would be the worst thing he could do.

"I know." Edge said. Something had twinged inside him. Normally those twinges were located in his brain. Akin to a tingling sensation on his scalp, but this was something in his chest. Something foreign to him. "What are we going to do?" He sighed, and started to pull himself off Jack.

Jack held him firmly by the hips. "Nothing."

"*Nothing*?" Edge looked at him strangely.

"Nothing, yet. Once we get to Europa we will be safe."

"Jack, they'll never let you go," Edge said, once more trying to pull himself off Jack's cock. "They'll never let me go. It will enrage the master to such a degree that he will send a thousand assassins to kill *us*."

Jack shook his head.

"How can you say that?" Edge was beginning to panic, looking once more like a scared human boy.

"Europa, and we will be safe," Jack said again. He gripped Edge's arms, tightly.

Edge closed his eyes and shook his head. "You don't understand, Jack, you have something they want, and if they can't get it back ... they will make sure it is destroyed."

Jack ran his hands up Edge's arms, to his shoulders. "What is it? I still don't know. I know I have information they want."

Edge laughed. "You *don't know*?!" He laughed again, threw his head back, and practically screamed it again and again.

"You have what they do not have, Jack! You have *love*!"

Jack blinked at him.

"You have the capacity to love, Jack ... something no Dark Robe has *ever* had. Not since we were created from first human embryos."

Jack almost understood. But he listened. He did not interrupt.

"Jack, no Dark Robe, no matter how many times they have changed the genetic code, no matter how many sequencer's they have used, no matter what DNA they have injected into the cells, has *ever* been born with the emotion called love." Edge lowered his head.

Jack took Edge's hands in his, but still couldn't believe any of this. Some trick, perhaps.

"And now, Jack, I have it. I feel it, and I know it."

"Love?" Jack said. "Love?" he repeated it.

"I ... I am feeling love, Jack. They told me it wouldn't be possible for me to feel it, they said you were a freak, an anomaly, a genetic mistake." Edge sighed and finally pulled himself off Jack's cock.

"I..." Jack still could not fathom this. He had never understood love. Lust, yes, love never. It was impossible for a clone to love, always had been. He had left the brotherhood because he was tired of killing. He had felt bad about the killing. He had felt remorse about the last time he had killed. He didn't know whose brilliant idea it had been to turn a diplomat clone into a killer, but he had a good suspicion it was Ernst Number 5. It didn't matter. It was only a short amount of time before that blight in Earth's history was healed.

"Jack, you felt it too, when you killed the first man that made you feel love..." Edge sat down and put his hand over Jack's heart.

"Yes." Jack replied. "I killed him and...."

"You lost control and vanished," Edge finished for him.
"You've forgotten, haven't you?"

"You are reading my thoughts." Jack said to him.

"You can read mine as well." Edge said, a slight smile on his face. "It's the love, Jack, the love gives us so much more than they have ... than the brotherhood."

Jack nodded, understanding more. "It's not just the information I have in my brain, then."

"No, Jack. That is a minuscule part of why they sent me and others to kill you. They fear your love, Jack, my love now too. It's not just our love, but the power love gives us, you and I."

"Yes, we can hear their thoughts, discover their plans, their plots, who they'll kill, who they'll threaten—" Jack looked out the window into space.

"Their every move, Jack." Edge leaned over and kissed Jack's chest.

"Now I understand why," Jack said, chuckling. He turned his gaze back to Edge.

"We can destroy the Dark Robe Society." Edge ran his hand down Jack's stomach, reached his cock and pulled on it. "I want to know about the man you killed, Jack. I want to know about all those you killed. I want to know all about your secret life."

"Yes, some of that we can do—what we will do, once we reach Europa," Jack said. "But my history will have to wait. I'm not ready for that, yet." He watched as Edge lowered his mouth onto his cock, taking him fully, until his nose was buried in his crotch. "Make me forget this for a little while."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Europa

The icy moon Europa was like a small blue dot against the monstrous face of Jupiter. Europa, the fourth largest of the Jovian moons, was a crisscross of cracked ice and dusty glaciers. At just over nineteen hundred miles in diameter, it was slightly smaller than Earth's only moon.

Jack gazed out the view window of the observation deck and beheld his new home. Europa could almost be invisible against the backdrop of its giant parent. The swirling gasses of its Jovian mother creating a miasmic portrait that made it difficult to see its sixty-third child. His vision was keener than a ordinary human though, and the soft blue-white moon, with its gouged and fractured icy surface, held his gaze as Edge approached, the steward, always at their beck and call, right behind him.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Jack asked, staring at one particular ice canyon in its blue tinted ball. It looked more like a tremendous rent that had been caused by some eons past catastrophe.

"It will be more beautiful if we don't get crushed by Jupiter's gravity or irradiated by its magnetic field or something," Edge replied, standing next to Jack. Edge wasn't scientifically minded.

"Oh, no worries about that, sir," the steward piped in. "We have the best shields and we are far enough way to not feel its gravitational attraction."

Jack raised a brow at the steward.

The steward looked uncomfortable. "Well, yes, I mean, we are significantly far enough away to withstand its gravitational pull," he corrected himself.

"Well we are here. Are we safe yet?" Edge said softly. He waved the steward away, who after a month of Edge, realized that meant to get lost.

Jack watched the steward trundle away. "No, not until we are on the surface." He held up his hand, and stopped the steward just as he was out the door. He had a short, softly spoken conversation with him that ended with Jack handing the small man a handful of credits. Jack waved him away, pressing the button beside the door, locking it as soon as it closed.

"What was all that about?" Edge asked.

"Nothing important, forgot to tip him," Jack replied, not meeting Edge's eyes.

Edge smiled, knowing there was something more to it than that, but he didn't press him. "So, Jack, why? Why will we be safe once we reach Europa?" Edge moved to the large window, and stared at the small moon, noting the shadow that projected across Jupiter's atmosphere.

"Because," Jack replied, curtly.

Edge was irritated. "Because, why? I think it's time you told me, for some reason I can't read your thoughts."

Jack smiled. "That's because I know you can. I have hidden the reason why, deep within my thoughts," Jack chuckled. "It's a neat trick. I'll show you how sometime."

Edge grimaced.

"Alright, I'll tell you."

"Good, do so while we are alone."

"We will be safe on Europa for one reason." Jack turned, held Edge's hands, and pulled him close.

"Yes? And don't tell me it's because we have love, love is our weapon but—"

"Because once we get to Europa, I will think one thought, and when I do, the main complex of the Dark Robe Society will explode."

Edge blinked at him, incredulous. "What?"

Jack smiled, and looked to their new home. "Inside my head is a simple chip, a processing chip with a small antenna."

Edge shook his head. "There was no mention of that in your bio."

Jack grinned. "I know, I had it done myself, and I have never told anyone. I am rich, you know, far wealthier than the brotherhood realized. When I first felt that pang of guilt, I began siphoning credits from the accounts all over the world. Mainly Asia."

Edge nodded. "And?"

Jack chuckled, gazing out as Europa vanished to the edge of Jupiter. "There is a molecular explosive device planted under the floor in the High Priests' chambers. When I think of the detonation, it will be the end of them, not all of them, mind you."

"But the hierarchy..." Edge finished.

Jack nodded.

"Then do it now." Edge said.

Jack chuckled softly, rubbing his temples. "I already did," Jack smiled. "Look." He pointed at Io, which came around the other side of Jupiter. "Perhaps we can take a guided tour over the surface one day."

Edge smiled at him and kissed his cheek.

"Let's get ready to go home." Jack said.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

The Domed City of Ural—Europa

Jack Harrow sat down, took a long drink of rum, looked out his apartment window and watched the Great Red Spot swirl and shift on the planet Jupiter. The shadow of Europa's neighbor, Io, was just barely visible but nearly out of sight as it orbited the mother planet.

Europa was a moon primarily composed of ice and rock; its core, semi molten iron, heated by the gravitational tug, from its mother Jupiter. Its shadow danced across the surface of its Jovian parent, occasionally passing close to its sisters, Io and Callisto.

Jack sighed, and threw his feet on the hassock and took another drink. He could never get used to the view here. It wasn't just the Jovian giant that took up the entire sky, but the other moons that traversed back and forth that was thrilling to him. Jupiter's atmospheric colors were an astounding mixture of golds, oranges, blues, reds, and grays. There was Io, it truly looked like a molten pizza in the sky. With extra sauce.

Then there was the moon Callisto, a moon so heavily cratered, it looked as though it had been pummeled for eons by asteroids not much smaller than itself, and looking at it closely now, Jack wondered how even the powerful force of gravity had been able to keep it from being torn apart. Jack liked this moon, it was so much different than all of the other satellites in the system. It had personality, and he silently wished he had been able to find the time to study all of them

more. He had been too busy as of late during these past two months on his new home to spend time observing. He rubbed his finger along the edge of his glass, then finished off the rum in one gulp.

Jack looked into the bedroom to his left, and saw the sleeping form of his assassin, Edge.

Assassin ... he had to chuckle. Edge had folded easily, fallen so simply to lust, and then love had taken him and transformed him from a would-be killer, to no more than a playful puppy. *His puppy*, Jack thought.

Jack cast one more glance at the majestic sky and got up to refill his glass. He had begun to drink a little too frequently, as of late. Not to excess, but just too much for him. He would have to do something about that before it became chronic. He filled his glass, then put it down without taking a drink, and went to look in on Edge.

Edge was sleeping in the nude, as he usually did. His window curtain wide open to the view of, what was it, Ganymede and Callisto? And a couple of moons he could not remember. Jack closed the curtain. Even though no other apartments were within distance, he felt more comfortable with it that way. When he was going down on Edge, he did not want an audience.

Jack removed his gray robe and let it slip to the floor. Once again, he took in the view of his sleeping lover. Just weeks before he had contemplated killing him, and now all he could think of was sliding his cock into his ever-so-tight anus.

Jack ran his fingertips the length of Edge's bare calves, letting his fingers dance between his legs as he moved up a

smooth thigh. Edge didn't move, but slumbered, his face nearly covered with a plump pillow. Jack sat upon the bed, letting his weight slowly push down the mattress. There was something about waking up his lover with a little tongue action between his butt cheeks.

Jack leaned down and kissed the softness that was Edge's left ass cheek, then circled the roundness with the tip of his tongue. He placed his hands on both cheeks and spread them wide, and ran his tongue along the tailbone and down until his tongue reached the sweet center of his man's most private realm.

Edge stirred slightly, bending his knee, his ass spreading wider. Jack smiled, and began to thoroughly drench Edge's asshole with his tongue. The tip found the hole, and he pressed in firmly until he entered him.

"Mm, you're as bad as me," Edge said, sleepily, stretching out one arm and propping himself up to watch Jack eat his ass.

"I had to return yesterday's favor." Jack said, his voice somewhat muffled by the mouthful of the anus he was consuming. He went back to it, licking in a slow circle around the center, then he darted his tongue, just barely flicking the hole, causing Edge to flinch with pleasure.

"You do that so well, Jack, go deeper for me," Edge said, as he buried his face in his pillow.

Jack grinned to himself and dove down, burying his face between the cheeks, his face now wet with his own saliva.

Edge propped himself up and looked back at Jack. "That's enough, I want something else." He pulled himself up and flipped over, giving Jack a face full of hard military cock.

Jack shifted and leaned on his elbows, staring at the cock inches from his mouth. Truly a gorgeous cock, he thought, and had told Edge this very thing, numerous times. It deserved retelling. A nice eight inch monster, its blue veined shaft thick and formed into a perfect straightness. Jack reached out with a fingertip and caressed the length until he reached the hairy balls, balls that sagged low in the heat of their apartment.

"Well?" Edge said, leaning back on his hands. He flexed his abs, causing his cock to bounce and smack Jack on the nose.

Jack continued his fingertip stroll across Edge's ball sack, then looked up. "Don't rush me. I'm pondering all that I can do with this." Jack grinned, slyly.

"Uh huh, I think you're wanting it in your ass, personally," Edge replied, trying to hide his grin by turning his face away.

Jack snorted. "The only ass that will be getting a visitor tonight is yours, cadet." Then Jack took the head of Edge's cock between his lips and didn't stop until his nose was tickled by Edge's golden, bushy pubic hairs.

Edge lay back, his hands at his sides, and watched the artist go to work on him. He marveled at Jack's ability to take his full cock, and not choke, not even once. He had assumed Jack would have at least have some trouble with his oversized cock head, but not Jack. He closed his eyes and let the pleasure surge through him.

Jack liked this. He had plenty of power over his lover, his would-be-killer, but he enjoyed *this* power the most. When he had Edge's cock head planted at the back of his throat, *that*, was true power. The only power that mattered for him, at this time, right now.

Jack began to bob on the cock, sucking hard as he came up on it, and in a moment, the first surge of cum slammed into the roof of his mouth. Salty, sweet, pure essence of man. Jack swallowed the first few spurts of man seed, then let the rest just flow down his throat, as he dove deep when the cock finally lay quiet.

"Shit, I could use one of those more than twice a day," Edge said, sighing. He reached out and rubbed a drop of cum from the corner of Jack's stretched mouth. Jack pulled up on the cock and licked cum from the head, then moved up and covered Edge's body with his own.

The next kiss was exquisite, a mingling that both men enjoyed immensely and Edge said, pulling his tongue from Jack's tasty mouth, "I should eat more than two bananas a day."

Jack laughed and rolled off his lover, pulling on his own rigid cock. He held it up to point at the ceiling. Its seven-inch length was as perfect and as complete as he had asked for. The geneticist, who Jack had paid an exorbitant amount of money to, give him a cock that couldn't be complained about. Not too big, not so small.

"It is perfect for me, fits in my mouth and—the place I like to have it most." Edge grinned at Jack, in answer to his

thoughts. He rolled over, sliding between Jack's outstretched legs.

"You're reading my thoughts right now, even though I have been hiding them from you a lot lately," Jack replied, somewhat surprised. He reached down and gently tapped Edge on the forehead.

"Hmm." Edge propped himself up a bit and noticed a glint outside the portal. He looked past the slit in the curtain and froze.

"What is it?" Jack replied, craning his neck to look. His angle was off, however and he saw nothing but curtain.

"A ship, big, doesn't look like a star cruiser," Edge answered. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and went to the window, pulling back the curtain. Jack followed him.

"You're right. It isn't a star cruiser." Jack's voice was filled with worry.

Edge looked at Jack with concern, suddenly unable to hear his thoughts. He could just barely sense what he was feeling, but that was all. Jack had blocked his thoughts once more.

"What is it then?"

Jack put his hand on Edge's shoulder. "What I feared."

"But how?" Edge stared at the ship as it moved across the sky, just passing the lip of Jupiter's edge.

"The Dark Robes don't quit easily, Edge," he sighed. "You should know that without asking." He closed the curtain quickly. "There is only one reason why they would come here to Europa."

"I thought you had made sure to kill them all? Who is leading them, then?" Edge sat on the bed and began to dress.

Jack pulled on his robe and went to retrieve the drink he had left on the bar earlier. He returned in a moment. "That, I don't know. I am sure I timed the explosion perfectly. The Hierarchy is dead. I am sure of it."

Edge massaged his temples, feeling a headache coming on. He reached to the table beside the bed and grabbed a stimulator and pressed it to the back of his head. "You actually sure you got them all?" He squinted at Jack with one eye closed.

"Headache?" Jack asked, sitting on the bed. "And no, I'm not positive." Jack stared at the window as if he could see through the curtain. "Some of them could have escaped, but I'm sure the progenitor clone was destroyed."

Edge nodded. "For a moment, these things..." He tapped the silver metal device, which had numerous blinking lights on one side. "...work wonders, but I hear there is another more advanced version that can do much more." The device began to hum as he moved it across his temple.

Jack shook his head. "You shouldn't use those. Depend upon your own healing powers. I don't trust anything designed by the military."

Edge laughed. "I know you don't, but these are great for minor aches, and since I don't have time for a headache, especially with the Brotherhood only hours from landing on our doorstep..."

Jack looked closely at Edge and cast a disdainful glance at the device in his hand. Edge put it away, smiled and nodded.

"I have a feeling you probably placed the explosive device near the dais."

Jack stood up, went to the window and looked out. "I did exactly that. If all else fails, there will be no way to regenerate Ernst." There was that, Jack thought, quietly.

Edge didn't want to leave. They had only just become accustomed to the layout of the apartment, the long corridor to the transport from one dome to the next. This was the best building as well, where the wealthy lived. He could see it now, they'd end up in Squaller town, at the base of Tyche Glacier, hiding from the Brotherhood, and he believed, there was no chance they'd not roam that place looking for them.

Jack once again could hear Edge's thoughts. But he kept it to himself. He was far more trained in mental mind games than Edge had been. Edge had been all devious killer. Now he was all gentle lover. He would have to forget the love and bring back the executioner he was genetically created to be.

Or we will both die.

"Yes, I can hear you and I am more trained than you ever thought," Edge said, coming up behind Jack, sporting a smile, and a new bulge in his blue cadet jumpsuit.

Jack chuckled. "I should have known." *Indeed I should have*, he thought. He looked Edge up and down. "I see you're ready for our little war."

Edge grinned, and in an eye-blink, withdrew an ironite dagger from his sleeve. "Of course, the Brotherhood paid good money for my design." Jack nodded, placing his hand on his lover's shoulder.

"Show no compassion for your once brothers, my young lover," Jack said, sternly.

"They will show us none, and they will only meet their destiny," Edge finished, with a courageous grin.

Jack nodded and poured himself a final rum, drinking it down with a satisfying sigh. He dropped his glass on the rug, then fished around in the dresser, finding his podpad. He quickly punched several keys and tapped into the city's mainframe. In a moment, a small but detailed map of the city appeared on the screen. "I was hoping they would be as updated as Earth." He handed the think pad to Edge, who quickly scanned it.

"You did your homework, but didn't bring your own information?" Edge chortled, scanning the map closely. "What if you hadn't been able to tap in?" Edge shook his head with a grin.

Jack snorted. "You can't exactly find European maps at the corner store, kid, and Earth's mainframe central isn't an easy hack."

"Where next, then?" Edge asked, pulling a slim blade from under the mattress. He handed Jack his ironite dagger.

Jack tested the point of the blade on the tip of his finger. "We need suits. There's something I want to look at." He slid the dagger into the inside pocket of his robe then thought better of it. He tapped his robe, then slipped out of it. "I'm going to have to leave this behind. Leave your bag of extra clothes, your casino winnings and leave everything else. We'll need to travel light from here on out."

"And you won't tell me until we get there, right?" *You really should trust me more, Jack.*

Jack smiled. "We need information, we need to take a look at something before we get off Europa." *And Edge, I do trust you, more than you know, I'm just being cautious.* Jack dressed quickly in a remarkably similar jumpsuit that Edge wore, then slipped his blade into the leg pocket.

Edge quietly understood. "Get off Europa?" He sighed. "But we *just* got here."

The two made their way to a Spanners Bargain Thrift Shop, located on a dimly lit "street" at the base of a glacier. It was more of a cramped access-way, no longer in use. Sturdy metal sheeting, five inches thick and covered with several more inches of frost were pressed and bolted into the sides of the ice wall. Instead of blowing up the frozen mountain, they had built part of the city's dome around it. This street was one of several shortcuts they had taken to build the dome quickly. The only truly bad thing about it was the heating system was not in operation here. It was kept well below freezing, for obvious reasons. They stopped outside and leaned as close to the wall as possible, allowing an old man and child just leaving the shop to pass by them.

"We need atmospheric pressure suits." Jack's breath was a misty vapor. He handed his podpad to Edge and tapped the screen. "Boots, new ones, not something cheap, helmets and heavy bags to carry whatever else we decide to pick up." Jack looked around, "And keep your eyes open for anyone paying more than casual attention to us." He pointed inside for Edge to follow. "I have a feeling we're being watched."

Edge nodded in agreement. "I got the same feeling."

When they had acquired all that they needed, Jack handed the shop owner a few extra credits and he quickly showed them to a private corner where they could change. Jack had purchased two brown leather bags as well and he quickly stuffed a couple extra jumpsuits, purchased from the shop, into them. The jumpsuits weren't cheap, but Jack didn't desire to spend the next week or more wearing the same one. The pressure suits were new, probably stolen by the underground market then sold in small shops like this one all over Europa. A bare spot on the left shoulder of each suit bore a striking resemblance to the rank insignia of Earth Special Forces.

"Dress quickly," Jack reminded his lover, who was watching him closely. Jack pointed at a pile on the floor. "Those are yours, pack them up."

Edge fumbled with his suit, staring at Jack. "You first, I have no fucking idea where this strap goes," he sighed, pulling on a rather long tube attached to a nylon-like cord. "You bought me new clothes?" He grinned. "Now I know you love me."

Jack laughed. "That goes in that hole in your helmet neck-lining, then plugs into the oxygen nozzle inside." Jack shook his head and showed him. "It's there," he reached into his helmet and gently flicked a small rubbery socket just where the chin would go. "It's how you're going to stay alive out there." Jack tapped a small white cylinder affixed to the back of the helmet. "Air."

Edge nodded, but still watched closely and waited for Jack to finish fighting his way into the suit. "I'm an assassin, Jack, not a male model."

They trudged through a narrow ice crevice for nearly twenty minutes, then Jack held up his hand and pointed to a larger gap. The dusty glacier was cracked down its middle. A dark powdery substance, Jack wasn't certain of its name, covered the ice like a blanket of dark snow. He craned his neck and looked up but could not see the peak.

"I knew we would end up here," Edge said, through his audio-transmitter. His face was obscured by the glass visor, a thin fog formed on the inside. He hunched up his back suddenly and tried to get the bags he now carried into a more comfortable position. They weren't heavy, but something inside one of them was digging into his shoulder blade. "Jack, when did we decide I'd be the porter?" he sighed.

Jack grinned in his helmet. He reached out and grasped a thick column of ice—ice that ran up some eighty feet and out of sight behind a jutting crevice. Through his gloved hand he didn't feel the extreme cold. He was, for once, glad he had so much credit, having transferred all of it in another name to Europa two days before leaving Earth.

Edge jumped on the ice beneath his feet, the shoulders of his white pressure suit already covered with a layer of the dark snow dust. "Do they have skiing here?" Edge said, with a laugh.

Jack nodded. "I am sure they do, but not here, don't be careless," Jack replied. He pointed at a gash in the ice not far from where they stood. "*That* is death." Jack pulled Edge

along with him. "Tortreen Canyon, it's not wide, but it's a four mile drop to the bottom."

"Yeah, it's also called death row on Europa," Edge replied, adding that bit of humor on purpose. He peered over the crevice's edge. Jack didn't know that, but he didn't doubt it. Europa's government did not play lightly with the convicted criminals of the moon.

"Well, now what?" Edge asked, stepping away from the gash, vertigo sweeping over him. Jack turned a knob on his suit, until the temperature setting clicked green. It was minus four hundred and seventy degrees on the surface of the moon, and he was already beginning to feel the cold seeping into his suit. They didn't have long to sightsee.

"Let's hurry to the dome." He pointed at the jutting edge above. "We need to get there. From what I was told by my contact, there is a cave system that runs for nearly three hundred miles."

"Where did you hear that?" Edge looked up and went to the edge of the glacier.

Jack followed, turning up his receiver so he could hear Edge better. "Miners. They brought contraband in there over the past thirty years. Not just that though, but it's really not a good idea to talk about these things over a live connection." He tapped his helmet. "You never know who might be listening, eh?" He tugged on Edge. "Come on now."

They entered the airlock and the door closed with a hiss. After a moment, the airlock began to turn, then descend rapidly. A red blinking light was the only way they knew they were indeed moving. Jack tapped his foot on the corrugated

metal floor until the overhead light flashed green. He began to remove his helmet clamps. "Take your helmet off," he told Edge.

Edge didn't have to be told twice. He hated these damn suits. They made him feel like he was being slowly smothered. He doffed the bags and dropped them by his feet. "Shit," he said, when he finally pulled the cloth neck guard off his head. "I hate these things." He dropped his helmet and removed his thick gloves.

Jack connected his helmet to his belt hook and removed his gloves. He wiped the sweat from his face and took a deep breath. "I'm glad the air in here is a little more natural than the air in there," he told Edge, slapping his suit, then added, "Strip the suit off."

Edge complied. "Yeah, but what I wouldn't give to breath real air again." Edge sighed and began removing his pressure suit as fast as he could.

Jack had to agree. "One day."

"Hmm?"

Jack smiled at Edge. "We shall both breath the air of Earth again, my young killer." He meant it, too.

Edge shrugged. "I don't see how you can be so optimistic, when we are facing..." He threw up his arms. "...Who knows how many brotherhood assassins." Edge knew what he was talking about.

Jack leaned against his lover. "We have their best killer."

Edge's grin was evil. "We have their worst nightmare." They both laughed, as the elevator came to a halt. Edge picked up their leather bags just as the door hissed open.

They left their pressure suits on the floor. They weren't lazy, it was the rule down here. People needed jobs, and pressure suit retrieval just happened to be one of them. Young kids were usually hired to do the light work, earning very little credit, of course, but according to the government it kept them out of trouble.

Jack watched two teen boys scurry past them and pushed a series of buttons on the wall beside the airlock door. A small ramp, previously unnoticeable, descended and the wall zipped open. A K-3 Series Rover soon wheeled itself out to wait for the boys to heft the pressure suits onto its hooks. The K-3 series had the intellect of a canine and could do several tasks without having information imputed into its memory. From there, he did not know where the suits were to be taken, but he assumed, cleaning and diagnostic scanning were part of it.

"You don't really care, do you?" Edge said, tapping Jack on the arm. He handed Jack one of the leather bags. "Carry yours for awhile, huh?"

Jack shrugged and took the bag, slinging it over his shoulder. "We may be here a while." He watched the boys lead the rover down the corridor. "Might as well blend in as much as we can. Get to know the way of things—it may come in handy."

Edge shrugged. "As soon as we deal with our—*friends*, we are going back to our digs and living it up. I—"

Jack raised his hand for Edge to hush. "Look." He pointed down the corridor at two men, dressed in black robes. They were talking to an administrator.

"Great," Edge said, his teeth and hands clenched together at the same moment.

"Let's go, they haven't spotted us," Jack said and they both hurried in the opposite direction.

They had not been seen, Jack thought, as he and Edge made their way down the streets of Squaller Town. It wasn't the real designation, but it fit this place to a tee. Marius City, named for Simon Marius, co-discoverer of Europa, along with Galileo, had at one time been the pinnacle of European society. When the dome was constructed and lowered into place, this was the only area people were able to congregate that was *under* the sky of the moon.

Now, ninety-seven years later, the dregs of European society called this place home. The miscreants, the convicted, the peddlers of illegal drugs and banned alcohol, all made their living here. And their dying. The murder rate in Squaller Town was off the charts. Jack liked it though, when criminals surrounded them. They would be less likely to talk to any authorities about anything.

"If I had killed you, like I had been ordered to do..." Edge said quietly, glancing around to see that no one was in earshot. He looked at Jack, clenching and relaxing his hands into fists. "...I would, at this moment, be in the tropical zone enjoying my retirement."

Jack raised a brow and laughed. "They offered you early retirement?" He couldn't believe that. No one ever left The Society.

Edge nodded. "And four hundred thousand credits a year." He winked at Jack. "But you know what I mean by retirement,

right? Living outside, anywhere I wanted. Not living on the island like all assassins do. They wanted you dead badly, Jack."

"Interesting. Perhaps we should have let them believe you killed me, then you'd have your own cash and wouldn't need to spend all of mine." Jack chuckled.

Edge grunted. "You have—how much?"

Jack grinned.

"Come on, tell me."

Jack grinned again and looked around as they turned a corner. He had heard of an alley tavern where the denizens didn't ask any questions. As they walked up to the metal door, he decided to give Edge a hint about the wealth he had stolen from The Society. "Billions. But come on, we don't have time to dally about." He pushed the door open, and ushered Edge inside the *Knife and Sprocket*.

Jack led Edge to a darkly lit corner on the far side of the bar. The only glances the two received were when they first entered, then all gazes went back to their own business. No one looked at them as they strode to the deepest corner. Jack took note of the lack of lighting and appreciated it. But it was Edge who liked the place the most.

"Look," Edge whispered low, pointing at a small cubicle.

Jack followed his gesture. "Well, here is as good a place as any," Jack said. Two men were naked in the cubicle, one about nineteen or twenty, the other a man in his forties. The younger man was bent over a small table while the older man pounded his ass from behind.

"Let's watch," Edge said, obviously very excited about the drama.

"You've never watched two men fucking?" Jack asked.

Edge's mouth was wide open, staring. Finally he slowly shook his head, not taking his gaze away from the fuck session going on. "No, just you and me."

Jack nodded. "Well, you're in for a show then, that's the entertainment here." He laughed and left Edge, finding, and marking, a table for them. He sat down and gestured to an old guy with a bag filled to the top with bottled illegal liquor. "Two rums," he told the man. "And an answer to a question."

The old guy grinned, showing that he'd lost quite a number of teeth. He had a faint greenish tint to his skin, caused by the thin atmospheric gases that were allowed into the dome through filters. He had been born here, Jack thought.

"Rum I gots, answers I don't," the old guy cracked.

"No, you don't understand me, I have a question, you probably have the answer and if you'd like to—move out of Squaller Town for the rest of your life—old man, you'll tell me what I need to know." Jack smiled at the old man, leaned forward and grabbed two old dust covered bottles of rum from the bag. They weren't large enough to share just one.

The old man squinted at Jack, his smile turned to a grimace. "The last time I answered a question, I lost two fingers." He showed Jack his mangled left hand. It looked as though someone had taken a very dull knife and hacked the old man's fingers off, without taking aim. Several large gash-like scars covered the claw.

Jack nodded, slowly twisting at the cap. He brought it to his nose and inhaled the aroma. The rum was aged nicely, and he wondered how many bottles of the good stuff were still available. He met the old man's gaze, returned it with a thin smile and sat back. "Answer my question and I'll make sure you have more than those missing fingers returned." Jack raised his bottle and took a long drink, wiping his mouth dry. He barely caught a glimpse of Edge, who was now seated just three or four feet from the two guys fucking in the cubicle.

The old man looked around the bar anxiously, then he stared at Jack for a brief moment, before his eyes began to dart back and forth from Jack to the entrance.

"No one is paying attention to us, they know better," Jack assured him. The old man knew this already, Jack thought. He was holding out for more cash. Jack tapped his pocket and withdrew a podpad and pushed a button. "How much will it be, old man? I'll transfer it to you now, if you don't tell me what I want to know, I'll just—"

The old man need not have heard the last of what Jack had to say, as he was fully aware of the consequences and had heard the same line before. "Two million," he cracked and giggled into a coughing fit. "And ... one hour with your young friend over there," he pointed at Edge, a smile now creased his ancient face.

Jack grinned slowly. "Two million I can do. Pretty steep, but ... for the information I need ... And it will be up to my friend if he wants to spend an hour with you." Jack knew the answer to that, however.

The old man threw his head back and howled with laughter, causing a few heads to turn, momentarily, in their direction. "No," he laughed some more. "Not me," he shook his bent finger at Jack. He gestured toward the cubicle. "One hour with your friend in there, with you!" His grin turned into a leering cackle.

Jack shook his head. He had no intention of fucking Edge or anyone in else in front of a crowd of horny criminals and murders. "No deal. You, however, will give me my answer." Jack began to stand.

The old man took a step closer to Jack, leaning down to his ear. "No, one million and you and your friend in there for one hour and I'll give you your answer." The old man straightened up and crossed his wrinkled arms around his bag.

"No," Jack said, simply.

The old man laughed again. "Look, Earther, I'm too old to be threatened with death, what I want is what I want. What I want, I always get, this is my place, see." He turned to leave. "Take it or get out of my place."

The old man was tougher than Jack had wagered. "Then we have a deal?" Jack replied. Jack took the old man's scarred and mangled hand.

"That's Bigsly three, four, three, nine." The old man said into Jack's ear and Jack quickly transferred the credits to his account.

"Did you see that?" Edge said, sliding in beside Jack. The old man had vanished behind the bar when Edge appeared. "Shit, I'd do that young guy any day, didn't he howl at the end!" Edge laughed.

"You liked the show, did you?" Jack said, grinning. He took another drink from his bottle and pushed the other to Edge.

Edge caught the sliding bottle and nodded, grinning like he had just found his own version of Utopia. He removed the cap with ease and took a drink. "This goes on every day?" He looked around the place, pushing his chair back so that it balanced on the back legs.

Jack shrugged. "When one show stops, another begins soon after."

"Shit, I'm living in here." Edge guzzled his liquor, until only half still remained.

"I found a contact with the information we need," Jack told him, fingering his bottle.

Edge leaned close. "Yeah? Where?" He looked around the dim joint.

"The owner. Don't worry about that part, the less you know for now, the better," Jack replied quickly.

Edge smiled at Jack and shrugged. "Too many secrets spoil the fun, Jack."

Jack placed his hand on Edge's. "I'm glad you liked the show, because they've already picked the next two guys to fuck."

Edge clanked his bottle against Jack's. "Good, I'm not even close to being satisfied. That young guy had a hot cock and a sweet ass; I'm surprised he's down here." He threw his head back and stretched to the ceiling. "Hot ass ... wonder if I could get him out of here and to our bed."

Jack nodded slowly. "That young guy has probably been bought and sold more times than you've pissed on the

ground," Jack told him. Edge had told him he liked to be one with nature, back on Earth. Jack had wished he had been there to see it, but hearing it was the next best thing.

"Good, there'll be a new show soon." Then he added, "Part of the deal I made was that the next two men to go into that cubicle to fuck will be you and me." Jack grinned, but he was frowning behind the mask.

"What?" Edge's mouth dropped open and he let his bottle drop, spilling half of its contents across the table and his lap.

Jack nodded. "No choice, the contact has the upper hand here. I had to accept."

Edge's frown turned into a wide grin. "Well, I'm up for it, but..." he laughed, "...I happen to remember one of us doesn't even like to fuck with the curtains open on a desolate fucking moon." He laughed some more and watched his rum bottle finally empty itself on the floor.

Jack shrugged. "We all have to make sacrifices, especially now," Jack said, although the pit in his stomach grew with each passing moment. "This won't be the first for me, but for you..." He knew that was true.

The old man returned, with Edge still chuckling. "You told him, eh?" The old guy said, leaning close and strangely enough, sniffing Edge. Edge grinned at the old guy, seeming to be pleased he was turning him on. Jack immediately noticed a growth in the old timer's pants.

"Yeah, he told me, did he tell you he's embarrassed by crowds?"

Jack shot Edge a withering glare. *Don't give him any information about our personality traits.* He thought it hard and Edge nodded, picking it up easily.

Sorry.

The old man reached into his pocket and withdrew an old metal cowbell and rang it twice. The next show was about to begin. "You two had better make it quick, seems you've got some ... less than friendly people lookin' for ya." He cackled softly. "But don't make it too quick, eh, I want my money's worth."

Jack leaned close to Edge. "It looks like we haven't lost our Dark Robe stalkers, so keep an eye out. Well, *try* and keep an eye out," Jack whispered.

Edge nodded silently, removed his boots and jumpsuit and stepped into the cubicle. He could already feel the eyes on him and he had never felt so naked until this very moment. He liked it, it didn't bother him in the least. His cock was already pulsing with blood, the engorged shaft and head swelling to its maximum length.

He bent over, stretching, giving the gazes on him a good look at his ass. He bent lower, touching his toes, showing them his dexterity, showing them his puckered asshole.

Jack watched Edge step up and turn around. All eyes in the dimly lit tavern were on his young and perfect body. He watched him too, his heart racing in his chest, his blood pressure rising with each second. Then the light in the cubicle flashed on, bright, showering the stage in white light.

Jack quickly removed his jumpsuit and slipped out of his boots, letting them drop in a pile next to Edge's clothes. He

wasn't so eager for this, in fact it occurred to him just at the moment he became completely nude, that he was feeling an overwhelming sense of modesty, the most he had ever felt in his entire life. He stepped onto the stage, and turned around to face the crowd. A hundred male eyes took in his body. His perfectly formed, twenty-five year old, clone body.

Edge came and stood beside him, his cock already prepared for the show. Then he knelt before Jack and without even a pause, wrapped his lips around Jack's soft penis. The gasp from the crowd was unexpected, and Jack understood. Normally, the sucking of a cock was a more ... sensual act, unlike the hard fucking the crowd was used to.

They're loving us already, Edge thought to Jack, as he quickly sucked on Jack's hardening cock.

Let's not make this last past the hour, Jack thought to him. But he closed his eyes and tried to ignore the hundred eyes, glued to him. He focused on the action of Edge's mouth going back and forth on his cock. The gasps from the crowd came and went, and Jack opened his eyes to see why. Edge had turned his back to them, spread his legs wide, giving them a good and sensual view of his perfectly formed ass. Jack understood the gasps. He had the same feeling the first time he saw Edge's sweet ass.

Edge moved his hands up and down Jack's muscled thighs, reaching up to clench his firm ass, then up to his lower back, where the muscles were taught and straining. Jack was tense, nervous, and try as he might, he could not shake the timidity that shook his body, like a cold wind. He looked

down at Edge, and watched as his cock was swallowed up, over and over.

Edge finally stood and turned his face to the crowd, taking in all their gazes and all their expressions of lust. Jack only looked to Edge for a moment, then he quietly looked to the crowd, scanning faces, positions, then Edge hugged him around the neck and kissed him firmly on the lips. The gasp from the crowd was telling. This wasn't something they had seen in some time, possibly *never* seen. The kissing brought a sudden warmth to Jack, seemingly in just a moment, chasing away the coldness of stage fright.

Jack opened his mouth and accepted the slippery tongue between his teeth, and at last, he felt his cock begin to jerk on its own. He pulled away from Edge and descended. He even cast a quick glance to the crowd, their faces shadowed in the dimness. Then he opened his mouth and guided Edge's thick cock to his lips, taking him fully.

Edge let a moan escape his lips, and with his hands firmly gripping Jack's shoulders, began to hump his face. Edge looked to the crowd and watched them watching him. That only made him more daring, so much so, he began to thrust his cock into Jack's mouth with a furious speed that caused Jack to strain against the cock head hammering his tonsils.

The crowd began to yell. Jack could see them, even in the dimness, his clone eyes becoming fully accustomed to the gloom. They were not angry. They were not jeering, but cheering for them. They wanted more, they wanted unbridled lust, they wanted a fuck session that would send them all into spasms of orgasmic glory.

Jack slowly inched his tightened, and now puffy lips around and up Edge's sweet cock, finally letting it fall gently from his sucking with a soft smacking sound. He looked up at Edge a moment, then embraced him warmly around the waist. Edge, being intuitively well aware of what was to happen next, *some things you just know*, helped Jack to his feet, then kissed him firmly on the lips. Once more, he attempted to slide his tongue to the very back of Jack's mouth. Jack blocked out the crowd in that instant, and focused on the passion that began to burn in his chest. The coldness he had felt earlier was all but a memory.

He pulled away from Edge and motioned to him, and Edge didn't hesitate. He spun around dramatically and grabbed the cold metal bar against the cubicle wall. Jack moved in closer, grasping the firm ass cheeks before him. He pinched and pulled the ass for the crowd, then lined up his erection and pressed the swollen head against Edge's tight asshole.

"Fuck him! Give it to him!" The crowd yelled in unison.
"Fuck him!" Over and over.

Jack's face flushed a deep crimson as the crowd's cacophony grew even louder, and Edge, caught up in the vivacity of the moment, was suddenly overwhelmed with an ecstatic fervor that made his entire body quiver uncontrollably. Without thinking, he pushed his ass back snugly against his lover's sweating body, trying to force Jack's swollen cock head inside his tight asshole. Then Jack thrust in hard, feeling his prick break through Edge's tight ring. It was a spontaneous gasp of pleasure from Edge that screamed

realism, not drama, but he would have faked it if he had needed to. He was a natural actor.

Edge's asshole was snug, warm and now, the coldness that had run itself up and down Jack's spine was truly washed away with the heat of passion. He thrust his cock in and out, the cheering of the crowd spurring him into hammering Edge harder, faster. With each thrust, his lover cried out, his hands gripping the cold metal bar to keep himself from falling.

He wasn't even aware of the crowd any longer. The cock was all he could sense, feel. The way it stretched his asshole wide, the shaft sliding in and out, against his inner wall. Jack's strong hands clenching his hips, his fingers digging into his flesh. He felt every inch of the cock, his senses entering hyperdrive, and his own cock began to jerk and spurt cum all over the cubicle wall.

The crowd went wild. The cheering grew so loud, it reminded Jack of a stadium filled with crazed soccer fans when their team won the championship. They could see Edge's cock spurting its white seed all over the wall and floor and Jack knew it was only a matter of seconds before he, too, launched his cum against the furthest wall of his lover's asshole.

The crowd began to stand. One, then two, then more and more until they were all standing. Cheering, coming closer to the cubicle. Jack thrust his cock in deeply once more and exploded, his cum shooting in spasms. He held his cock all the way in, emptied his balls, leaned over Edge's bent body, and kissed the back of his neck.

The crowd watched and cheered as Jack pulled his cock from Edge's ass, then returned to their seats. They applauded and moved aside as the old man approached the cubicle. He gave them a mostly toothless smile and handed Jack a piece of paper. "There is the answer to your question, now if I were you..." He looked toward the door. "I would make a quick exit. There are those that are asking questions about you two. I've ... delayed them, but not for long." He pointed to two dark robed men standing in the far corner near the bar, both their faces obscured by hoods. "My men ... see." Two bare chest and nearly naked young men circled around the Dark Robes, hips gyrating, arms flailing in an exotic, if not wholly erotic dance that prevented the assassins from looking their way.

Jack nodded. He tried hard to suppress his expression of deep hatred that he felt for the Dark Robes, and quickly took the folded paper. *Dress quickly*, he thought to his lover. He gathered up his clothes, pulling on his jumpsuit, stuffed the note into the concealed pocket, then slid his feet into his boots. He watched Edge pull on his nearly skintight jumpsuit and fumble with the buckles on his boots. *You should really try and conform and wear less confining clothing, I don't know how you move around in that thing*. Jack tugged at his own suit, showing Edge how much room he had in his.

We could kill them here, you know.

You're not a killer anymore. Jack thought back, almost glaring.

Edge shrugged and finished the last buckle, pulling it tight and snapping it closed. *I have worn the same style of clothes*

since I came outta the accelerator, Jack. He did not allow himself to think about whether or not he was still a killer.

Jack shook his head in amazement. They really had you wearing that from the beginning?

Edge shrugged. "All part of my training. Clothing didn't matter, Jack; how I performed, how I made the kill, quick or quicker still—that mattered. No witnesses, nothing left behind, nothing to trace. I've never been sloppy." He met Jack's frank stare and matched it with his own. "Besides, it is quite stretchable, if you haven't noticed, and I can breathe quite easily."

Let's get out of here, while we still can, Jack reminded Edge with a gesture toward the assassins in the corner. They were now surrounded by several "employees" and would be hard pressed to escape the coming orgy.

Oh, if we could only stay and watch, Edge sighed. 'Course, I'd have to kill them anyway.

They aren't going to leave this place virgins. That made Edge laugh a little inside.

Jack smirked, pointed to the door and waved his lover to follow. He and Edge soon made their way down the alley that wrapped itself closely around their building, then after a brief walk, entered the bazaar section of Squaller Town. Jack was hoping they could lose themselves in the crowded street market, or at least buy themselves some time to find a better way to the one room apartment he had secretly procured for them, just in case a situation just like *this* arose. He hadn't told Edge about securing the rental upon their arrival on the

cruiser, but only because it had slipped his mind with everything that had been going on.

Jack decided it was best to take a circuitous route, and he and Edge spent nearly an hour and a half going up and down random streets and stopping to duck into obscure street side shops, in hopes of losing anyone that might be following them. Jack knew perfectly well that ditching the Dark Robes trackers would be difficult, and he had a strong feeling that they weren't going to be able to lose their shadows sufficiently enough to get to the apartment unseen. He could feel them even now, nearby; not dangerously close, but enough to make his brain itch. It was too risky, Jack thought. If they were cornered in a closed building, with only one way out ... "Guess that apartment is gonna go to waste."

"Apartment? What apartment?" Edge asked, taking up his position behind Jack, as they wove their way between stalls packed with all sorts of legal and illegal goods. *You got us an apartment on Europa? You have any idea how hard that is? Takes years ... why didn't you tell me?*

Jack barely looked at Edge, "Don't worry about it, doesn't matter anyway."

Finally, Jack led them down a narrow and darkened alleyway. He waved his hand, but didn't directly point at anything. "There," Jack spotted it. A rusted transport assembly lay against one wall, and he knew immediately it was hiding an entrance behind it. His contact had told him precisely what he had wanted to know.

Jack took Edge by the arm, whispering close. "This is one of the few entryways into the European Underground." Edge

nodded. "Remember what we had to pay to get this information, next time, we may have to pay more dearly," Jack added, although having to have sex in front of a crowd of fifty sex crazed and lonely men was a pretty high price, in and of itself.

"Look," Edge said, but Jack had already spotted the man in the dark robe.

"They didn't take long to find us," Jack said, clenching his fists. "That one looks—" Jack squinted, trying to see the Dark Robe's face that was almost completely hidden in shadow by his hood.

The Dark Robe was talking excitedly to a vendor, gesturing wildly in all directions. The dark robed man then turned his gaze toward them and in a split second, a tazer was in his hand, swiftly snatched from inside his robe.

The Dark Robe assassin pushed the vendor aside and just as quickly, aimed his weapon at Jack. At the same moment, in fact, a split second before, Edge reeled around, twisting his whole body as if he'd done the very thing a thousand times before. He shoved Jack backward, against the wall with one hand, but it was too late. The thin white beam from the assassin's tazer hit Jack squarely in the left shoulder, just before Edge was able to pull him back, around the corner of the alleyway.

Jack muttered a barely audible curse and reached out to Edge, grasping at his sleeve. "I'm alright ... just stun—." Fresh crimson oozed from the small round hole in Jack's shoulder. The burned cloth around it still sent curling smoke rings up from it.

"Hold on Jack, we're almost home-free." Edge felt Jack's weight, as he collapsed against him. He barely kept him from hitting the rough cobbled street. The telltale smell of burned flesh and cloth wafted from Jack and Edge could see his seared and partly bleeding wound. "Hold on Jack, just a few more feet." Edge let Jack slip softly against the alley wall and peered around the corner. The dark robed man was now surrounded by several citizens and at least one security officer, who had his own tazer firmly aimed at the assassin.

"Edge, get us out of here." Jack reached out and grabbed Edge's belt loop. "Get me up."

"Looks like the assassin has his hands full," Edge said. He looked down at Jack. "You're badly hurt, I need to get you to a medical center." Edge's face twisted with concern and it was only at that moment that he knew Jack meant more to him than he had ever thought was possible. "Jack..." He pressed Jack's wound with the palm of his hand, trying to staunch the flow.

Jack cried out and shook his head. "No, I'll heal." Jack struggled to climb to his feet. "You know better. We heal a lot faster than they do. Let's go, we're close now." Jack gave Edge a stern look, as if to say do what I tell you, do it now.

"Alright, but promise me you'll hang on." He tried to cradle his lover. "You're bleeding a lot." Jack's dark blood was all over his hands.

Jack nodded and tried to grin. He threw his arm around Edge. "You saved my life, you know ... a few more inches..." His arm ached like hell. It felt as though it had been stomped

by an elephant and it was quickly stiffening and becoming difficult to move.

Edge looked into Jack's eyes as his own began to water. "Jack..."

"If you hadn't shoved me..." Jack started to pass out, but quickly regained his senses, his eyes fluttering open, as tears of pain trailed down his blood sprayed face. Strangely, all Edge could think of was that Jack had become some macabre clown and he was now dying in his arms.

Humor, good, keep that up, Jack thought. "I'm still here and you're still too easy." Jack forced a blood streaked smile.

"Come on, you're delirious now." Edge winced and for a moment, he felt a twinge of pain in his head, almost as if his sinuses drained and his head became suddenly clear, his thoughts fully focused on one thing. In a fraction of a moment, the pain was gone and only clear, absolute resolve remained. "They've made a *very* big mistake."

The two rounded another corner and Jack pointed down a much darker alley, where refuse, abandoned crates and rusted machinery lay scattered like so much flotsam. Edge noted an old scratched and bent sign stuck to the alley wall, illuminated by a tiny pinprick of light from the adjoining alley, which read, in a red lettered scrawl. "Take what you want, but leave something you don't—The Management".

"Come on," Jack said, trying, injured as he was, to pull Edge to the wall. He let out an exasperated sigh, then saw it. The thing he was searching for. He reached out and pressed a small round panel, one inch in diameter, half obscured by an atmospheric temperature display panel. He sure hoped the

old man had been telling the absolute truth. A moment in time felt like an eternity and another passed, but nothing happened. Jack pressed down on the round panel again.

Nothing.

"Hurry!" Edge said, quickly. He had a feeling that danger was still close at hand. Something at the back of his neck tingled, as if someone's gaze was glued to him. Then he peered into the darkness toward the alley entrance. A robed figure, stood stark still for a moment, then he turned this way, turned the other way and once again stood still, as if listening. "Another Dark Robe."

He's searching for us, he feels us I think. Jack's thoughts were not able to mask his pain.

"This isn't good, Jack." Edge gripped Jack's good shoulder as his tension rose to a new crescendo.

"Is he looking our way?" *He's too close.*

"No, but hurry anyway. It's dark down here, but he's one of us, one of me. He can see for miles."

Jack pushed the panel again, holding his breath. Still nothing. He clenched his teeth, then punched it hard, grimacing as a fresh jolt of lightning pain shot up his wounded arm. At last, the faux assembly shifted slightly, then swung open.

Jack moved into the small opening with Edge right behind him, but at the last moment Edge shoved Jack through the rest of the way and stepped back as the panel began to close. "I'm a killer Jack, and now I have to prove it."

"Edge, no!" But the door had already shut.

"Sorry Jack, I can't let those assassin's roam free." He quickly stepped away from the panel and darted down the alley, away from the underground entrance. It wouldn't do to be seen now. Edge rounded the corner and spotted the Dark Robe no more than thirty feet ahead of him. Edge closed his eyes to calm himself. *Remember what you are.*

Suddenly all the memories of his training began to emerge from deep within the recesses of his clone brain. His first kill. The human that had been Scott Fland, mercenary, thief, assassin. Victim, father, innocent. Another pebble to be swept away. Another number to be subtracted from the whole.

Edge opened his eyes a moment. The Dark Robe was still standing there, now talking to a bald headed man, wearing the insignia of European Security. He closed his eyes again, remembering. The original, his "father" had been captured and brought to the island. His expertise had been "copied" from his mind and his DNA had been used to clone Edge. He was no longer useful to the Society. Now, he would be the first "kill" for Dark Robe Assassin, Edge Fland. His "coming out" kill.

Edge had tracked him, his original, who had been released outside the islands gated compound. Scott Fland had been told he was free to go, a skiff would arrive and take him to the mainland. Only it would be Edge who would meet him. Edge smiled, remembering.

He had donned his white cap and pulled on his shore patrol uniform. He fit the part. His only reservation was being able to get close enough to Scott Fland, even in the dim light of

dusk, before he realized he was being murdered by a carbon copy of himself.

Edge shook his head and reached inside his sleeve. He reached out and used his keen senses to hear every sound, every whisper, every footstep around him. He opened his eyes and headed casually toward the Dark Robe that now walked alone. The Dark Robe turned the corner at the main street and stopped outside Spanners Bargain Thrift Shop. He smiled. "Good, the seedy side of town. This assassin is new and foolish."

He realized there was a good chance the death of the Dark Robe would go unnoticed to the local authorities, especially on this side of the city. He stopped at the corner and waited, counting the steady thump thump of his heart as he prepared internally for a fight to the death. Someone had obviously given the assassin information about them, or he'd not be outside that small out of the way bar.

Edge gritted his teeth and looked around, making sure there were no innocent passers-by. The street was, to his great fortune, completely devoid of possible witnesses. He silently withdrew his dagger from his sleeve, gripped the handle firmly, testing the weight and balance at the same time, and swiftly lay the blade out of sight, flat against his wrist and arm. This way, he could easily make the killer slash with one motion...

"Scott Fland?" He stalked close, his face obscured by the dark of night. His dagger clenched in one fist behind him.

Scott Fland smiled and held out his hand. "Can we make this quick? You people have wasted enough of my time."

"Of course, Mr. Fland," Edge replied, bringing his dagger from behind his back. "We aim to please." And then he struck so quickly, a cobra would have been proud. A lightning blur of an upward motion that neatly sliced the artery as a spray of red arced gracefully, even artistically, through the air. You're dead, fucker, before you even hit the ... then he pulled the dagger back, twisting it slightly as the serrated edge caught in the cervical spine. He jabbed the dagger in once more to make sure and to free its serrated teeth from the bone. He shoved his kill backward, and watched him fall off the dock into the dark murky waters.

Edge wiped his dagger and looked down at the dying body of a former brother. He turned his head to look into his eyes and he gaped in astonishment. It was another Edge. "You bastards."

A hand grasped his shoulder and Edge whirled around, his dagger pointed up to strike—his wrist, gripped by unbelievable strength, as he upthrust to penetrate the groin of the attacker and in a blink, his wrist snapped, the dagger fell and his neck was twisted up to see—the face of his lover.

Jack caught the look in Edge's eyes. It wasn't the Edge he had come to know, but he knew it was the Edge that had been. The assassin, the killer.

"Jack!" Edge's fierce and sudden bloodlust quickly melted under the wave of emotion he felt as he gazed upon his lover. He winced, holding his broken wrist, and once again the Edge that Jack had come to love was there again. The calm serenity that was Edge. The soft and lovable puppy-dog eyes.

Jack knelt down and, ignoring the excruciating pain in his shoulder, took Edge by the arms. "I'm sorry, we've got to get out of here." He lifted him to his feet and grabbed the dagger, placing it in his leg pocket. His arm had become all but useless with that last excursion.

"Jack ... but how?" He couldn't believe Jack's inhuman strength or how he'd managed to creep so closely behind him without being heard. "What are you doing here, Jack? How did you get here?"

"I couldn't let you do this alone, now could I? We're in this together now. This is no time to play hero and run off alone." Jack prodded Edge with more than a soft jab in the ribs. "I told you, there are things about me that defy explanation." Jack finished, with a mater-of-fact quickness. "Come on, before we are seen with that." He threw a quick glance at the corpse, now motionless in a pool of dark blood.

"Your arm..." Edge looked closely at Jack's wound as they stumbled away from the death scene. He also noted Jack's pallor was now off white, as if he'd lost a tremendous amount of blood.

"I'm healing. We'll get it looked at, but we can't worry about that now."

"I could have killed you, Jack." Edge shuddered at the thought. But he still couldn't fathom how Jack had snuck up on him so easily. Had he seen him dispatch the Dark Robe? Had he seen him kill without a second's hesitation?

"No, I don't think so," Jack replied, scanning the street ahead. "Hush and come, we've really overstayed our welcome, now." *You were distracted with your first kill in a*

long time. You'll get better by the time this little war is over, Jack thought.

Distracted, yes, that must be it and I have a feeling that won't be my last. Edge tried to bolster Jack as they walked. He did a good job of hiding it, but Edge could sense Jack was feeling a great deal of pain.

"Did you see the face of the Dark Robe?" Jack didn't respond, but pulled Edge along with him.

They walked briskly through the midday crowded streets, attempting to lose themselves in the mass of humanity that was Ural City's downtown district. Edge turned to look behind them several times, making sure no one else was following.

"What about the other?"

Jack smirked and shook his head. "The Dark Robe won't divulge his identity no matter what, and the authorities here will deal with him. He *did* attempt murder, after all."

"They don't have a victim..." Edge looked Jack over. "You're bleeding more now, too."

Jack shrugged and held his shoulder. "It's healing quickly," he lied. "Besides, they don't need a victim. European Security has a *lot* of power. They'll deal with him how they deal with all violent criminals on Europa." Jack smiled and urged Edge to hurry along.

"Oh, you mean Tortreen Canyon..." Edge nodded with triumphant satisfaction.

Neither spoke as they meandered down one street after another taking a longer route this time, just in case they were followed. They arrived once more at the darkened alleyway,

and this time the quiet of the night and the dimmed city lights were their friends.

Jack kned the panel hard, and listened as it gave a protesting hiss, then slid open. "You first, I remember what happened last time," he told Edge, firmly.

Jack quickly followed and no sooner had he cleared the door, it slid shut without a sound.

"We're safe now," Jack whispered, pressing his good shoulder against the wall for support. There was only enough room in the space for them to be bent over, and the pain that shot down Jack's shoulder, like jolts of fire, only seemed to worsen in his stooped over posture.

"You hope," Edge replied, softly. He tried to slow his heartbeat. He had been primed. He had killed again. And even though it had just been reflex, he had truly been ready to give his life to save Jack's. *Am I redeemed?*

Redeemed? Jack thought back, but somehow he knew that thought was not meant to be conveyed to him. His mental abilities were getting stronger. He gritted his teeth and winced at a sudden jolt of pain in his shoulder. "We're safe, I can't feel the other one now."

"It's nothing, Jack, just thinking too much." Edge waved his hand, as if it was no matter. "What do you mean, you feel him?" Even in the utter darkness, he could still make out his lover's expression. "You actually felt him?"

Jack grimaced. "I call it my awakening. I didn't tell you earlier, it just slipped my mind. But yes, I felt him. I feel you now. I can feel them all if they get too close." *Sometimes I can't shut it off.*

"You think they've passed sentence on him already?" Edge tried to turn around in the cramped crawl space. "You're going to have to teach me this, and how long you've had *this*, whatever you call it."

"No, but he's probably in a holding cell on the far side of the city by now." Jack mimicked Edge and likewise tried to gain a better position. "I don't know if it can be taught," Jack sighed. His wound had closed somewhat and he was no longer bleeding. He lowered to a crouch at last. "I don't really know what it is or why I feel what I feel."

"What is it? Like some sense or...?" Edge knelt as well, nearly slamming his head against an old air conditioning unit that hung by frayed wires from the wall.

"Let's not talk about this now, let's get to the underground." Jack put his hand on his lover's arm. "I'll tell you everything, but only when I know for sure we can talk unhindered."

They remained motionless, both reluctant to make any loud sounds. Then a light blinked on over their heads, illuminating the entrance of a narrow crawl space, ahead of them. "Must be set on a sensor of some sort," Edge said finally. "Let's hope it isn't a trap."

"Or someone aware we are here," Jack added. "That old man was more than a bar owner, he was far too brazen. As crazy and crafty as he was, I wouldn't doubt he leads the Black Marketers." Jack moved passed Edge, the walls too narrow for them to crawl side-by-side through the tunnel. Edge followed, moving just behind Jack and on more than one occasion, Jack would stop and Edge would plow face first into

Jack's butt. "Don't get any ideas in here," Jack said, chuckling softly. He was trying his best not to show that there was a stabbing pain shooting up and down his arm. He wasn't doing it because he wanted to protect Edge. He just didn't want to show his own weakness, now.

"That's a way to lighten the mood," Edge replied, slapping Jack on the ass with his good hand. "Move, I hate tight places and it's getting hard for me to crawl with one hand." *There is only one tight place I like,* Edge thought. *My wrist feels like it's on fire!*

"I know you do. Just try and block out the pain. I'm sure you've had to do so in the past." Jack hurried along, ignoring his own pain as best he could until they finally reached what appeared to be a rusted grate at end of the crawl space. Jack pushed it and it swung open silently, its hinges well oiled. He pulled himself out of the vent with one hand, the injured arm now lay dead at his side, and he was unable to move it at all.

So much for quick healing. He clutched his arm and rubbed at it vigorously, trying to feel something, but it was completely numb below the wound on his shoulder, where the pain still jabbed at him like so many knives.

He looked around quickly. It looked like a man-made cave that had been blasted out of the rock, then smoothed over with laser drills. He watched Edge fall out of the old ventilation shaft, now derelict and abandoned, Jack was sure.

Edge leapt to his feet without a pause, leaned close to Jack and plucked the dagger from his leg pocket, quickly replacing it in his sleeve. He winked at Jack, feeling better just having his weapon back where it belonged.

He looked around the cavern and sighed. "I dunno, Jack." He wiped at the dust that covered his jumper and noticed for the first time, the dark stains on his sleeves and arms.

The proof of my deed.

He shook the thought from his head and inhaled deeply. "The air is fresh here." Then he looked closely at Jack's shoulder. "That tazer was set at full power; you're lucky you even have an arm. They aren't standard issue, you know. The ones they carry have no wires."

He shook his head slowly. "*This* is the European Underground?" The dismayed look that spread across his smooth features, said much more than words. He grimaced, tentatively clutching his quickly swelling hand. "I think it *really* is broken."

Jack looked at Edge's wrist and nodded. "I didn't really have a choice at the time. It was either break your wrist or let you stab me in the neck." Jack grinned slightly, but it was forced. "You'll heal." He shook his head then, looking around. "This *isn't* the Underground, it's just an entrance. I'm not even sure if the Underground is located on this moon." He pointed to a door, then another door, beside it. "One of them will lead the way, but I don't know which." He produced the note from his pocket, then put it away. "No mention of anything beyond this point, and I have a feeling we're going to have to get off Europa faster than I had planned."

"Great," Edge sighed. "We paid a high price for that information and—" He groped his ass. "My ass is still aching from that pounding you gave me not long ago."

"You have never complained before, and I doubt it's aching more than your wrist." Jack laughed and gave him a quick wink.

"Yeah, well, you went out of your way to give it to me with a tad more thrust potential than in our previous fuck sessions." He shot Jack an annoyed glare, which quickly became a slight grin.

"Come on," Jack said, walking over to the slightly rusted door to the right of them. "Worry about your asshole later, right now we have to look out for our collective butts." Jack tugged at the door. "Give me a hand with his." Jack noted how Edge favored the broken one. It looked pale and lifeless. He'd had no other choice.

Edge joined Jack and pulled with all his might, ignoring the pain in his hand as much as he was able. Together, they managed to wrench the door open, with nary a sound. However, its hinges creaked in protest as Jack pushed the door fully open and slammed it against the wall. Powdery flakes of rust and other debris fell to the floor like red snowflakes. It hadn't been opened in sometime, that much was obvious to Edge.

Now that the hard work was done, Edge kissed Jack on the cheek. "You're going to be spending a lot of time making my asshole feel better." He gave Jack a poke between the shoulder blades and followed him through the door, closing it behind him. For some reason, he had a feeling that was a bad move.

"Yeah, you know it, my tongue will do a tango, but right now, let's have less talk." Jack stopped, then turned around.

"This isn't the way." He pulled Edge back with him, but the door had jammed shut when Edge closed it. "Shit."

"I have a bad feeling about this," Edge said, adding his weight against the door. He pushed at it, but it didn't budge a hair.

"Did I tell you to close the door?" Jack asked, mildly frustrated. He kicked at the door, to no avail. "Where was that assassin sense a moment ago?" Jack kicked the door again sharply, but it still didn't budge. He growled and muttered, cursing to himself, but he knew his frustration was more from the pain that wracked the entire left side of his body than from being angry at Edge .

"No, you didn't, but I *thought* you were good at this. I *trusted* you to lead us the right way," Edge sighed. "And it's right here," he tapped his chest. "I'm a killer, Jack, not a tour guide." Edge bit his tongue and said no more.

"Well, it looks like we'll have to find the way through here, let's hope this doesn't lead to the moon's reactor core," Jack said, hopefully, and he moved down the corridor, quickly followed by Edge. "Good thing I'm not bleeding anymore."

I'm sorry, I didn't mean that. It's not your fault. Jack thought.

The two hadn't gone more than a few feet, when they were suddenly standing against a welded bulkhead. From the looks of the door, someone had not been too careful making the weld perfectly uniform. But they had made damn sure the weld wasn't going to be easy to cut through. "Looks like a few titanium plates were just stacked here and melted into the

wall," Edge said, turning his back and leaning against it. He sighed and looked at Jack for a moment.

Jack shook his head. "Don't ask me."

"Well now—" But before Edge could finish, the floor under them suddenly gave way, or more precisely, opened mechanically and they both fell through, landing on a partially padded floor. Jack quickly jumped to his feet, realizing immediately the floor had been a trap door. The dark of the room was swiftly chased away by a blinding light overhead and all around them. Jack quickly pulled Edge to his feet with one hand. They were surrounded in seconds.

"You were saying?" Jack asked, staring at, what he believed to be, members of the European Underground.

"Never mind." Edge said. *I'll take the three on my right.* He quickly thought.

No, they won't harm us, I don't think, not if the message I gave to the old man was passed to them.

What message? You should really tell me these things, Jack.

A lanky man with a single tuft of white hair on his head, and the grizzly beginnings of a goatee, came forward, the men before him parting to let him through. He stopped before Jack and Edge, looking at each of them for a long moment. Then he reached into his pocket and withdrew a keycard and handed it to Jack. "You are Harrow, I assume?" His pockmarked face turned into what could have been a grin, had it not been for a deep purple scar that ran down under his right eye, across his lips and down his neck, obscuring it. "One million credits and my people here..." He pointed to the

motley crew of men surrounding them, "...will take you to the caves. From there you can use a small shuttle skiff we've procured for you, to reach the Borgen cargo ship."

What message? What's going on? Edge thought again, furious at Jack's secrets. It was beginning to really piss him off.

Don't worry. Remember, there are other Dark Robes on Europa, and we don't know for sure they can't hear our thoughts. Jack nodded to the tall man, took the keycard and withdrew his podpad from his pocket. He imputed the numbers on the card, transferring the agreed upon credits, and sealing the deal.

"The ship isn't a good one, it's slow. Get too close to Jupiter and it'll pull you in, but you'll be dead long before that," the tall thug said with a smirk. Then he chuckled, softly. "Radiation is a real killer out here." Smugly, he traced the length of his scar.

Jack nodded. "We won't get too close Did you give us a trajectory disk?" He promptly but reluctantly handed back the keycard, doing so to elicit a measure of trust between them.

The thug scratched his chin, and nodded. "Sure, it's there, wiped the memory of the 'puter first, then added all that you'll need to get to the cargo ship—nothing else." He grinned, showing his tobacco-stained teeth.

"Let's go then, we're in a bit of a hurry."

"You're in a hurry?" The thug's eyes widened, and then he laughed. "You'd best be in a hurry. Seems you two have drawn a lot of attention to yourselves, Your faces and names are all over the news reports and wanted images with your

mugs on 'em will be lit up on every street corner within hours."

He slicked back the tuft of white on his otherwise balding head and released a short chuckle. He looked closely at Jack. "Judgin' by your bloody arm, looks like your friends already found ya once." He sneered. "You didn't lead 'em here did ya?" His hand went to the weapon at his belt.

Jack shook his head. "We had a run in with our *friends*, but we—"

Edge interrupted. "We took care of *both* of them." The look in Edge's eyes was enough to make the thug take a step back.

"Alright then, don't ask for medical shit," he threw his arms up. "Supplies like that are hard to get, *and* expensive." He tugged at his belt. "We're not into bloody charity, but who knows, maybe someone with a kind heart stowed somethin' or other on your ship." He gave a cockeyed grin, rubbed the butt of his weapon and shrugged.

"They should join us, they're already famous!" One of the other thugs commented, slapping a comrade on the arm.

"They'd bring too much heat on us," another wiry man said. All but his beady gray eyes was covered by some sort of a darkened leather cowl, slit open only enough to allow sight. He glared at Jack and Edge with unrequited malice, before trundling off down a side cavern.

"Why do ya think we asked for a million, eh? It was fifty thousand 'til we knew their baggage!" Another black marketer muttered.

"Alright you rabble, break it up and move on, our little meeting is adjourned," the lead thug yelled. He, along with the remaining ruffians, strode off laughing and clapping each other in congratulations. "They're as good as dead," Edge could barely hear one of them say as they vanished into the darkness.

Edge rubbed at the dagger hidden in his sleeve. Who are these people? They don't seem like more than a bunch of thugs to me.

That's what I was thinking. I'm guessing they're intermediaries. Black marketers, high priced ones, Jack thought back.

Should I start worrying yet? Do you think he was hinting that some medical supplies will magically appear for us? I'm not so good at reading people, Jack.

Not yet, maybe soon, and I have a feeling the supplies we need won't be a problem.

A few moments later, two bedraggled men came out of another side cavern tunnel riding on a scraped up and dented four wheeled vehicle, motioning to Jack and Edge to climb on. "Where the hell are we going?" Edge asked, as they bumped along on what he figured was an old cast off golf cart, from the looks of it. The walls of the corridor were barely wide enough for it, and the driver was not too worried about scraping the sides as he pushed the cart to its top speed. Twenty miles an hour may not seem fast, but in these tight quarters, it might as well be one hundred.

"The Borgen, the one and *only* European freedom fighter vessel," Jack whispered. He leaned closer to Edge, trying not

to get tossed off the cart. "From there, we'll go to Ganymede. They have an enclave there that I suspect is deep below the surface."

Edge blinked at him. "How?" He had never heard of such a place, and he thought he had been told everything before he left Earth. He knew Ganymede was the system's largest moon, but it had been marked as off limits thirty years ago. Why, he didn't know. *Radiation ... It's so intense there, it can play tricks even with our cloned DNA.*

And we're going there? Wonderful...

Don't worry, it's not like we'll be there long, besides, you're an assassin, don't you like to live dangerously?

I did what I had to do, Jack. I did it for us!

I'm not faulting you, Edge, calm down.

Jack chuckled softly and waved his hand around, trying to change the subject. "This place has been here for twenty years, these people—" He gestured to the two fighters in the front of the cart. "They've been stealing, dealing, and building a base on that moon. One day they'll launch a revolution. It's all going to begin there—the fight, the battle, the war." *They may very well succeed, if we help them.*

The rebels will never stand a chance, Edge thought. He looked Jack in the eyes. How is your arm, really?

Jack could only shrug. Not good, but don't worry, just try to be a little less pessimistic, my lover.

They reached the end of the tunnel and the cart came to a halt in a wide-open area, well lit by incandescent bulbs, hanging from the carved-rock ceiling. Before them was an airlock, an old one by the looks of it. Several pressure suits

hung from hooks on the wall. Jack noted several small crates, helmets, gloves, boots, and some extra harpoon pistols. Nasty things, tipped with poison, usually. Out here, just as good as a bullet, or a tazer.

"Put those on and go into the airlock, it'll take you up to the shuttle," the driver told them. He flipped a switch on the wall and entered a series of numbers. "It's unlocked now—you're on your own." He got in the cart and looked at Jack. "Good luck, you'll need it." He snickered and drove off, back the way they had come.

"I thought we were going to the caves first." Edge shook his head and peered closely at Jack, noting Jack appeared to be confident in his piloting skills.

"Change of plans, we have to get off Europa as fast as possible. I'm fairly certain there are more than two assassins on this moon. Seems our exhibition in the *Knife and Sprocket* made us more famous than I would have wished."

"Wonderful," Edge smirked. "But at least we know two of them are out of our hair."

And millions more to take their place. Jack tried hard not to bite through his tongue, as rage began to rise up within him. *I almost failed. I almost let them win.* He turned his attention to the display panel and focused his mind on piloting.

Jack and Edge took longer than was expected to get into their pressure suits, having to assist each other at every step of suiting up, but they managed. The hard part had been pulling the suit over Jack's injury. Edge grimaced as he pulled the padded shoulder over Jack's left arm and noticed a fresh

pool of blood form under his jumper. "Can you even fly a shuttle?" Edge asked, holding his hand out for Jack to assist him with his right hand glove. Soon enough, they were moving up the elevator.

Jack chuckled. "Of course, wasn't that part of *your* training?" Jack turned up the volume on his audio headset. "I was a pilot as well as a diplomat. Not me, mind you, the original." He smiled at his lover. "I just have all his memories, but you know that, right?" Jack tapped the glass plate of his visor. *I'm all set.*

Edge shook his head. "No, they trained me to kill. They trained me to be without emotion." *I'm not sure how well the latter part succeeded.* He looked at Jack for a long moment and felt a twinge of something deep inside himself. "You're bleeding again."

"And yes, but only a little. Putting the suit on didn't help." The shuttle looked like a wreck, but as they got in, they realized the inside was nearly new. "They planned it this way," Jack replied. *From above, this thing looks like it is derelict.*

I figured as much, Edge thought back. I'm ready as well. "I think."

Jack removed his helmet and had Edge remove his gloves for him. The atmospheric controls had already been set to the appropriate level. "Seal the door and lock everything down, this is going to be a bumpy ride." He pointed out the observation grid. The glacier they were perched on was less than smooth and a fresh blanket of the dark, dusty snow had fallen, obscuring the terrain even further.

Edge locked the airlock door and pressurized it. "How fast does this thing have to go before it'll lift off?" He strapped himself in beside Jack and removed his helmet.

"Not sure, never flown one of these," Jack replied. "Get ready, push that yellow button and turn that lever between your legs counter clockwise." He watched Edge do as he was told. "Careful, there, stop, now lock it down, the button on the lever."

"I hope you know what you're doing," Edge said, the knuckles of his left hand going white as he gripped the armrest.

"So do I kid, so do I." *You could always learn to fly.* "Hey, pull my arm up and place it in my lap," Jack requested, suppressing a grimace. "It's just dead weight."

Edge shook his head and held on tight. *You do the piloting and I'll hold you by the hand.* Jack flipped the engine power to full, then pushed the throttle stick forward. The skiffs rubbery treads spun slightly in the ice, then before either of them realized what was happening, the skiff bumped up once and it was off the glacier, speeding like a racecar just above the thick European ice sheet.

"Jack?" Edge said, finally releasing his white knuckled grip.

"Yeah?" Jack said, scanning the way ahead of them. He realized it may very well be his faster reflexes keeping them from plowing into an upthrust of ice. He needed to gain altitude, fast.

"Mind if I lie down a while, Jack? My head is spinning from all this jostling." Edge leaned down and put his head in Jack's lap. "I could just rest right here and keep you company at the

same time," he sighed. "Oh and Jack, have you ever piloted a shuttle with one hand?" He didn't really want an answer.

Jack laughed. "I may need you, but go ahead and rest, and no, this is the first time. Ah, adventure, you wouldn't trade this in for anything would you?" He glanced down just a moment, admiring the back of Edge's head. "You should let me shave some of this hair off the back of your neck ... werewolf." Jack grinned, and pulled up on the crescent wheel, just in time to miss the top jagged tooth of a glacier. The whole landscape below reminded him of an upside down ice dragon, with its top jaw ripped free. Just its bottom razor teeth, thrust into the hazy European sky.

"Mmm, I'll remember to do that when we're in a nice hotel suite," Edge replied softly. "No, Jack, I'd not trade this experience for anything." *You know what I'm thinking.*

"Good, neither would I." He paused to think a moment. "Well, except for the arm." He looked down at Edge a long moment. "I'd like a smooth trim on you. Yes, a smooth trim." He looked back at the view screen and nodded, then banked sharply up, tapped the thruster pedal at his feet just enough to give it that extra oomph, then pulled up as far as he could. The skiff wobbled back and forth a moment, then smoothed out as the small vessel reached the moon's escape velocity of 4.3 miles per second, give or take. "See, one handed—we'll be fine," Jack said, triumphantly.

Edge tried to get comfortable as the shuttle shook and vibrated. He closed his eyes, waiting for the worst. The skiff shuddered once more then began to shake violently to the left, then right.

"Hold on, this may be tricky," Jack added. Straining every muscle, he turned the wheel sharply to the right, and the shuttle's right tread brushed against the thin atmosphere just long enough to make the overheating alarm light glare red. The ship began to vibrate wildly. "One ... two ... three, and there." *Smooth sailing*, Jack thought, to his lap companion. "We made it," Jack told him, smiling thinly.

Edge rubbed his eyes, and sat up. "Well, I guess a nap is out of the question now, huh?" He sighed, and looked out at the blackness of space for a moment. He covered a yawn with his good hand. "Maybe just a small nap." He leaned against the cold metal bulkhead to give Jack more room, and despite the chill, immediately found the soft comfort of sleep, if only for a little while.

"Now we have to plot the course, let's see..." A sudden recollection came to Jack then, and with a nod of complete understanding, he pushed the keypad several times. "They didn't put the course heading in for us. I have to do it," he tapped another series of buttons, relieved that a portion of his past knowledge came back to him just when he needed it. "There, this should take us close enough to the Borgen for them to haul us in."

Ganymede was currently on the other side of Jupiter, but according to his information, the Borgen was in a low orbit just above the surface of the small moon, Amalthea. It would take some time to pilot the skiff to that moon and the rendezvous point. Jack laid back and closed his eyes.

From what he was able to learn before leaving Earth, the resistance was growing, and becoming an increasing threat.

The report he had managed to swipe and briefly read was some help, but he needed more information. What he did know was the European resistance had begun when the first martial law had gone into effect, more than forty years ago.

After a moment, he opened his eyes and made yet another course correction. The shuttle only vibrated briefly this time. Jack sighed, and wished the skiff had been a newer shuttle, where the steering wouldn't require so much herculean strength to maneuver. Having the use of only one arm only made it that much more difficult.

Ganymede's orbit had brought it to the other side of Jupiter. Jack flipped the thruster to autopilot, then back to manual, and made one last check to make sure the coordinates he had been given were precise. "Two point four and fifteen point seven should do it," Jack said to himself.

"I'm sure glad you have unlimited wealth," Edge said, sleepily. He had been asleep for the better part of four hours. He looked around, then rubbed at an indentation marring his right cheek. The bulkhead was certainly no pillow, but at least he had slept soundly for a while. The throbbing in his hand had lessened slightly, but still, now that he was awake it began to pulse even faster, each throb, sending a new experience in pain up his arm. Edge rubbed at his temple a moment, trying to find that nerve, the one he knew had to be there, to dull the pain. He gave up, sat up, and tapped the observation window. "It's very cold in space, Jack, and it's not much warmer in here." He slowly and carefully rubbed his broken wrist, trying to warm it.

Jack nodded. "You can thank the Brotherhood, or what's left of them." He turned the shuttle toward the massive Jovian atmosphere and counted to ten, then sharply banked it away. The shuttle shook briefly as it skipped across the magnetic field, then shot away from the planet. Jack's face was taut with strain as the shuttle shook a moment. "There might be blankets in the cargo section, but then again, it's not likely." Jack gave him a quick smile. "I'll look for a first aid kit, though." He stretched his legs as far as the cramped quarters would allow. "That thug leader hinted at something, but didn't want his brethren to know he was giving free aid to us."

The shuttle shook again, this time slightly more up and down, rather than left and right. "I'm hoping that was supposed to happen. I thought we were supposed to stay as far from Jupiter as possible," Edge said, sitting up straight. He was a bit worried, but then looked out the small portal and sighed with relief. Jupiter was shrinking quickly from view. "If you find a kit, but I wouldn't lay any bets on them helping us with any more than what we paid for, Jack."

"We're fine. I just used Jupiter to give us an extra push," Jack said. "Slingshot effect," he added, with a shrug. He looked at Edge and gave him a quick wink. "In case we don't meet up with the Borgen, we'll need to use the gravity of Jupiter to throw us around to the other side." He sighed as well, then tapped a series of buttons on the cramped console. He let go of the throttle and rubbed at his throbbing arm. "I can't feel any of them now. We must have just reached my distance limit." But he looked over the radar screen anyway,

just to reassure himself visually. "If you notice anything out of the ordinary, don't keep it to yourself."

Edge nodded quickly. "Autopilot?" He leaned down to look at the green read out display. Several of them were blinking, some were in dull yellow. He had no idea what most of it meant. He really didn't want to, either.

"It's limited," Jack told him. "These shuttles, especially ones as old as this, have a very small memory core." He leaned back and stretched his good arm over his head. "But it'll work for us, at least shoot us in the direction of Ganymede."

"Wake me when we get there," Edge said, sleepily. "I could use another ten hours of sleep."

"No, it's your turn to take the pilot's seat for awhile," Jack said. He climbed out of the small seat, and stood, his head nearly hitting the ceiling. The shuttle's design was not built with comfort in mind. "I'll go and look for that kit now, you stay awake and pay attention. We won't win this war if we're eating an asteroid."

"If I must." Edge shimmied over, trying not to kick any buttons or get the throttle stuck up his ass. "Shit."

Jack scratched his chin a moment, then leaned over and kissed Edge on the head, "I'm going to try and change clothes and find out what, if anything, they gave us for food and water." He leaned down and closely examined Edge's wrist. "I just hope that I was right about the thug's hint." He touched Edge's arm. "It looks terrible. Can you feel that?"

"Yes, it's aching like a son of a bitch." He shrugged. "I'm not bleeding, I'll be fine."

Jack frowned. "Your hand is pale and the circulation is cut off. You're not fine." He turned and looked out the observation window. "Looks like clear sailing for a few hundred thousand miles, just remember one thing, and I should have emphasized this when I mentioned it earlier ... it's imperative..." he tapped the small radar screen. "...keep an eye on that. Just because we took out two of them, doesn't mean there aren't more following us."

Edge checked the small radar display and shrugged. "Looks like we're alone out here." Then he added, "I'm starving. If they gave us food..." His eyes widened. "...Bring me something, but none of that ration crap." He wrinkled his nose in disgust. A blinking light on the console suddenly drew his attention. "What's this?" He asked, alarmed.

Jack opened the cabin door and glanced back. "Oh, don't worry about that, we're just low on fuel." Jack laughed and closed the door behind him.

"Shit," Edge said. He tapped the blinking light several times with his thumb. "Maybe it's just broken, like my wrist," he said, hopefully. He soon found he couldn't take his eyes off the radar screen. Watching the constant yellow line go round and around, just waiting for a sudden blip to appear. If it was small, it would have to be a Dark Robe scout ship. "What I'd give to have a laser cannon on this baby."

He looked out the pilot's seat portal window and watched Jupiter continue to shrink from view. As it did, the knot in his neck began to slowly fade away, but the throbbing in his hand continued, unabated. He pushed a small black button beside

the window and the portal slowly shut, blocking out the view of space. He felt a little better.

Edge knew nothing about shuttles. Or flying space vessels, for that matter. When he had been *born*, he was immediately taken from the cloning station on Papua and brought to Reno for training in the *killing arts*, his words, for what he had been genetically engineered to do. Never in life did he think he would ever be piloting a ship or running from his masters. He sighed heavily and closed his eyes. Not like anything would happen, the shuttle was on auto, after all.

Jack cut off a piece of leather strap hanging from the shuttle wall and bit down on it. He knew this was going to hurt, but he had to get that suit off, at least for a few hours. He closed his eyes, slipped out of the bulky pressure suit, then peeled off his jumpsuit. His eyes were watering and his arm was now completely numb from the circulation being cut off, but he no longer felt that burning pain. *I'm going to lose this fucking arm.*

He sat down and took several deep breaths and tossed the blood stained jumper into his bag. He sifted through his clothes and pulled out a new form fitting dark blue jumpsuit and pulled it up to his waist. This jumpsuit was more comfortable, a bit tighter, but not as tight as the one Edge wore, at least. Just a tad too tight around the crotch. He had felt like cutting a slit across the tight binding that held his cock and balls snug against his body. He decided against that, he would get used to it eventually. Besides, he doubted anyone would have been pleased to see his cock flapping about as he walked around the crowded city streets.

He looked around the cargo hold and spotted a small black box tucked into a corner. He reached for it and flipped it open. The small compartment was filled with tape, a small white tube, syringes, a bottle of blue pills and scissors. The scissors were bent and rusted, useless. He lifted the drawer and found a flare gun in the bottom, with one flare inside. "Useless." He looked at his wounded shoulder, now crusted over with dried blood. It was bruised purple, yellow, and green, just ugly, but the remainder of his arm was as white as snow. He tore open a tube of gray ointment, sniffed at it and nodded. Some sort of antiseptic cream. He squeezed the entire tube onto his wound and rubbed it in. He felt nothing.

"It's okay Jack, this isn't your first wound." He tossed the tube and picked up the box, placing it on his lap, then tore off a strip of cloth from his soiled jumper, and began to wrap his shoulder. He leaned against the bulkhead and held it firmly, while he tore off a length of sticky white tape, then quickly wrapped that around the bandaging until it was secure. "Not perfect, but it'll do." He shivered and wished he had brought a shirt and not just one-piece jumpsuits. But he was unable to pull the suit all the way on by himself. Taking it off had been hard enough. *Deal with it, Jack.*

That done, he rummaged through their supplies. A rather large trunk had been left in the shuttle for them, compliments of the owner of the '*Knife and Sprocket.*' The old man didn't fuck around; he wanted money, he got money and he had given Jack exactly what he'd asked for—the needed information on the European Underground, what the rebel's main objective was, and where their main base of operations

was located. The info on the whereabouts of the base was sparse, just Ganymede was given, and a promised meeting with the rebel commander. Jack wondered what, if any sway the old man had with the rebel leader. Lastly, they had given them a small, but capable ship to get off Europa. No questions were asked. He would fulfill his promise to the old man, as well. Replacing his missing fingers would cost at least two million credits, but that was nothing to him. He would do it, too, if he survived the revolution and got back to Earth in one piece.

There were two small tin boxes of rations—Edge would not be pleased—and three, two liter jugs of European water, crystal clear and cleaner than Earth's. It would be enough. Jack opened the ration box and shook his head. No, Edge would not be happy about dinner for the next few days. He would have to deal with it, Jack thought. He took out two packets, each about the size of an old-style military ration pouch, stuffed them in his leg pockets, and grabbed a jug of water, closing the trunk with his foot.

Jack frowned and slammed the cabin door. It did not produce the desired effect. Edge was slumped over the steering column, one hand grasping the throttle. Jack kicked the seat, hoping it would wake him, but once more, nothing. Jack grumbled slightly, and sat down in the co-pilot's seat and checked the readout display. The fuel panel still blinked, but now it was bright red. If they needed any thrust, they wouldn't be getting any. "Bastard's could have given us a bit more fuel." But he realized fuel was hard to come by out

here, on the outskirts of nowhere. "We're lucky they gave us any."

He smiled as he ripped open his ration packet. There would be some thrust, but it wouldn't come from the old engine of the shuttle. He had an idea to wake Edge and drag him to the cargo section and give him a good few thrusts of his own. Edge would certainly appreciate a good hard fucking. He had more stamina than any man he had ever been with. Of course, he was the first assassin clone he had been close to, and the first one he had fucked. If only his arm wasn't dead at his side. If only he hadn't broken Edge's wrist.

He pulled out a semi wet chicken patty and began to eat. It would still be several hours before they would reach Amalthea, if they weren't spotted by any European scout ships that occasionally traversed the orbit of Jupiter. If they were seen by any security vessels he wasn't sure the shuttle had the fuel or the maneuverability to escape pursuit, but if it came down to that, he would, as always, come up with *something* to get them out of danger. When in times of danger, Jack liked to think of himself as if he was the rat, trapped in a corner. A cat stalking close, aware of its every move, and what would the rat do in such a predicament? The rat would go for the throat of the cat, and he would too. He had a way of getting out of sticky situations, but he preferred getting in to them far more. Especially if Edge was involved.

Jack finished off his meal. It wasn't as horrid or as old as he had thought it would be. He drank down several gulps of water and tossed the jug onto the floor beside him. He checked the readout display once more. Everything was

working normally. He wondered why the renegades had given them such a worthy ship. Apart from the lack of fuel, everything was going smoothly for the little vessel. In fact, Jack thought, it needed a name.

"How about, the Little Fucker?" Edge said, suddenly. He raised his head and rubbed the throttle, like it was a stiff cock. Jack leaned over and kissed his cheek.

"I should cover my thoughts better," Jack replied. "The Little Fucker, eh? I think I like it," Jack chuckled.

Edge smirked. "Just because I'm asleep, doesn't mean you can let your guard down." He stretched and climbed out of his seat, rubbing the long erection bulging from his pressure suit. "Aren't you cold, all bare chested like that? I mean, it looks good..." He leaned close. "You bandaged yourself." He slowly shook his head. "Why didn't you call me? How'd you manage all this?"

Jack shrugged, and flipped a switch up and down, then locked it into autopilot. He scrutinized the display readouts for a moment, making careful checks of all the key systems. He tapped a blinking yellow button twice, until it went opaque white. "Everything looks good," he said, turning to Edge. He looked his partner up and down, taking note of a particular bulge. "Take that off and get comfortable." He jacked his thumb at the door. "Wait a minute. Help me with this." Jack tapped his jumper.

Edge stood behind Jack and pulled the jumper up, trying his best not to bang or apply too much pressure around his shoulder. He finished by zipping it up to Jack's neck, which he then kissed. He grinned, opened the door. "I'll take

everything off and then play doctor. I can take a closer look at your arm ... amongst other things. Some energetic sex might be just the ticket to take the *edge* off things." He shut the door behind him and wondered if Jack would catch the pun. It *was* intended.

Jack was already up, deciding to take him up on the offer, dead arm or no. But then he hesitated. He stared at the door, looked back at the console, noting the diminishing fuel display board. "Shit," he cursed and returned to his seat. He couldn't take the time for sex, and if there was a time to abstain, now was it.

Jack flipped the autopilot off, then hit the intercom button. "Come back in here, we have a *slight* problem."

"*Get in here!*" Jack's bellow was earnest enough to send Edge tripping over the trunk, as he flung himself into the cockpit. Jack was straining with the control thruster, then Edge saw it, how could he miss it. Desolate of color, monstrously huge, a fucking mountain coming right at them.

"*Jack...*"

"Strap in!" Jack yelled. He pointed at the control panel and slapped several switches to the up position. "Keep that power at midpoint between five and ten, or we're going to be planted in this fucking moon for all time." Aitne's orbit was retrograde, erratic and with this old clunker of a shuttle, there was no feasible way to predict its course around its mother, Jupiter.

Edge did as he was told, frantically pulling and pushing a series of knobs, which all had gyroscope indicators above them. "Five and ten," Edge said, more to himself, than the

pilot. "Five and ten, easy, easy." He glanced at Jack a moment, noting his perfectly calm concentration. "I guess this means the sex is out?"

Jack would have grinned at the humor, perhaps even laughed, but only under less threatening circumstances. "This," he said, "is Aitne, one of several moons around this blasted planet that doesn't follow the rules." Jack had the crescent wheel pulled against his chest, his teeth clenched with strain, the knuckles of his good hand white. The peak of Aitne's tallest mountain was still coming at them, but the shuttle began to climb and just barely skimmed the dusty spire. He would now be able to boast about his piloting skills, at least.

Edge sat back and relaxed, as Jack released his grip on the wheel. He cast a quick glance at Jack, "I'm hoping that isn't going to be a regular occurrence." His heart was pounding harder than it ever had, but he hid his fear well enough. He trained his eyes on the altitude display and sighed softly.

"You weren't concerned, were you?" Jack said, slapping him on the knee. "You don't think I'd smash us into a desolate moon, ending all of our dreams, just before all the fun is about to start, do you?" Jack grinned sardonically.

Edge cocked his head. "Concerned, slightly, afraid, not really." He shot him a grin. "I don't think, well I *know*, I have *never* felt fear." That was a lie that he would not admit.

"No fear, huh?" Jack grimaced. "Assassin training ... not something I ever had the chance to investigate, much." He turned his attention back to the control panel. He wanted to gain more distance from the moon, as quickly as possible, so

he pulled up once more, held it for a count of twenty and watched the moon's surface quickly shrinking under them.

"Well, you did leave rather quickly, Jack," Edge grunted. "You took all the information you could gather, you emptied several secret bank accounts and you even killed a few brothers." Edge chuckled and sat back. "How many bank accounts did you empty, by the way?"

Jack shrugged. "I did what I thought I had to do, Edge." Jack flipped the autopilot switch back on and sat back, opening and closing his good hand. "As to the killing," he shrugged again. "I had no other choice, now did I?" *I've never really wanted to kill anyone, except one.*

Edge caught the thought and nodded with understanding. "No, Jack, you did what you had to do. I admire you for that." Edge leaned over and kissed Jack on the cheek. Edge thought a moment, his eyes on Jack's handsome face. "Jack, when were you born?" He sat up, crossed his legs at the ankles, and stretched out as best he could in the cramped cockpit.

Jack pulled himself out of his seat. "I need to stretch my legs and get a drink. Keep an eye on the radar screen, eh? I haven't seen you even look at it for awhile." He didn't wait for a response. He returned a few ticks later with a bottle and two glasses stuck in his pockets. "When was I born?" He handed Edge an empty glass, then poured him a finger's worth. "Hold this," he told him, handing Edge the other glass. He filled the second glass to the brim. "Mine."

"You brought rum *and* glasses?" Edge asked. He downed the shot, his face flushing immediately. "Shit, how old *is* that stuff, anyway?" He coughed and put his glass between his

legs. "Before you ask, yes, I didn't take my eyes off the radar while you were gone. We're alone out here."

Jack nodded, chuckling softly and sat down. He drank his down then took a long drink from the bottle. "I always bring a bottle with me." He looked closely at the bottle, but the label was long gone. "Well, it's not as old as me." He leaned down and stuck the bottle between the bulkhead and drive assembly, and climbed back into the pilot's seat, careful not to kick the display. "I think this thing was designed for very small people." Jack muttered, adding an unpronounceable curse to the engineers who built the shuttle.

Edge smirked. "You have too many secrets, Jack," he sighed loudly for emphasis, "just tell me everything." He began to get out of his seat, feeling very frustrated. "All of your secrets will be open to me eventually." He scoffed, then stared long and hard at the cargo section door.

"Yeah?" Jack replied. "You think so, do you?"

Edge nodded knowingly. "Why not be open with me? Surely I've proven myself to you, by now."

Jack sat up straight, scanning the display. He looked at Edge, met his gaze. "Because, you *were* sent to kill me." He turned his head slightly and gave Edge a long look. "How do I know you're not going to try?" He smirked to himself, then reached out and grasped Edge's rigid cock.

Edge stretched his legs out, leaned over the thrust manifold, wrapped his arm around Jack and kissed him on the nose. "Oh, sure, the kissing killer." He still hadn't confessed to Jack that he had poisoned his fish on the lunar subway train, and now he realized Jack may very well have read his

thoughts. He looked directly into Jack's eyes, trying to discern if he had been read, but Jack showed no signs of it. Perhaps the pain Jack was feeling was diminishing his ability.

Jack chuckled. "Well, just imagine how fun it would be if you tried." Jack stretched out, working out the knots in his muscles, then ran his hand up Edge's muscular back. He no longer felt anything from his right arm. It was just dead weight hanging there. He wasn't sure if that was good or bad. He was a clone. He *did* heal faster than a human.

"Yeah, I'll kill you while you fuck the hell out of my ass," Edge snickered slightly. "That would be a neat trick huh? I guess I could do it while I'm on my back, my feet kicking wildly in the air."

"Oh, tease me," Jack replied. "Will you giggle at the same time?"

Edge laughed. "That's exactly what I'm doing, and no, I absolutely will *not* giggle, not even if you tickle me," he nuzzled Jack's face with his moist lips.

"Let's go to the cargo hold, there's more room and we won't accidentally crash this thing into a moon while we're going at it." Jack paused a moment at the door. "And Edge, you *saved* my life. I *do* trust you, more than I have ever trusted anyone."

Jack sat on an old dented trunk banded by straps of dark stained leather, and watched Edge yank, pull, and generally fight, until his pressure suit was on the floor. His blue jumpsuit was moist with hours of sweat. Jack could smell his scent and it sent shivers of excitement through his loins. He pulled his own jumper open at the crotch, then slipped out of

his boots. In a moment, his cock was hard and free, waiting for Edge.

Edge looked at him with a funny expression. "You don't think I'm going to strip again, do you?" Jack asked. He stared into his lover's eyes, gripped his cock and waved it at him.

Edge chuckled and shook his head. He was taking his sweet time, however, admiring his bare, chiseled chest in the atmospheric display panel. It easily worked as a pseudo mirror. Then he poured some water into a small towel and gave himself a quick wash. He was doing a masterful job of ignoring the throb in his hand.

"I've never had sex in such a cramped space," Edge said, matter-of-factly. "One of us may break something if we get out of control." He winked at Jack, a grin slightly etched his cheek. He pulled off his jumper, being mindful to pull it slowly off his right hand, and let it fall. He turned and gazed at his fully hard cock in the panel. He looked at Jack, and grasped his cock, squeezing hard, and looked at it again. The head was swollen fully, slightly purple, some pre-cum dripped from the slit.

Jack smiled, leaned against the cold metal wall, his own cock growing harder with the sight of Edge. "I've never had sex in such a small place, either. I did have sex on a canoe once, but it seemed far less confining than this..." Jack reached down and pulled on his erection, until it began to throb.

Edge inhaled deeply, his eyes half closed. "I'm not surprised," he said, leaning over and nuzzling Jack's neck. "How old *are* you, anyway?"

Jack was silent for a few seconds. "Does it really matter?" He didn't want to divulge that, at least not yet. He didn't think it the least bit important.

Edge nodded and sat down hard on the trunk. It was just wide enough for both of them. "Yes. No reason not to tell me now, is there?" He reached down and took Jack's cock in his hand, stroking it slowly. He inhaled deeply through his nose.

Jack wet his lips, looked into Edge's blue eyes. "Just over four hundred." He smiled softly and put his arm around Edge.

"I see, it must have cost a fortune to keep bringing you back like that," he whistled low and measured the girth of Jack's cock with his fingers. He squeezed and released, the warmth of the member transferring to his cold hand.

Jack nodded. "One reason why they were so adamant on me not leaving the way I did," Jack surmised.

"Not really." Edge leaned down and licked the head of the cock in his hand. He tasted the slit. "That really had nothing to do with it." He looked up at Jack a moment, then gave the head an extra long lick. "Mm, I can't get over how good your cock tastes."

"I'm sure it had something to do with it. But you're probably right. The ability to love is the most dangerous thing to them." Jack moaned and pushed Edge's head down, forcing his cock between the younger man's sweet lips.

Edge held Jack's cock in his tightened fist and worked the shaft with his lips and tongue, bobbing up and down fast, each time pressing his nose into Jack's velvety smooth skin. Jack didn't shave it, Jack didn't have to, being created that way. Edge wanted something else though. "Kneel down and

lay over the trunk," he told Jack. His heartbeat quickened slightly, as the telltale signs of out of control lust began to build within his chest, and move down to his loins.

Jack gave him a wicked grin. "Oh, I was wondering when you'd beg for my ass." *You realize this isn't going to be easy, right?*

Of course not, we both have one arm, that's why it'll be a challenge. Edge chuckled. "It's not my cock that wants your sweet ass, Jack." He licked his lips and stood behind his lover, pulling Jack's jumper open and tugging it down over his dead arm. "Sorry Jack, if I'm going to have what I want..."

Jack shrugged. "It doesn't hurt now. I can't feel a thing." Jack knelt at the base of the trunk and lay across it, hugging one side and letting his dead arm dangle. "Pull?" Jack asked, arching his back.

Edge nodded and pulled Jack's jumper down just below his ass. Satisfied, he knelt down behind him and cupped Jack's ass, squeezing the firm mounds one at a time, then buried his face between them, until his tongue struck anal gold.

"Mm, Edge, we should turn off the gravity and do this weightless." Jack bit into his lip.

"Nah, we have time for that later, I am greedy for your ass." Edge dove his tongue in and out of Jack's tight anal opening, then began to lick up and down, pausing to suck the hole itself several times. "Jack," Edge stopped and wiped his mouth. "I love your asshole, have I ever told you?"

Jack grinned and pushed his ass back into Edge's wet face. "Yes, you've mentioned it before. Show me how much."

Edge laughed and pushed his tongue up the tight hole as far as he could. He pulled it out, smacking his lips. "How was that?"

"Too good," Jack said, breathless. "Give me more of those." Edge obliged and gave Jack's asshole a thorough eating, and didn't stop until his own cock began to drip.

"Jack," Edge stood up and wiped his mouth dry. "As much as I love the taste of your ass, mine could use some loving." He reached out and pinched the wet butt cheeks before him.

"Yeah, I knew it couldn't last." Jack stood, stretching his good arm luxuriously over his head. He pointed at Edge's cock, which was as rigid as it could get. "Sure you don't want that sucked on first?" Jack licked his lips and took a moment to look out the side portal. Nothing but dark empty space. He pulled down the portal screen with a snap. He gripped Edge's waist, running his hand up and down his muscular thigh. He licked his lips, then opened his mouth wide, trying to relax his jaw to prepare it for Edge's big cock.

Edge shook his head and turned around. He grabbed one cheek and pulled it wide. "Eat my ass." He knelt and lay over the trunk, mimicking what Jack had done, holding one side and then spread his legs wide, giving Jack a good view and plenty of room. He had fallen in love with having his ass eaten when Jack did it for him the first time. He remembered it fondly, even months later. "I'm for once, thankful for DMCs," he told Jack.

Jack laughed. "How many digital memory chips does your series have?" He figured it had to be substantial. Assassins

needed that extra edge. Edge seemed to have more than he at first realized.

Edge was thoughtful for a moment. "I have no idea," he turned his head, resting his cheek on the cold trunk. "They didn't exactly give us details about our specifications, Jack."

Jack raised a brow. "Fine, I know you're just teasing me, anyway, besides..." Jack buried his face between the firm, hairless cheeks. "You know I love slurping your hole until you beg me to fuck it." Jack chuckled, and began to munch. He continued devouring Edge's butt hole, barely pausing to take a deep breath. Then he stood up, stroking his cock.

Edge turned his head and stared at Jack's cockmeat. "Mm, hurry up, I'm needing it." He spread his legs just a little wider, then raised his ass in the air slightly. His asshole was wet with the slurp of Jack's mouth. Jack grinned, pumped his cock a few more times, then knelt and placed the head of his hard-on against Edge's puckered fuckhole.

"Want it?" Jack asked, teasingly.

"Yes," Edge said, clenching his teeth. He grasped the trunk and held on tightly. "Give it to me hard, we don't need to worry about being too loud." He bucked his ass up and down, trying to push his anal ring around the cockhead pressed against his hole.

"I'll make you *scream*," Jack replied. "If that's how you want it." He thrust his cock in, hard, didn't stop the lunge until his cock was imbedded in the tight anus.

Edge winced, his hole flexing around the cock. "Fuck, Jack, I didn't mean torture me!" he bellowed and tried to relax his ring. He liked it though, but Jack's thick cock stretched him

wide. Edge tried digging the fingers of his good hand into the side of the trunk for some purchase, and using his excellent balance, finally managed to get a grip on the leather strapping that was wrapped around it. If only it would hold during the coming tumult.

"You asked for it." Jack gripped him around the waist and began to pump his asshole hard. "Like it?" He pumped harder, banging his balls against his mate.

Edge began to moan, he didn't hold back with the cries of pleasure. "Yes, yes, Jack, fuck, give it to me harder, fuck me until I'm crying." He spread his legs and stretched them back as far as he could, the tops of his feet just barely brushing the cold corrugated metal floor. Jack rammed in deeply, over and over, planting his cockhead against the deepest cavern of Edge's rectum. Edge released a steady moan, his ring flexing several times around the thick cock, then his own cock jerked by itself and sent a large wad of sticky white across the trunk. It didn't stop until there was an artistic puddle of it across the straps that slowly trickled down the trunk. His passion still did not abate, however, and he tried pushing his ass into the ramming cock, with even more fury than before.

Jack was sweating like an animal and thrust in one last time, his cock exploding into Edge. He held his cock in all the way, feeling spurt after spurt until the pulsing stopped at last. "Fuck," Jack breathed heavily. He pulled his slick cock from the asshole and fell back onto his ass. "Edge, damn." He leaned back, stroking the last drops of cum from his dick.

Edge pulled himself up and sat between Jack's legs. "Was good, wasn't it?" He leaned back and kissed Jack on the chin.

Jack nodded and returned the kiss, but met Edge's lips, pushing his tongue between his teeth. Edge chuckled, then pointed at his cock.

"You didn't?" Jack said, frowning, as he looked at Edge's cock, slick with cum, the shaft dripped with it, the pubic bush was matted with sticky white cream.

Edge nodded. "Yeah, you did an excellent job, didn't you notice my asshole tighten over and over? I lost it about five minutes ago." They both laughed. "Don't worry, it was good, first time I've ever blown my load from being fucked."

Jack kissed him hard, sucking his tongue. "First time I've ever made anyone cum by fucking them," he admitted. "Well, we'd better get dressed and see where the hell we are." Jack told him, twisting out from under Edge. He helped him up and grabbed his cock once more. "Next time, try and hold off, I was in the mood for a cum dessert."

Edge laughed and pulled his cock. "Can't always control it, Jack."

Jack chuckled softly, and pulled his jumper up as high as he could, then once again had Edge help him dress fully. He rummaged around in his bag for a clean pair of black socks. He pulled them onto his feet. "Are you going to get dressed, or are you going to travel in the buff all the way to Ganymede?" Jack opened the cockpit door, giving his lover one more look.

"I guess commando would be very distracting, huh Jack?" Edge slapped his bare thigh. "I need to eat something, then I'll put some clothes on, since you insist."

Jack raised his eyebrows. "Hurry up will ya?" He closed the cockpit door behind him.

Edge finished cleaning himself off, using his old socks. They'd been worn too long, anyway. That done, he stood and looked himself over in the display panel that had become his mirror. Satisfied, he released the locking clamps of the trunk and fished around until he found a ration pack that didn't turn his stomach. He was indeed famished. He ripped the package open with his teeth and wolfed down the semi solid beef stew. He left the puddle of cum on the trunk as a reminder, not like there wasn't a possibility of having several more of them painting the top before they said goodbye to this piece of junk skiff-shuttle.

He dropped the packet in the trunk and closed it, then opened the portal screen, looking out at the beauty of nothingness. He craned his neck, pushing his face against the slightly cool glass, and could just barely see the edge of Jupiter's atmospheric halo glowing in orange and yellow hues. He, like Jack, saw beauty in the utter blackness of space. It was calming to look at, nothing to distract his thoughts. The darkness was peace to him. *The darkness that a killer becomes one with.*

He sighed, closed the screen and locked it, then pulled open his bags. He selected a clean, dark blue jumpsuit, like Jack's. He picked up his cadet jumper, rolled it around in his hands, then tossed it into a corner behind some broken machine parts. He wouldn't need *that* anymore. *Throwing away my former life*, he thought. *Don't throw away the killer, yet.*

Jupiter's great face covered the entire view screen, like some old painting of a New England fall had been plastered in the middle of space, before them. "I never realized how big it was," Edge said, stepping into the cockpit.

Jack smiled. "Didn't you pay attention on the cruiser?" He examined Edge closely. "You look good, all you need is some rank insignia and you'll be even more of a catch." Jack chuckled. "I'm *kidding*."

Edge eased himself into his seat and strapped himself down in the same motion. "I was a little busy most of the time, Jack. Gambling, sex, more sex." He grinned and stared at the orange hues before him. "Too bad it's so deadly. I bet it'd be beautiful looking up at that from the surface."

Jack nodded, "But it has no surface, just gas, liquid hydrogen, nothing you want to try and stand on." He tapped a button. "And there could have been a lot more sex if you hadn't been spending all of my credits." Jack pointed at the screen. "Look."

Amalthea's surface, the twice baked potato of Jupiter, was pockmarked with enormous craters, small craters filled with dust, making them almost invisible, and deep gouges that looked more like giant scars made by some beast with a massive claw eons passed. One behemoth crater looked as though it was smacked by several giant asteroids, almost centered each time. Jack flipped off the auto-pilot and turned the shuttle, leveling it off, scanning both the view screen and the forward window shield.

Amalthea was also called Jupiter V, but ever since he had first seen it in a museum's astronomy display years ago, he

had called it the 'twice baked potato,' for that's exactly what it reminded him of. It was also very close to Jupiter, the third in proximity, and being so near, it could wreak some havoc on the shuttle's electrical systems, and that worried him, somewhat.

"Okay, I see our moon, can't miss it, but where is the damn ship?" Edge asked, as he tapped the view display panel several times, hoping that somehow that would cause the missing ship to miraculously appear on the screen. But there was no sign of the Borgen. A ship as large as that one supposedly was couldn't exactly hide very well.

Jack cocked his head slightly, but kept his attention on the moon, which was quickly growing larger ahead of them.

"Are you sure these are the coordinates?" Edge didn't get nervous easily, but the fuel was almost depleted and something far worse was happening. "Fuel isn't our only problem, you know," he said with alarm, pointing to the oxygen tank readout. It was nearly empty.

Jack didn't flinch. "I know." He pushed the wheel down slightly, dropping altitude until the shuttle was only five thousand feet above the surface.

"Wasn't the Borgen supposed to be in orbit around this moon?" Edge stood up and leaned over the controls, trying to look out the cockpit window. His pessimism about the clunkiness of the shuttle's system made him only want to rely on his own senses. He still didn't see the ship they were meant to rendezvous with.

"It's here, has to be," Jack responded. He didn't take his eyes off the tracking sensor display. It was an old style

version, not much better than ancient radar, but it should be good enough to spot a ship the size of the Borgen.

"We've been double-crossed." Edge clenched his teeth, and the dull throb returned to his hand.

"Don't be so hasty," Jack told him, quickly. "Jupiter's Goddamn magnetic field is probably obscuring the signature of the ship. "And..." he prodded the screen with his thumb. "...This little ship's power supply isn't exactly at its full strength."

"Swing around to the other side," Edge said. "If it's not here, there is no way we can get back to Europa, is there?" He stared at Jack.

"Just what I plan to do." Jack looked at him with a grin. "What little you know about space travel." He pointed at the screen. "Jupiter will be our fuel, we'll coast and sling shot around it. It'll take a hell of a lot of time, but we'll shoot out and head right for Europa." *I hope.*

Edge was incredulous. "Jack, uh, the oxygen won't last *that* long." He suddenly realized they were both going to die and spend eternity in this damn shuttle. He silently envisioned both of them floating through space, frozen solid, finally being found three million years in the future, adrift and orbiting some asteroid. *Just what I want, make some space archaeologist famous.* His eyes were glued to the oxygen readouts.

Jack gave him a grim expression, but it turned up slightly. "I heard that thought ... we have our pressure suits. The oxygen supply may last long enough to get us to..." Suddenly all of the display lights went from what they had been, to

blinking red, lighting up the cockpit in a menacing crimson glow.

"Now, what?" Edge couldn't make heads nor tails of all the flashing lights, then he jumped when an alarm began to blare.

"I think we're in trouble." Jack shouted. He was frantically pressing buttons and when one of the flashing lights went green, another would go out completely, and once they went out, they didn't come back on. *I need two hands!*

"Umm, Jack..." Edge began.

"Not now, every fucking system we have is failing!"

Edge grabbed Jack's leg. "Jack." He pointed at the view screen.

Jack glared at Edge, then saw him pointing. He looked, and his panic turned to instant relief.

"The Borgen," Edge said, amazed at the size of it.

"Indeed, I told you everything would work out," Jack said, flashing him a grin.

"But it's so big, how the hell..."

"Good question, it's a hell of a lot bigger than I ever expected. It looks like a refitted carrier." The Borgen was a good thousand feet in front of them and the cone shaped vessel took up nearly their entire view.

"Something's not right about this." Edge stared at the ship, noting it had come to a complete stop.

Jack punched several buttons on the console, effectively shutting down all non-priority systems. The cockpit went nearly dark, but at least all the flashing lights and alarms were quieted. Jack sat back and looked at the Borgen. "I'm

rather curious myself how they could manage to steal a ship that size, but I'd rather wait and see what they have to say about it. They didn't mention any of this to me when I last had contact with them."

Edge sighed noisily. "And when we're not satisfied with their answer?" He cocked his head. "You've had contact with them before?" He tapped sharply on the console, unable to hide his nervousness.

Jack pulled himself out of his seat. "Then we do what we have to do." He looked at Edge, certain he could at least answer the question about being in contact with the Rebels. "Yes, right before I left Earth."

"How so?"

"It was the rebels who gave me the false identity papers to get off the planet and onto the moon." Jack fingered the throttle, remembering.

Edge nodded. "I was wondering how you pulled that off." He looked at Jack with admiration. *You crafty devil. We never figured out how you did it.*

Jack grinned. "It's nearly impossible to code that kinda crap on Earth, seeing that all computers are networked."

Edge nodded. "And there are no network connections to the rebel base." He smiled knowingly.

"So, I am indebted to them, for saving my life, but they also need me, us. And we need them." Jack got out of his seat and motioned toward the back.

"Is that all?" Edge asked, following him.

Jack shook his head and hesitated, but only briefly. "No, they gave me a location and a contact, but I'll say no more now."

Jack and Edge fought for nearly an half an hour to pull on their pressure suits, checking each other to make sure the seals were secure, then Jack went back to the cockpit a moment, returning with the throttle in hand. He tapped it. "I wiped the core, we'll take this too, just in case and don't forget our bags. I don't really feel like wearing the same jumper for the next few weeks."

Edge gave Jack a wide eyed look. "The throttle? Oh, just in case uh..."

"Just in case European security forces happen upon this shuttle and want to take it. If they can't pilot it, they can't take it apart and scan it and find out we were here."

"How could they find out?" Edge pulled his helmet on, closing the neck clamp until it snapped in place. He picked up the leather bags and slung them both over his shoulder. He didn't bother trying to hand one off to Jack. Not only would the weight be too much for him, but he had accepted his role as porter at last.

"We're clones, they'd be able to pick up skin flakes and who knows what else," Jack said. He stood behind Edge, opened his bag and stuffed the throttle inside, hiding it at the bottom. "Remember what's in here. Don't leave it unattended."

"I won't let it out of my sight." Edge hunched up his back. "You just had to have that thing jab into my back..."

Jack chuckled. "It won't kill you. Turn around now and I'll check your air hose." He pointed to his helmet. "Are you reading me alright? My receiver was full of static for a moment, probably the radiation."

Edge nodded, but rapped his helmet a couple of times. "Say something again."

"Something again," Jack said, grinning behind the glass visor.

Edge nodded. "I hear you fine, no static for me, smart ass."

The Borgen pulled very close to the small vessel and Jack pointed to a small airlock entry, painted with a red V. He and Edge stood next to the small shuttle door, waiting for the ship to extend the docking clamp. "Now, once we get over there, just follow my lead. We need to be friendly with these people." Jack admonished him. "There will be nothing stopping them if they decide to toss us out an airlock."

Edge smirked behind his visor. "I'll just not say anything, how's that, mister diplomat?"

Jack grinned. *Good thinking.* "Oh, and turn your transmitter to full power. Once this hatch is blown, you'll need it to hear me."

"Done," Edge replied. "Hear me ok? Test, test."

Jack gave him an affirmative nod. "Here they come."

The Borgen extended a long arm from the side, which clamped to the side of the small shuttle, then began to pull it close. Jack and Edge looked out the small portal and watched. "They won't be able to secure it air-tight," Jack said.

He reached out and took hold of one of the long woven fiber cords, used to tie down cargo, that were hanging from the ceiling. "Take this!" he yelled, swinging it to Edge. He grabbed another for himself, and wrapped it snugly around his waist. "When I open this door, everything is going to get sucked out, so make sure your bags are secure, and don't let go of that fucking cord!"

Edge nodded emphatically, slung both bags over his shoulder, making sure the straps were snug, then he grabbed the cord and held on for dear life. "Count of three?"

Jack nodded. "Wait for their airlock entry to open, then I'll count." His helmet communication device crackled with static. "My transmitter is making that sound again."

Edge gave an affirmative nod. "Mine seems fine." He tapped the small acorn shaped knob on the outside of his helmet anyway.

Finally the shuttle clanged against the side of the larger vessel and from this vantage point, Jack could tell it was certainly no cargo ship. "Look at the gun ports." Jack pointed to a row of Gatling gun style projections, slightly camouflaged by innocuous looking metal bulbs.

"I told you, this just isn't right," Edge intoned warningly, just as the larger vessels airlock slid open.

"One, two, three!" Jack said, and slammed his hand on the airlock release lever. The door didn't just pop open, but ripped itself off its hinges and bent sharply against the outside bulkhead, causing the shuttle to vibrate.

Spaces Escapes
by Angela Fiddler, Jason Edding

"Why didn't I hear that?" Edge asked, but before Jack could reply. "Oh wait ... no air, right." *I'm tired, Jack, and I'm still getting used to this space travel thing.*

Jack rolled his eyes. "So am I."

Edge nodded. "Nice, I guess we won't be coming back here." Edge laughed, but he was a little worried. *I was thinking this would be our escape route.*

"Don't worry," Jack said. The Borgen's entryway opened and two men in stark white pressure suits waved, beckoning to them.

"Go."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

The Borgen

"Welcome to the Borgen," the white haired man said. He waited for Jack and Edge to remove their helmets, then extended his hand to Jack. "You must be the man they're all chattering about." He didn't smile, but gave them both a scrutinizing gaze. "You two have caused quite a stir. Not just on Europa, but on Earth. There are alerts on all of the emergency channels."

Jack handed his helmet to a small thinly built man who stood beside him. "I'm Jack," he said to the white haired man, shaking his hand. "And this..."

"I'm Edge." Edge removed his helmet, but didn't extend his hand. "We tried to be quiet down there, but they wouldn't leave us alone."

The white haired man nodded at them both. "I am Commander Tees, I'll be taking you to Ganymede." He waved for them to walk with him. The corridor away from the entry airlock was lit up brightly, the polished white walls curved around a bend that opened to what looked to be a larger cargo area. Tees stopped them at a door flanked by two burly guards, each helmeted and armored, both carrying tazer pistols on their hips. "You two are wanted for murder now. Some sort of Earth agent found dead in an alley, I'm sure you know who I mean, and a dear friend of ours, an old Senator that owned the *Knife and Sprocket*." Tees stopped and looked at Jack. "They found him hanging from the ceiling fan of his bar."

Jack winced inside, but managed to force a thin smile. *Dammit, they killed the old man.* "We were expecting a cargo ship."

"Ah yes, our people on Europa are kept in the dark somewhat, they are, for your information, not exactly as trustworthy as we would like." Tees paused a moment. "And they are on Europa, susceptible to being arrested, questioned."

"I see." Jack said, casually. He was looking at everything, without appearing to be doing so. "I'm sorry about the old man..."

Alton Tees nodded slowly, looking directly into Jack's eyes. "Tortured he was, and then killed and left on the street." He clasped his hands behind his back as they walked. "The old man was very useful to us. It will be hard to replace him." He cleared his throat. "It will very likely be impossible."

Jack nodded, understanding. "So, where'd you happen to get an old carrier?"

Tees smiled, nodded to one of the guards, who pressed a button on his belt. The door they flanked hissed open. "Come, we'll talk on the way, I'm sure you'd like some *real* food, perhaps a drink and to get out of those suits." Edge handed Jack the bag that didn't carry the throttle. *Carry this for now, I want a hand free just in case*, he thought. Jack took the bag and carried it loosely, in case he needed to drop it fast.

"Sure is a big ship." Edge remarked, as he slung the bag he carried off his shoulder and into his left hand.

They entered another long corridor, then an elevator. "The trip to Ganymede won't be a long one," Tees told them. He

was looking directly at Jack. "If you like, I've made rooms for you both, you can have dinner with me tonight, and we'll be in orbit sometime late tomorrow." He paused a moment, looking closely at Jack. "You're injured, no?" He smiled. "You were shot, yes? In the ... left shoulder, I believe." He snapped his fingers at one of the guards. "Bring Doctor Emanuel to their quarters immediately."

Jack nodded, not really surprised Tees knew of his injury. He had his own questions, however. "Fast ship?" Jack noted the elevator was going down.

Tees smiled. "Very fast, we could be in Earth orbit in less than a month." He brushed away a bit of lint from his sleeve. "Here we are." He scrutinized Edge. Staring at his pale hand. "You as well? Strange."

"That was my doing," Jack replied. "A little accident," he shrugged. "Nothing a brace won't take care of ... and we'll only need one room." Jack motioned to Edge. "We travel together."

The door slid open and Edge followed Commander Tees and Jack. "What's your engine like? I'd love to take a look," he asked.

Tees nodded at Jack. "I understand." He looked at Edge and shook his head. They rounded a bend on the corridor and stopped outside a room with a number 10 painted in black in the middle. "I would be honored to show you, but that part of the ship is off limits to all but the crew." He smiled at Edge. It was an honest smile. "I would love to hear about this accident. It gets somewhat dull around here. Back and forth

dodging patrol ships is tedious at times, especially when we've been doing it for so long."

I don't sense that he's hiding anything from us, Jack thought.

I just want to sleep in a bed. Edge smiled, staring at the back of Jack's head.

Jack and Edge went inside and Tees excused himself with a courteous nod. Edge pressed a small opaque button on the wall and watched the door slowly, soundlessly, close and lock itself. He noted the mechanism now flashed an innocuous dull red and he was as confident as he could be, under the circumstances, that their room was secure. He turned his head slightly, a nearly invisible grin on his face, and said, "You are *not* getting the bed *this* time, Jack."

Jack looked around the room, one large bed, one chair that looked comfortable enough for him. He sat on the bed however, and began removing his pressure suit. Unzipped, he pulled at it gingerly, until it slowly slipped down his injured arm. The rest was easy. He let it fall to his lower legs, then he quickly removed his boots. "We can share it," he said, bending down to rub his feet a moment before pushing the pressure suit completely off and away from him. "Damn boots are too tight and the suit smells like an old laundry center." He wiggled his toes a moment, trying to get the circulation going.

"Want me to rub your feet?" Edge was serious. "You could probably use a good massage." He sat snugly beside Jack, and slowly unzipped his jumpsuit.

Jack shook his head. "Let's conserve our energy for now. I don't want to let my guard down here."

Edge agreed. "One of us should stay awake..."

"...While the other sleeps," Jack finished. "You sleep first. I need to think some, anyway." He patted Edge on the shoulder, held his hand there a moment, squeezing.

A knock on the door a few minutes later brought Edge quickly to his feet. He tapped the button, watched the color change, and waited as the door slowly slid open. He was surprised to see a short but pleasantly fine looking young man in thin glasses and wearing a white one piece uniform standing there. Edge raised his eyebrows, and without appearing to be doing so, looked the man over as he had been trained to do. His long black hair, a perfect match for the suitcase he carried in one hand, was tied back into a ponytail, thrown over one shoulder and looped into a small silver band attached to his collar. He had one of the newer podpads in his left hand, which Edge noted was covered in an ugly red scar, as if his hand had been horribly burned at some point in his life.

"I'm Emanuel ... don't let my stature fool you. I am quite adept at hand to hand combat." He clenched his scarred hand tightly around the podpad. He wasn't kidding.

"Er, I'm Edge, come in." He shot Jack a surreptitious glance, and Jack returned the look with a casual shrug. He stood up, nodded politely to the medic, and began to remove his jumper.

"Let's dispense with pleasantries." He scoffed at Edge and nodded back to Jack. "I'm told you're wanted for murder and

you caused the death of a fine, fine man." He tossed his suitcase on the bed and opened it. The top section was a computer display panel, which looked very much like what one would find in a hospital. The bottom held assorted vials of colored liquids and a small silver cylinder with buttons along one side.

"We killed in self defense," Jack spoke up. He said 'we,' because he was not about to tell them any more than he had to. He tossed his clothes on the chair, and sat on the bed. "And we regret the death of the old man."

Doctor Emanuel cocked his head slightly. "It's our first death in quite some time. We try to be very careful with our little ... revolution," he said, not to anyone in particular. He gently lifted the cylinder from the box, cradled it in his hands like it was his child, and pressed two buttons on the bottom. The device began to hum and one end lit up with a violet glow. "Remove the bandages, if you would please?" He tapped his foot impatiently.

Jack nodded to Edge, who came around and pulled off the bandages. They were soaked with blood. "I thought you stopped bleeding," he shook his head at Jack.

"I didn't think it would do either of us any good..."

Edge sighed. "I have to use the bathroom." He left the room, closing the bathroom door behind him.

Emanuel smiled. "Not all is as it seems, then." He remarked. "So he killed the assassin and you..."

"Broke his wrist." Jack finished. "How..."

Emanuel shrugged. "Just a guess." He smiled now and leaned over Jack. He put the light end of the silver device

against Jack's shoulder and ran it back and forth. He pressed a third button on the device and the humming intensified.

"Amazing instrument."

"What is it? What are you doing to me?" Jack could begin to feel his arm tingling all the way to his fingers.

"It's new technology. We ... procured it from a shipment just a month ago. Amazing, like I said. It works on the cellular level, repairing damaged tissue, revitalizing dying cells. And..." He pressed another button and the violet glow turned into a bright white that lit up half the room. "...Since you're a clone, you'll be healed in no time. Or is that rumor about clones healing twice as fast as a human?"

"It's true, but I've never been wounded this badly before." Or had he? He seemed to have a vague memory of something ... Jack nodded then. "Scar?" He had never had a scar.

Emanuel was silent for half a minute, obviously thinking. "That I don't know." He paused again and rubbed at his nose, finally pushing his glasses up. He raised his head and looked into Jack's eyes, as if he were trying to peer into his soul. "You're the first clone I've ever seen." He bent lower, got closer, looking deeper. "You look totally human ... amazing, amazing." He turned the device off. "That is all I can do. It'll either work, or it won't now, if not, the arm will have to come off." He wrinkled his nose, which caused his glasses to nearly fall off. With an irritated shove, he pushed them back up. "I'm terrible with knives. They call me a doctor, but I'm only partially trained." He grinned deviously, pulled his ponytail out of the loop and flipped his hair behind him with a satisfied chuckle.

Jack nodded. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that, then." He pointed at the bathroom door. "Help my friend next?"

"Of course."

Edge let the 'doctor' out and closed the door. He gave a half smile and rubbed at his wrist, which was now barely swollen. He could already flex it. "Have a drink Jack, have one for me, too." Edge yawned and began to undress. He kicked off his boots, sending each one in a different direction. He peeled his suit off and slung it over the edge of the bed. "I like being able to have both my hands back." He clenched his bruised hand into a fist and flexed it over and over. "We should take one of those devices with us."

"I'll bet half my wealth that's the only one they have," Jack replied matter-of-factly. "Did you see how he treated it?" He also felt incredibly better. He could not only feel his arm, but the pain was there, just barely. He could even flex his fingers slightly, but Emanuel had told him to let it rest and heal.

Edge agreed with a halfhearted nod. "I'm tired, Jack. I want to sleep, at least for a couple hours, okay? Have two drinks, have three, and then come to bed and keep me warm." He lay back and sunk into the soft mattress, sliding his healing hand under his head.

"I will at that, but it looks like they didn't arrange for drinks yet. Good thing I have one more bottle of rum." He had foolishly forgotten the other one on the shuttle. Now that he had time to relax and let his guard down, he looked around the room again. The room was sparse, well lit, a door that led to a bathroom. He pushed it open. "Good, a shower, we can take one together." He sighed, turned to Edge to see

if his invitation had been accepted, but he was already fast asleep. He went over to the bed and pulled the soft tan blanket that had been rolled back under Edge's bare feet all the way up to his neck, and tucked it gently under both of his shoulders until it was snug. In the dim light, he looked at Edge's handsome face a moment then kissed him softly on the forehead. "Sleep first ... apparently you need it more than I do."

Jack showered methodically and finally stepped out of the shower stall, pulling a towel off a wall hanger at the same time. He glanced at the blinking time piece on the shower control panel, and was somewhat surprised nearly an hour had passed since he had closed the bathroom door. He dried himself, then finished with a quick comb of his hair. He looked in the mirror, satisfied for the moment, but he was intent on getting a trim as soon as time allowed. Perhaps after the war was over ... His hair was now about the same length as Edge's and looked good enough. Over the past few weeks, Edge had begun to lose his military look and it was easy to get used to, after a time. He'd decided just recently that he would endeavor to be less controlling over him from now on. He felt like he had sometimes treated Edge as his subordinate, his lesser, but Edge was more his equal and he wanted to show him that's how he felt about him. He was even thinking of sharing his past with him. All of his past ... every minute detail.

After giving himself an extra rub down to make sure he was completely dry, he hung the soaking wet cloth over the sink and dimmed both of the lights until the room was nearly

plunged into complete darkness. He silently crept to the bed, and slid in beside his sleeping lover.

He let him sleep for a good hour longer, watching him from time to time, transfixed at the slow up and down movements of Edge's chest. He rolled onto his side until his lips hovered inches away from the face of his lover. He felt the warm air as Edge's nostrils flared. "I really hate to wake you my lover, for tomorrow our little war begins." He smiled at him and lay back, staring at the rough rock ceiling a moment.

"Renegades," Edge mumbled in his sleep and rolled onto his side, facing Jack, his hand softly caressing the older man's arm.

"Renegade lovers," Jack replied. "Edge, wake up, it's my turn to sleep."

Edge started and sat up. "Oh, right. I'm always first." He wiped at his eyes and looked around the room, then sat back against the headboard. "Everything quiet?"

"Yes, take a shower, have a drink and remember, you're younger," Jack said. He pushed himself into the mattress, slid his good hand behind his head, staring for a few brief moments at the dimly lit ceiling.

"I'm awake," Edge said, shaking his head vigorously, but Jack had already been taken into the arms of slumber. "I'm awake."

Jack dreamed of a wasteland, desolate, barren of life, on a scorched and shattered planet, circling a typical yellow-white star. A small moon, cracked and broken into two halves, slowly orbited each other in their dance around their dead mother. He sat in a fighter craft, one that he had never seen

before and all around him many of the same. Their guns trained on him. He fought to move, he even fought to breathe, but could not, but did not feel the suffocating pain of breathlessness either. Try as he might, he couldn't move his hands to send his thrusters into full acceleration to escape, yet the enemy ships, and enemies they were, did not fire on him. He was close enough to see the pilot of one of them, his yellow inhuman eyes, staring into his. "I know you," his mind said to the beastly thing.

"Jack? It's time, and we only have a little while before the shuttle launch." He had let Jack sleep, watching over him, for the remainder of the night, but didn't feel at all tired himself. More of his training he was glad for.

Jack sat up, and swung his legs out of bed, not saying a word. His night had been fitful, full of images and thoughts that troubled him deeply. "Coffee?"

Edge nodded. "Probably. They left something outside a few hours ago, but I didn't want to wake you." He went to the door and retrieved a small-wheeled cart, laden with dishes covered with metal heating domes, to keep the food warm. He pushed it over next to the bed. "I wasn't about to dig in without you." Edge sat down, and gave Jack a quick peck on the cheek. "I have to admit, it was a hard thing not to go out there and devour it all." He had thought about doing that several times, actually.

Jack grunted, and wiped the sleep from his eyes. "How'd you know it was food? Did they knock?" He bent down and rubbed his still sore feet. "Fuckin' boots, remind me to buy a fitted pair when this is all over."

Edge rolled his eyes, lifted a cover and went glossy eyed over the still steaming bowl of soup. "Jack, I'm a *killer*, not a doorman." Edge shrugged, adding, "They spoke through the door." He grabbed a spoon wrapped in cloth and began to eat the soup. At the same time, he pulled off the remaining domes. Bacon sandwiches, scrambled eggs, half a chicken and two pieces of chocolate cake made up the rest of their menu. "Wonder where they get all this food?"

Jack nodded satisfactorily, then shrugged. "I see you're dressed already." He lifted his sore arm over his head and clenched his fist once, twice. "Amazing device. My arm is almost back to normal, albeit a bit sore." Jack shrugged both shoulders and didn't wince. "They've got everything else here and after all these years, I'm pretty sure acquiring ample food supplies isn't a problem—they *own* the European Black Market."

Edge pondered that a moment and helped himself to a sandwich, then reached over and handed Jack his jumpsuit. "I got dressed hours ago." He showed Jack his hand. The bruises were barely visible. "I think it's partly the device and partly our DNA." He shrugged, and decided some of the eggs would be very happy to bed down atop his bacon.

Jack nodded. "It's possible it's both. Remind me to let you sleep next time and I'll stay awake." Jack stretched and rubbed his temples. He sighed softly and pulled on his clothes. His fingertips felt slightly numb, as if he'd fallen asleep on his hand.

Edge laughed. "I'll remember that. You okay, Jack?" He watched Jack pull the breast and leg off the chicken and chow down, licking his fingers after a few hearty bites.

Jack wiped his hands on a cloth and finished dressing, finally slipping his too tight boots onto his feet. The vision of the shattered planet was in his mind again and he did his best to hide it from Edge. "I'm fine, just need more sleep, that's all." He smiled and gathered up his bag. "I've had enough food for now. Too bad we can't enjoy it more."

Edge looked around the room, making sure they hadn't left anything behind. He slung his bag over his left shoulder and checked the bathroom once more. He returned a moment later and handed Jack his podpad. "Forgetting something?"

Jack grimaced and took the podpad, sliding it into his hidden pocket. "Thanks. Wouldn't do well to leave that behind."

Two guards, both uniformed, armored and carrying small black tazers, were waiting in the corridor outside when Jack and Edge emerged from their quarters. *For a moment I thought we'd have free access to poke around,* Edge thought.

Not likely to happen. As rough as things might be out here, these people don't seem amateurish, Jack thought back. *Be good.*

I'm always good, Jack.

Commander Tees and a small armed contingent were waiting for Jack and Edge in the shuttle bay as they were escorted in, but Tees waved off the escorts, and they immediately left the area. The bay looked more like a gutted cafeteria, by the looks of some of the equipment still lying

around. There were even some culinary murals on the walls. Tees smiled and shook the men's hands. "The shuttle will take us to the surface."

Jack nodded. "And the Borgen?" Jack was curious how they'd hide the enormous vessel. Surely European Security Forces patrolled the entire system; and of course the Dark Robes weren't just going to forget about them, especially after two of their killers failed in their mission. They too, would be out there searching the system of moons.

Tees smiled and gestured wide. "We've made some ... improvements on our shielding. The Borgen will slip into the mother's atmosphere where it will wait."

Mother? Why not just call it Jupiter? Edge couldn't help but laugh. "You've got to be kidding?" He gave Tees an incredulous look and stared at Jack, hoping he'd chime in with his complete agreement. "Nothing can survive that kind of radiation!" *Not even us!*

Jack shook his head at Edge, but said nothing aloud. *We have to trust that they know what they're doing.*

Now it was Tees' turn to laugh. "Come, I'll explain it on the shuttle if you've a mind to listen." He winked at Edge, but took Jack's arm and gestured to the shuttle ramp.

Edge shook his head and followed. He could hear part of the conversation, the explanation, but let it be drowned out by the loud hum of the shuttle engines. "Nothing can survive Jupiter's radiation," he mumbled in disbelief.

Edge held on tight as the shuttle flew out of the hanger bay, banking sharply left, then descended rapidly before leveling off and heading toward a dim spot in the distance.

Ganymede, he assumed, or possibly one of the other more obscure, less relevant, moons. He noticed a pad beside his seat and picked it up. "Jack, did you have any idea the base was..." He was looking at a schematic of the rebel base. No doubt left there by Tees for them to find. A little carrot perhaps. He shook his head and bit his lower lip, before handing the pad to Jack. "...One thousand feet below the surface?"

Jack accepted the pad and looked it over carefully. "This is only the first level," he replied, glancing at Commander Tees. Jack's jaw was set, his irritation evident. "I thought we had reached a level of trust."

Tees closed the cabin door and put his hand on Jack's shoulder. "A level of trust, indeed, the first level and nothing more. Not yet, not here." He pointed at the portal. Jupiter took up the entire view. "We're vulnerable here Mr. Harrow. We can't have all of our plans out in the open, now can we?" He roughly took the pad from Jack and left them without another word.

"I think you pissed him off, Jack." Edge clapped Jack on the back and pushed his face against the portal, looking left and right. "I think I see Ganymede."

"I seem to be good at that." Jack replied, jokingly.

"You are at that." Edge grinned and couldn't help but give Jack a peck on the cheek.

In less than an hour, the shuttle turned sharply once more and Edge watched as the small ship banked down over the surface of a muddy brown moon. It soon descended rapidly toward a deep crater on the rim of Ganymede's northern

hemisphere. "I think that's ice pack," Jack said to Edge, pointing at a soft white shine in the distance. It was several hundred miles away, but still very visible.

"Must be a huge glacial formation down there," Edge intoned. "You think they're using it for a water source?" he asked, but he was staring at the black shadow of a crater they were now approaching rapidly.

Jack shrugged. "They'd need water and I doubt they've got a supply train from Europa." Jack smirked.

"I don't see any base structures at all." Edge said, a touch of worry in his voice. *Maybe the schematic on the pad was a ruse.*

Laughter erupted behind the two lovers. Edge knew it was Tees immediately, but strangely hadn't heard him enter the passenger cabin. Tees walked up to them, his hands clasped behind his back, a smile creased his forty-five-year-old face. "You don't see a base, eh?" He laughed again.

"What's so funny?" Edge asked. He wasn't in the mood for fun and games.

"Edge..." Jack cautioned. *Friendly, remember?*

Tees stood between them, staring at the crater. The shadow of it now covered the shuttle in a blanket of blackness. "What's funny is you thinking our base would be out in the open, even in this crater." He shot Edge a warning glare. "We're not fools, what we fight for isn't some game we play."

Edge shrugged and turned away. "Then where is the base?" He, at the least, expected to see some sign of it.

These rebels weren't exactly a strict military group, adept at hiding things, were they?

Don't be so sure of that, Jack thought to him.

Tees smiled, "Our base of operations is one thousand feet below the surface as you already know by reading the schematic I left for you to see."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Ganymede

"I didn't think it would be this bleak."

Jack shook his head at his lover. "You can remove your helmet now." He pointed at a spectacular view of the crater they had landed in. "This is ingenious and beautiful."

Edge removed his helmet and stood beside Jack, looking in this same direction as Jack. "It's still bleak." He unfastened several straps on his pressure suit. "I was expecting..."

Jack turned to him. "What? We're on a damn lifeless moon. This one just happens to be mostly rock with a little ice tossed into the mix."

Edge nodded. "Rock devoid of color, reminds me of Earth's moon." He forced a smile. "Sorry, Jack, Europa was beautiful compared to this." Edge took a seat and looked around the shuttle, making sure he wasn't forgetting anything. They had landed dead center in the crater *Zakar*. Named for the Assyrian supreme deity. It was a good choice, Edge thought. If he had been planning this whole thing, he might have even chosen it himself. Located in the rim of the shadow on Ganymede's northern hemisphere, they called it a shadow because the crater existed right on the edge where the light of the Sun and Jupiter began to ebb.

"Hard to see, damn near *impossible* really, and the shield wall of the crater will block their scanners to a degree," Jack said, to no one in particular. *And this is only one part of the moon. Ganymede is sort of a dull muddy brown, mostly.*

Edge sighed. "How long do we have to sit here before they open that door?" He jacked his thumb at the airlock, which was already connected to the base entry airlock.

Jack sat beside Edge. "They'll open it when they're ready." Jack spread his legs and stretched. He looked at Edge, leaned close and kissed his cheek. "Are you *that* eager for a thousand foot journey into the bowels of Ganymede?"

Edge leaned into Jack. "Not really, but I'd feel safer if I had more room to move around. I'm a little tired of being in the middle of a machine."

Jack shrugged. "Look on the bright side. Soon you'll be deep inside a moon with only one way out." He massaged his quickly healing shoulder a moment, and decided to sit in silence for the remainder of their wait.

It was another two hours before the airlocks were synchronized. The large green lights on both doors flashed and the sucking sound of vacuum release punctuated the silence of the shuttle. Jack and Edge stood at once, as the doors opened together. Tees came out of the cockpit, hands clasped behind his back, as usual.

"Shall we?" He smiled and waved them into the main rebel base entrance.

"How long until we're in the base?" Edge asked, his impatience obvious to everyone but him.

Jack sighed softly.

"It won't be long," Tees replied, not looking at him. They had entered an elevator. "This," he waved his hand around, "wasn't always as sophisticated." He smiled again and looked

directly at Edge. "You may be surprised at how much we've done here."

"You've accomplished a lot in twenty years," Jack added, trying to convey his admiration.

Tees nodded at Jack, then pressed a series of buttons and the elevator suddenly dropped, its speed somewhat alarming at first. Jack watched Tees' every move. It wasn't just push a button like a normal elevator, but a complex key code and Jack memorized it.

"I've arranged for a room for you," Tees told them. "You will not be allowed access to any part of the base other than your suite." He pushed another series of buttons as the elevator slowed, then they began to move horizontally. "There will be no exceptions until the admiral has a chance to speak to you." He straightened the wrinkles in his white uniform. "By the way," he looked directly at Jack. "You may be wondering why we accepted you into our fold so easily."

Jack nodded. "I was wondering, actually."

Tees smiled. "Word has reached us that your mission was a success, to a degree."

Jack raised his brow. "What do you mean?"

Yeah, what does he mean? How does he know, Jack? Edge was furious.

I'll tell you everything when the time is right.

Tees turned to Jack. "You managed to kill quite a number of the Brotherhood, but our man inside reported the Hierarch escaped with minor injuries."

Edge groaned.

Something twinged inside Jack. It felt more like a kick in the stomach. He shook his head. "Are you sure?"

"We are as sure as we can be," he threw up his hands, "out here. But if this is true, your debt to us is not paid and you'll have to finish your mission before our deal is complete." Tees' smile became a stern grimace. "We will fail as long as he lives, you know this as well as we do."

How could you have missed, Jack?

Curious ... I don't see how it's possible. Jack glanced at Edge and shook his head slowly.

Tees instructed two rebel corporals to escort Jack and Edge to their suite, then turned on his heel and left them. They stood in a long rock carved corridor, dimly lit on each side with small oval lights, each as bright as a twenty-watt bulb. The taller of the corporal's, his hand tazer held at his side, led the way. The other walked behind Jack and Edge, his own weapon pointed at their backs.

"Is that really necessary?" Jack asked as they walked.

We can take them.

And then what? Calm down, we have nowhere to go without them, just be patient, trust me.

"We have our orders," the one behind them said. His voice was absent of feeling and that made Jack uneasy. They turned down a corridor to the left that was lined with a dozen of the dull white globe-lights and walked for what seemed like two minutes, then another left for another minute. They arrived at an arched door, which descended ramp style into an even darker hallway. This one was lined with dim red lights, exactly like the last, but for the color.

Color coded. Memorize everything you see, it will be our map. Jack glanced at Edge, who nodded.

* * * *

The corporal ahead of them stopped and moved to the wall. He reached out with a device in his hand and pressed a button. The wall ahead of him creaked, pulled back and swung inward. "Your rooms."

Jack and Edge entered and the lights went on automatically. Before Jack could say a word, the corporal said, "Don't try to leave. Someone will come for you and food will be brought to you." Then the door swung closed.

"Well, now what?" Edge asked. He looked around the expansive room. It looked exactly like a posh suite in a hotel he had spent a week in when he was in Reno. A large canopied bed, with two highly polished dark cherry bedside tables on either side. Two brass lamps, a long bar on the far wall. Two large leather chairs sat side-by-side, slightly turned toward the other. The only thing that wasn't reminiscent of the hotel was that the walls were all rough rock. There was one long black screen along the far wall that broke up the rock image. Edge went to it and touched a small panel at the base and it lit up with a multitude of yellow and red squares of light.

"That's a digital video display window," Jack said, watching him. "And now, we do as we were told. We wait." He removed his boots and sat in one of the large leather chairs, one facing a painting of an European sunset.

Edge grunted and continued looking around the room. He opened a door and found a small kitchen that had barely room enough for one person. One other door beside the bar opened to a larger bathroom. "Jack..."

"Hmm?" Jack had thrown his feet over the arm of his chair and just wanted to rest.

"We have a bathtub ... looks like one from before you were born." Edge had seen old photographs from the era of Jack's birth, even before he had known Jack existed.

"That's a bit surprising, but it shows me they've been at it a good while and they've grown comfortable, which may be a good thing, or very bad." Jack smiled, and sunk a little more into his soft chair. He hadn't had a bath in ... too long to remember. He would enjoy a good soak, he thought.

Edge went to the bed and sat down. "I dunno how you can be so calm, Jack." He removed his boots and socks. "I feel like a prisoner in here." He stuffed his socks into his boots and pushed them off to the side, just in case he needed to get them on quickly.

"They didn't bring us here to imprison us. You heard what Tees said," Jack mumbled. "This chair is *far* too comfortable—and it's mine for the duration of our stay." Sleep had almost taken hold of him.

Edge didn't say anything, but stood, quickly removed his jumpsuit, then stretched and looked at his lover for a moment. He sat back down on the bed, tensed and relaxed every muscle he could think of, trying to work out the tight knots in them. He looked up at the stark white ceiling. It was

also rock, but painted white, with several lights attached to the crevices.

Jack smiled sleepily at Edge. "If you're trying to entice me," he looked up and down Edge's sexy body. "You're doing a very good job of it."

Edge chuckled. "Well, what else is there to do?" He turned on his right side and shimmied up a bit until he could face his lover. "You should pull your chair closer to the bed, or just come over here and lay beside me." He nibbled his lip a moment. "I know, you could tell me all about you, when you were born. You know, open up to me." Edge's expression became as blank as the darkest void of space.

Jack shrugged off sleep, got up and quickly removed his clothes, leaving them piled up by his chair. He looked at himself, running his hands up and down his bare chest. He still admired his younger body. Before he had been *reborn* this time, he had been an old man, wrinkled and near death. Each time he had *come back*, it took him some time to get used to his youthfulness.

"Well?" Edge rolled onto his back, looking at Jack upside down. He had waited long enough, he thought. He put all his will into hiding his thoughts from Jack, now. He knew *why* he was here and it had nothing to do with rebelling against his creators, but *everything* to do with his love for Jack. Part of that love meant he would follow him, even into a war that would likely see the end of them both. He closed his eyes a moment, then slowly opened them to look at Jack, waiting for an answer.

Jack moved to the bed and lay beside his lover, facing his feet but only inches from his crotch. He looked up at the lights, closed his eyes a moment. He reached out and took Edge's hand in his.

"Tell me everything." Edge sat up a moment. He leaned over and kissed Jack on the chin, then lay back. He didn't think Jack had heard his thoughts. If Jack knew the only reason he was going along with this rebellion was his love for him, he may push him out of it, or something worse. Now Jack had a real hatred for the Society. It ran deep, a gaping wound that would not heal. But he still didn't know *why*. He had an idea, but it was as if a mental block had thrust up deep within his mind to thwart his attempts at understanding.

Jack now nodded his head slowly, "I was born in June, 2175." He kissed Edge on the cheek, then swung his legs off the bed and stared at the vid-screen. "Does any of this really matter?" He asked hastily, and looked back at his lover, then stood and went to the screen. He reached out traced a circle around a small blob of a moon.

Edge's eyes widened briefly, and he sat up. "Jack, we're about to begin a war with the most powerful enemy either of us has ever faced." He stared at Jack's back and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. He gathered up his clothes. "I want to know. I want answers to my questions before we go any further."

Jack nodded and turned around. "Answer something for me, first," he leaned against the screen, the outline of his body glowing against the blackness of the glass. "You're the first in the series, right? The first clone of whoever your

original human was?" He didn't need to know this for any good reason, he just wanted to know more about Edge, and now was a good time to ask. He didn't know, for instance, who *his* original human embryo belonged to, because that information wasn't supplied to him for reasons beyond him. But he suspected his original was an important diplomat of the time. He couldn't be sure, though. He had lots of knowledge, too. He had advanced technical know-how of biological sciences, and that was far more extensive than what a diplomat would need. He could pilot a shuttle. He could even build a bomb with his eyes closed. That *had* worked, partially. Where had *that* knowledge come from?

It was curious. Very curious.

Edge slipped into his jumpsuit and sat back down. He pushed his erection down, hiding it from view. "Series one, I think so, not really sure about any of that, Jack. I wasn't even sure what a series one was until you told me." He shrugged, lay back, rested one hand under his head, looked at Jack and sighed. "I was born a year ago, well, that's Earth time, more like a year and a half now, I suppose."

Jack nodded. "Papua complex, or off the coast of Madagascar?" Madagascar was where normal Dark Robe assassins were cloned, Jack recalled. There was a sea cave, converted a hundred years ago. It was the perfect place, well hidden and radiologically dangerous to even be in the area, so people were told. But Papua ... those assassins were special for some reason. But why? He wasn't able to learn before he left the compound. He went and sat beside Edge.

Edge smiled, showing his teeth. "Papua, then I was airlifted to a carrier. Then onto Reno," He rubbed his eyes, and yawned slowly. "But after Reno, I was sent to the island for a few genetic changes," he paused a moment, thinking. "You know, thought transfer enabling enhancements, that sort of thing." He reached out and traced the contours of Jack's muscled arm. "I have to admit I really wasn't with it, in the beginning. It took me a while after being born to fully be aware." He ran his fingers up Jack's neck and through his hair. "At least that's how I remember it."

"So you were implanted with more than one chip, I assume?" Jack asked, getting up. He threw on his clothes and poured himself a drink. He offered a glass to Edge, who shook his head. Jack drank his down in one gulp, and poured another, this time to the brim.

Edge threw his hands up. "Like I told you, they didn't exactly give me a blueprint of my design specs." He sighed deeply. "Jack, tell me all you know about the beginning," he sat up and moved to the head of the bed and leaned against the baseboard. "You know, the founding of the Society, all of it."

"Beginning?" Jack folded his arms, clasped his hands together, and gave him a curious stare.

"Well, you've got me wondering about how all of this happened. You know, the cloning, *US*, the purpose of the Society, the whole thing." He nimbly crossed his legs, grabbed a pillow and placed it in his lap. He stared into Jack's eyes. "Sorry, but I think this is important." He placed his hands behind his head and looked up at the ceiling a

moment. "You still haven't told me enough about yourself, your past, so you could at least tell me what you know of the beginnings of the Society." He gestured at the vid-screen, which showed a spectacular view of Jupiter's faint rings. "We don't know what will happen when we're out there again."

Jack was silent for several seconds, but then he nodded, not looking at Edge. "They didn't tell you anything then?"

"It wasn't part of our training." Edge examined his fingernails, silently wishing he had some way to trim them.

"I'm sure it wasn't." Jack replied, softly. "They're not about to throw history lessons at assassin clones." He gave Edge a wink, sat down in his chair and put one leg over the armrest.

"Have you ever thought about what it would be like to be normal, Jack?" Edge inquired, as he absentmindedly picked at some lint clinging to his pillow. He had begun to think about that a lot lately, but did his best to keep it to himself. Normal. To be a normal human and not be a part of, or even know anything of, what was happening to the world. But instead, he was right smack dab in the middle of it. A key player and the burden of it all was beginning to take its toll, but he hid that as well. He had to be strong for the man he loved.

Jack was thoughtful for a few seconds as he looked closely at Edge. He didn't really want to answer that question. He had indeed thought about it. Being human, fully human. But sharing those feelings with anyone was *not* something he was prepared for. Perhaps later, he thought, and with Edge. Certainly with Edge. After the danger to them was passed, when they were safe somewhere. He smiled, got up, and poured the remaining rum into his glass. He sat down again,

staring at the half filled snifter, wishing he had just one more bottle as he traced the rim and listened for the sound his finger made as it orbited the crystal.

Finally, Edge said, "It's a simple question Jack."

Jack slowly turned the glass in his hand, looking at it in the light from the overhead globes. "I was cloned for— diplomacy," he grinned wryly, staring at the rum he now swirled around. He brought the glass to his nose and inhaled the aroma deeply, then finished off the last of it in one gulp. He held onto the glass, a good memory of what was probably the last rum he would see for awhile.

Edge laughed. "No wonder you turned me around to your side of things. I'm just surprised you didn't do it sooner." He turned on his side and pulled a pillow under his head.

Jack moved over to the video screen and pushed the power off and back on. From the ones he had seen on Earth, this tended to start the camera rotation from its beginning, to start the cycle all over again. The screen flickered momentarily, some static obscuring the image, then it cleared as if it were merely a thin paned window to the outside of space. "Looks like we've got direct video to the outside, now," he said. He tapped the screen several times on the right and each time the image moved in that direction like the panning of a camera. When he was satisfied with the view, he took a seat in his leather chair. He looked at the screen. The total dark of space was just as beautiful to Jack as any view on Earth. He was still amazed at the blackness, the total lack of twinkling stars. Oh, he knew the twinkling was the

atmospheric interference from a planet, but still, strange as it was, it was just as beautiful.

Ganymede's shadow skipped across the surface of its Jovian mother, while just in view, a plume of icy steam shot off Io's northern hemisphere. Jack tore his gaze away from the stellar portrait, and swirled the rum in his glass, looking closely at it. The light amber color, much like the surface of Io's western plains. He looked back at Edge. "Sorry, the view is just so beautiful here."

"Yeah, but I'd rather have the blue and green of Earth," he laughed. "I'd even take Europa's freezing ice scape over this." He shrugged at the screen. "Tell me more." He too loved the view, but he wanted to touch the grass of Earth again, and smell real air. He wanted to walk in a meadow, and hear the sounds of birds, not the incessant hum of the powerful generators that lay in the bowels of this base.

Jack smiled. "Tell you more. It's a long story, and could take days." He picked up his glass and tipped it into his mouth, trying to get the last vapors of rum. He tossed the useless glass into a disposal tube.

"We have time, Jack," Edge rolled over and got comfortable. "Besides, we could both die and then I'd never know." He rested his head on his crossed arms, staring at Jack.

"Tell you what, I'll tell you all I know of the origins of the Dark Robe Society, and when I finish," he gave Edge a piercing stare, then gestured at him, "you'll tell me everything about yourself."

"Deal," Edge nodded emphatically. "But, now I want to hear more about you."

Jack glanced away a moment, wishing he had another bottle of rum. He looked back at Edge, trying for a moment, to ignore his lover's desire to know more. "You'll leave nothing out," Jack said, his tone calm, but warning, as he locked his gaze on Edge.

"I'll leave nothing out, Jack." Edge didn't blink, nor did he take his eyes from Jack's. *You can trust me.*

"Are you comfortable?" Jack asked, putting his feet up on the small table in front of his chair. He cast a look at the door, making sure the red light still indicated the door was sealed and they wouldn't be interrupted. "I can tell more about me by telling more about the Society, since I was born at nearly the beginning of it all."

"Yes," Edge fluffed up a flattened pillow and placed it under his head. "And this had *better* be good, since you are skirting the issue again." He turned on his side and propped himself up on an elbow. "I want to learn a lot about you and this may be the only chance we have to talk about this ... until *our war* is over, at least."

Jack closed his eyes, and waited for Edge to hush. The silence that settled over the room was only interrupted by an occasional 'blip' from the vid-screen. Then Jack opened his mouth and began to speak. "The Society never started out as a benign thing." Jack gripped the armrests and lay back against the chair. "Ernst Venderhem never had any great thoughts of uniting the peoples of Earth in peace, making a world without war, disease, violence. His total plan was to

dominate the world, with him as sole ruler, his mind intact from the very beginning, immortal, all powerful. All that stood in *his* way, well they would be fodder for his armies."

Edge sat up and just listened, trying to take it all in.

"I'm talking about his armies. I don't mean us. I don't mean the everyday clones, or even the assassins, such as you—*were*. I don't mean the replacements, who are now world leaders, Presidents, generals, special UN envoys, or even the leaders of OPEC, which, they themselves are just a small tool for the OIL. I mean, the hidden mutants beasts that even now, prepare for war."

He forced a smile at Edge and closed his eyes, remembering. "I've had dreams of them. I don't know why this is happening, but I suspect it has to do with our like nature, or something else. I don't know if I'll ever know some of the things that make us what we are. But the dreams I am having, and dreadful things I have seen..." He got up and went to the screen and panned the camera toward a dark and empty space. "Earth is out there in this view somewhere. On that planet, right now, an army readies itself."

"Jack, I've never heard *anything* about a mutant army or anything you're talking about." Edge silently hoped Jack had not suddenly lost his sanity. But he felt he knew Jack very well now, and he brushed that thought from his mind immediately.

Jack smiled, but Edge could not see it. He turned around a moment and caught Edge's stare. "No one has. Who are we, that we should have even a hint of *them*?" He turned around sharply and stared at the black screen. "They are there, they

exist, and they will be the destruction of not only what is good, but of all of the Earth and its small moon." *Ernst was flawed from the beginning and in his egocentric craze did not dissect the gene that was his predisposition for insanity.* He smiled once more at his lover. "He thought it was perfection. His image in the mirror of his mind." He shook his head slowly and tried to calm himself.

Edge nodded, but could not help but want to rush to Jack and hold him. *We'll succeed, Jack, I feel it.*

After a few moments, Jack sat back in his chair and put his hands to his face. "I have seen our home a shattered, smoking ruin and I have seen the beasts that made it so, when they—"

"What?" Edge got up then and went to him, kneeling at his feet.

Jack shook his head. "I won't say it, because I am not sure about everything." He looked up and forced a thin smile. "I may be totally wrong. I may be partly right, but I'm not going to say any more about it ... now." Jack kissed Edge on the forehead and sprang to his feet, to rummage through the shelves. "No more rum," he said, sighing heavily.

Edge fell back into Jack's chair, his mind whirling with confusion. "These beasts, mutants, or whatever they are, how ... well, what are they?" He felt suddenly afraid. How close had he been to becoming one of these mutants?

Jack turned and leaned against the bar, his hands gripping the edge until his knuckles went white. He smiled grimly and rocked back and forth, obviously agitated. "Ernst didn't succeed in perfecting his cloning process overnight, Edge." He

swept his arms out in a wide arc, then crossed his arms, gripping himself tightly. "No, there were many failures and some of the cloners wanted to destroy these *failures* immediately, but Ernst wouldn't allow it." He pushed himself up until he was sitting on the bar and staring at his feet dangling just above the floor. "Ernst had them all taken to a secret lab. It was a small place at first, then construction began for a much larger facility." He paused just a moment. "To hold all of the many failures until he could decide what to do with them, I suppose. Or perhaps he had already made that decision," he paused again, staring at the wall. "They arrived on a daily basis, sometimes more than one, sometimes half a dozen."

"When I was cloned the first time..." Jack looked into Edge's eyes. "...I told you I was cloned for diplomacy. Well, it was for a very specific purpose and within a few short months of my 'birth,' I had already replaced the UN special envoy to Saudi Arabia." He frowned as the memory of what had happened made the old *pain* in his heart return. He shook it off, and tried to ignore it. "I quickly secured the oil rights. I mean all the rights—the land, the drilling, the oil refinery, the oil itself, for OIL." *You're wondering how?* "The man I replaced, the man I was cloned from, was the lover of the Saudi Prince who controlled the board of directors for the Saudi Oil Ministry." His frown deepened into a scowl as anger welled up inside him. "He gave me everything I wanted. I didn't realize at the time that he was also marked for death." Jack had received those orders later, in a small courier's envelope, but didn't see the need to pass that along to Edge.

"You killed him?"

"Oh yes, I killed him. I loved him, and I killed him." Jack wiped a tear from his eye. "You see, even then, even then, I was given something no other clone had, but only a taste. It wasn't even real, as far as I was concerned," he sighed. "They told me it was conditioning. They told me the chip would control the emotion. They made me love him. They made me lie in his bed, and then they made me kill him."

"Jack, that was, what? Four hundred years ago? More?"

Jack nodded. "Yes, and I was soon re-cloned. My memories transferred, but part of my early memories, the memory of my love for him, the memory of my murdering him, transferred over, but they didn't plan that. Oh no, they didn't want that."

"So that's why." Edge's mouth fell open.

Jack grinned. "Yes, I think that's part of it. The memory of my love for him was so strong. The memory of my killing him was so strong. It couldn't be suppressed. It followed me, dormant for the most part, unknown to me at all, until this life I exist in now."

"They could never have planned for that, Jack." Edge sat against the headboard and shook his head.

Jack got off the bar and sat on the bed. "Yes, so now you know." He looked at Edge and for a moment wanted to tell him of at least one of his own deaths. His shortest life, just two weeks long. A misstep on a gondola over the Grand Canyon. The Society had been lucky to be able to secure a thought transfer before his brain had been dead too long. Jack looked away a moment and decided there would be time

to tell such things later. If they survived the coming revolution. If they could manage to outlast the devastation that he had dreamed about. Perhaps he and Edge could travel to Arizona, to that very spot...

"But Jack, what about these failures? You keep saying failures, but I keep thinking that you're wanting to use another word, Jack." He was getting impatient again. *Just tell me!*

"Torture," Jack said, under his breath. "They've bee—" The room lights suddenly popped, plunging them into complete darkness. *Get down!*

"What the hell!?" Edge shouted, just as he was thrown off the bed to the floor; a massive trembling reverberated through the cavern room, followed by a tremendous explosion that shook the walls violently. Edge could hear the vid-screen clunk to the floor and shatter on the other side of the room. He had a feeling everything that could be broken had just been. *Jack, are you okay?*

The war has begun.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Spaces Escapes
by Angela Fiddler, Jason Edding

The Bright Side of Midnight

Angela Fiddler

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter One

The stained print of the organism, dyed purple and pink and blown up to poster size, was almost beautiful. Tavish had spent hours staring at it. It had a calming effect on him. It was too bad that something so beautiful infected the lungs of miners digging in the depths of his home colony.

Tavish looked out the window to watch Midnight's approach. Midnight, the planet, was growing off the portside viewer. It wasn't an actual porthole; he didn't even know if he had a room on the outside of the ship, but the display showed the murky, dusty planetoid to its best advantage, such that it was. He looked back to the stain, and pressed his fingers against the glossy finish.

The door slid open silently. Such easy convenience was one more thing Tavish was going to have to get used to not having. Midnight was nothing but a mining colony and comforts such as automatic doors were a waste of precious energy. He had to go back, not just because the Black Lung was only found in the mines of Midnight. His education had been mostly financed by the colony; he owed them his service. He wasn't exactly like one of the miners bought and paid for body and soul from the company, but he was close.

Royal entered, dressed in a white uniform, impeccably tailored, and immediately moved to the rumpled blankets on the lower bunk. He was immaculate, but then he always was. Tavish supposed he started fucking Royal just so he could break up the chestnut hair from its usual casing. He was

certainly pretty enough to have caught Tavish's fancy. But once he'd been caught, it hadn't really been what either of them wanted.

"Oh, leave it," Tavish said as Royal put the bottled water next to the bed. "We'll be landing in an hour or so."

"That's what I came in to tell you," Royal said. He began clearing the textbooks and tablets off the table. The magnetic field would hold everything down no matter how bumpy the landing was, and despite himself Tavish couldn't stop the stab of annoyance flashing inside him. He took the tablet away from him and kissed him, just to get him to stop touching his things.

"That's what you pay me for," Royal said. "Remember?"

"You're my lab assistant," Tavish said. "Not my mother, not my housemaid."

"What part of my job description includes cocksucking?"

"That's not a part of your job at all," Tavish said. Royal had said it teasingly, almost, but it rubbed Tavish's already raw nerves. He pushed the button on the stain sample and the casing went soft enough for him to roll it up and stow it with the rest of his belongings.

"You love that thing more than me," Royal said. His voice was still light, but his eyes weren't, not in the slightest. Tavish pretended not to see it. He sighed, and took Royal's hand. "We have an hour, you said?" he asked, the brightness in his voice as manufactured as the view screen up against the wall. They almost deserved each other.

When they were both in school, both finishing off their doctorates, Tavish had been at the head of the class and

Royal somewhere in the middle. So when Tavish had been offered the job, personally asked over holo by Midnight's governor, Patrice himself, he'd asked Royal to come with him as his assistant. He'd honestly thought Royal would refuse the job as being beneath him, but Royal hadn't.

On the three-week voyage over, this feeling of incompatibility grew. Royal made a brilliant assistant. His powers of observation and anticipation ensured that everything Tavish could have possibly wanted in the temporary workspace they'd been given was met. Only that level of care had also carried over into the bed, and that was the last thing Tavish wanted. The more care and concern Royal showed, the less Tavish wanted to screw him.

Royal kissed him, pulling him back to the now. "Shall we have sex?" He placed his hands on Tavish's chest.

Because Midnight was a corporate mining company, everything had to come from the company. That included workers to work. In order to control the numbers, colonies were usually kept monosexed. He and Royal hadn't been lovers before they left for school, and once they arrived at the co-ed university, Royal had several women as companions. Tavish had made a half-hearted pass at him late one night when they were both working on the organism's genetic map, and he was surprised when Royal had accepted.

It hadn't been an easy three months, and as they both graduated and were packing for their return, Royal had become snappish. Whenever he looked at Tavish, he seemed to look through him. Tavish knew he was thinking of running, and had been almost disappointed when Royal had turned up

for the ship's departure. Once they were on the ship, however, the overly-caring Royal returned with a vengeance. Tavish almost preferred the old Royal. At least he'd spunk.

"How do you want me?" Royal asked, pulling Tavish out of the memory. Tavish blinked, once, and shook his head. Tavish didn't want to talk about it. He didn't want to discuss it or draw diagrams or play twenty questions. He put his finger on Royal's lips.

"I want you quiet," he said.

Royal nodded. He pulled off his tailored uniform and stood naked in front of Tavish. Royal looked better in the uniform than without it. Not that there was anything wrong with his body, it had just already begun to take the characteristics of a person who worked inside at a computer all day. The too white skin combined with the slightly bowed shoulders was something a tailored uniform could hide.

Royal's cock was already hard. Tavish pushed his finger into Royal's mouth, making him suck it, but stopped Royal from dropping to his knees.

"Let me—" Royal began, but Tavish shook his head.

Royal didn't fight him. He sucked Tavish's finger, hard, moaning and Tavish pulled his finger out. He opened his mouth to make a begging sound but kept quiet when Tavish looked at him. Tavish licked his lips, and brought his wet finger down over the tip of Royal's cock.

"I could—" Royal cut in.

Tavish covered Royal's mouth with his hand.

It was over between them. Royal's eyes widened, sensing it, too. Tavish didn't stop jerking Royal's cock. He knew there

wasn't enough lubrication but the spray had already been packed. Besides, from the way Royal's hips were moving even with the rough touch of dry skin told him Royal no longer cared, one way or the other. Royal's eyes were closed, so Tavish stared past him, to the holo screen and watched the ship in its carefully planned fall to Midnight's surface.

He let Royal pant and groan, grasping onto his shoulders. Tavish kept the pace up, exactly how he knew Royal liked it, and let him come all over the floor. He kissed Royal on the forehead. "It's done," he whispered.

Royal jerked free, the bad news fighting with the endorphins for control of his face. He took three deep breaths before he had control over his throat. "I know," he said.

Tavish swallowed. "I'm sorry."

Royal slowly pulled his uniform back on. His hands shook. "I knew it wasn't going to last."

"If you'd rather return to the university, I can pay for it. I don't want you to think that I dragged you here under false pretenses. You're good enough for the job, and I'd still like to work with you."

Royal turned, and stared out to the growing hologram of Midnight. "I never wanted to come back," he said. "But I owe them seven years of work. I'd rather work with you than in a mining clinic."

"I was surprised you didn't try to run," Tavish said, quietly.

Royal's shoulders tensed. "I wanted to." But he knew as well as Tavish did that there was nowhere to run to. Without his accreditation, which belonged to Midnight until it was paid off in full, or his papers, he'd just be another non-citizen

trying to find a job at whatever questionable place where his paperwork would be overlooked. He turned. "But I thought at least I had you to go back with."

Tavish relaxed, not realizing how tense he was until he felt the knots of his shoulder release. He was about to say he was glad he had him to go back with too, when Royal looked at him. He was smiling, but the distancing look was back in his eyes. There was no way to read anything behind its chill. Tavish suddenly wanted Royal out of his room.

Royal left as quickly and quietly as he'd come. They were landing anyway. Tavish lay down on his bed, glad that he hadn't taken Royal there. The static field molded to his skin as he lay down, more secure than any old-fashioned belting-in system, and when next he woke up again, they had landed.

He came back to the clanks and groans of a ship locking itself into place. He sat up. The only side effect of the static field was an exceptionally dry mouth. That was what the bottled water was for. He cracked the seal and downed half of it, but the lining of his throat still felt parched. He got up and brought the bottle with him.

It was a hard landing on the surface, no tendering necessary, but there was still a queue to exit the ship. He saw Royal, further on in the line. Tavish didn't call to him. Royal didn't look for him.

It was going to be an interesting year.

Midnight's landing pad hadn't changed. The advertisements up on the walls just demonstrated newer versions of personal air purifiers and sleeker transporters.

Tavish's return was somewhat mitigated by the new hospital wing, visible from the hill as they stepped through the controlled air flow. The unconditioned air of the colony was dry enough that Tavish stopped a few steps from the exit pathway and downed what remained in his water bottle.

The rolling hills to the west, rich with the symbiote arochos, were a deep red and orange. Before he'd left, there had been huge forests of stone trees. Arochos grew from the stone like land coral, creating huge pillars of stone that branched out like trees to gather in sunlight. Arochos had a rudimentary photosynthesis ability. Behind him, the huge ship with its slick lines and iced-over metallic sheen looked, rightly so, as if it came from a different planet.

The Alpha Site was to the north, and somewhat optimistically named. There were no other settlements on the colony big enough to even have a name. Not yet, at least. But the city was big enough now that the controlled air bubble no longer contained it all. Considering how dry Tavish's lungs were from standing just a few minutes in the raw, unprocessed air, he didn't envy those who worked outside the bubble and had to travel through the dryness every day.

Inside the bubble, what had been crowded when Tavish had left was now stuffed tight. The original rows of buildings had had some semblance of order six years ago. Now, the rows were only dimly visible through the haze of shacks and gravity-defying bridges. Any inherent order the streets once had was gone.

Despite Tavish's best efforts, he ended up standing next to Royal again, pushed by the ebb and flow of the stream of

passengers moving past him. Royal nodded at him, the frosty glare gone. Tavish tried again.

"That was a crass way to end things," he said. "I'm sorry. I thought I was better than that."

Royal nodded again.

"I really do want your help," Tavish continued, encouraged. "Though I know it's almost an insult to your abilities, being on the books as my assistant. You could run the lab yourself if you had to."

The bleak look, for want of a better name for it, was back on Royal's face. He shrugged.

From Alpha Site came a caravan of mismatched transports, some small enough to hold only one or two people, others huge multi-person behemoths. Tavish knew they kept well back from the landing pad in case it became a crash site, but the strain of travel was starting to catch up with him and he was glad to see them none-the-less. With his father dead and his brother ... unlikely to make a public appearance, what with the bounty on his head and all, there were very few people likely to come to meet him.

Royal squeezed his hand comfortingly, and Tavish was grateful for it. He'd been about to say something to Royal, something unimportant, if the ease with which it had slipped out of his mind was any indication. He squeezed Royal's hand back.

"You're thinking about your father," Royal guessed.

Tavish nodded. "And my brother."

Royal snorted. "You shouldn't be. You're here to solve the world's problems, cure Black Lung and make Dose safe for

widespread distribution. If that doesn't scrub your name squeaky-clean, nothing will."

"Here's hoping," said Tavish, but the queer feeling in his belly intensified at the mention of Dose. His conscience was clear as far as the practical application of Dose went; whose wouldn't be? There were enough dangerous, black-market drugs out there, all designed to make life easier for the poor worker in the mines and the factories. The cost of addiction, however, and the damage the black market drugs did to the internal organs and the mind of the user was hideous. Dose was a clean drug, non-addictive, government-controlled, and impossible to abuse. Anything over the maximum was turned into simple sugars by enzyme reactions. The enzyme was only found in arochos, which was only found on Midnight. If only Black Lung didn't strike one out of every five miners digging for the raw materials necessary for making the wonder-drug, Dose would be perfect.

Which was why Tavish had come back.

The first transport arrived, a sleek two-seater that looked like it could get to the launch pad and back before the lumbering multi-person transport had even cleared the city boundaries. It was molded over two large wheels—all black, naturally—and it looked more like an old Earth motorcycle than anything else. When it came to a stop in front of them, it braked so gently it seemed to hover in mid-air, defying gravity. The driver's door opened, pivoting on an internal axis, and a young man climbed out dressed in off-world clothes and a probably-illegal leather jacket.

There were things that old-fashioned denim could do to a man's ass that no synthetic fiber could ever match.

The man getting out grinned at both of them, showing off pearly-white teeth. His dark hair was a tangle of carefully sculpted curls, and his chin and cheekbones showed fine bone structure. He was gorgeous and he knew it.

Tavish was instantly turned off. The last thing he needed was another high-maintenance relationship, even if Mister Nice-Ass was interested in him.

"Which one of you is Doctor Pan?"

Doctor Pan. It was one of the first times Tavish had heard his full title. He smiled, despite himself. "That's me," he said, stepping forward. "This is my assistant, Doctor Royal McLean."

Nice-ass bowed his head towards Royal for a brief moment and then immediately dismissed his existence. Tavish guessed he'd have to introduce them several times before Royal's name stuck in his pretty head.

"I'm sorry, I just have room for one. Your assistant will have to take the next mass transport. Dad sent me to bring you right back."

"And you are?" Tavish asked.

Nice-ass looked momentarily stunned that anyone wouldn't recognize him, regardless of how short a time they'd been planet-side. "I'm Jordan. Jordan Patrice."

Tavish stared. He'd met Jordan a few times when he was a kid, but Jordan, as the son of the new governor, was surrogated and paid for by the company. Tavish and his brother, Thomas, were biological—their father had had a wife

before he'd chosen to come to Midnight. She'd died years before, and the company had made it worth his while to come and be an advisor to Patrice. Tavish had been two years older, Thomas and Jordan were roughly the same age. He remembered Jordan as a bookish younger boy, serious, constantly at his tablet-screen, reading. This careless fly-boy didn't match the memory in the slightest.

"It's been years, Tavish," Jordan, né Nice-ass, said. His tone had changed. Tavish looked up, and Jordan's grin was gone. The expression in its place held the ghost of that serious young man. He met Tavish's eyes coolly, then grinned again and the ghost was thoroughly exorcised.

"Are we going or what?" Jordan asked, clapping his hands. "Betty here can go seventy miles an hour in third gear. You want to be gone before the cattle cars come."

"My luggage," Tavish said helplessly.

Jordan shrugged. "Your assistant can take care of it. That's what he's here for. Come on, those transports chew up the turf too much, and we might as well get out and push Betty ourselves."

Tavish turned to Royal. "Are you going to be okay?"

"It's what I'm here for," Royal said grimly. "You go. I'll be fine. And don't ask me if I'm sure. Just go."

Tavish swallowed his next question. "Sorry," he said instead, and got into the transport—Betty. Jordan grinned at him, closed the doors, and spun Betty around on its—her?—back wheels, spitting coarse sand at Royal and the other travelers.

Inside Betty they sat in comfortable pods on either side of the two huge wheels. The engine hummed, almost too loudly to hear Jordan screaming out points of land that were slightly less uninteresting than the rest of the nothing around them. But since they were both from Midnight; the failed landings and all the other abandoned would-be Alpha Sites that hadn't managed an economical toe-hold were a familiar object lesson. Patrice, Jordan's father was the first governor who had actually run Midnight in the black.

Jordan hit the brakes and the bike—Tavish had stopped trying to think of it as "Betty"—skidded about ten yards before coming to a stop. The doors swung up together, and Jordan got out. The sand dune in front of them didn't look any different from the surrounding dunes.

Jordan poked his head back through the open door. "Coming?" The vacuous grin was back.

"What if I said no?" Tavish demanded.

"I'm not above dragging you out kicking and screaming. It's not like there's anyone around to hear you." The threat was followed by another brilliant grin.

Tavish shook his head, but got out of the transport. The sand here was packed enough for the wide tires of most transports to have no problem, but walking on it was hard going. Each step was a struggle.

Jordan ran through the sand, ten, fifty, a hundred yards from the transport, pulling Tavish behind him. From the top of the dune, they could see the Alpha Site. From this angle, the impossible bridges that spanned at all angles, directions, and levels were even more obvious.

"Those are new," Tavish said noncommittally.

"Last couple years, office space was at a premium. Anyone in the B class got moved into mass dorms, and any free space was built up. We'll be there in plenty of time—the mass transports can't navigate the streets. Everyone else will have to walk from the city's edge."

"What about the bags?"

"They'll be delivered. Never underestimate the capitalistic nature of the B class." The smile disappeared, and it was the serious boy again. The serious, all-grown-up boy, Tavish quickly amended. The desire flickered through him, fleeting and treacherous, to reach up and smooth Jordan's curls with his fingers. But at any minute, the grin would come back. Tavish imagined those perfect teeth biting his fingers off, and shuddered.

But the smile didn't come back. "Have you heard from your brother?"

"You don't think I'm going to tell you, do you?" Tavish asked. His brother Thomas, all conflicting feelings aside, was still his brother, and he in no way, shape or form wanted to see him fall under Patrice's control.

"You're still loyal, then," Jordan said. It was the longest stretch yet that Tavish had seen his serious face. "I suppose that's a mark in your favor."

"What's that? A disloyal thought? Are those even allowed?"

"They are out here," Jordan said, and waved to the transport a hundred yards away. "This is the furthest we can get from any listening device, and I had to know. We can go back now."

The ever-present wind picked up, and Tavish gasped, feeling his face flush. The air quality out here seemed even poorer than he remembered. "That's it?"

"That's all," Jordan said, and grinned. "What did you think there, partner?"

Tavish shook his head. Just like that, Jordan's mask was back up. Just like with Royal. They headed back through the hard-packed sand, and this time, Tavish kept up enough to hear Jordan panting too, and that gave him some small measure of satisfaction.

They passed by the transport terminal just as the huge mass transport arrived, in a long queue waiting to unload. There had been forty replacement miners that had gotten off the ship with them. "Where do the bodies go?" he asked. Black lung was supposed to kill at a rate of two or three a day.

Jordan hesitated. "I don't know. Patrice keeps them somewhere."

"How clever," Tavish said.

"Midnight is all about expedition."

He was glad Jordan's transport glass windows were tinted so Royal couldn't see him. Tavish could see him, though, and Royal looked exhausted. He looked hot and tired, after a trip with close quarters, no elbow room, and no air conditioning. Tavish angled an air vent at himself and sighed.

Jordan's bike, of course, had a conditioner mounted on its small dash. "We can crack the windows open now that we're in the bubble, but I think the site has more people than air these days," Jordan told him. The engines were slightly

quieter now that they had slowed down to a jogging speed in the crowded streets. Lean-tos, shacks of corrugated metal and any other sort of shelter that could be scrounged, fought for space with kiosks selling everything from grilled meat to outerwear and electronics. Recyclers, bookies, and pretty boys all vied for prime real estate. The last time Tavish had seen these streets, they'd been bare. That was without the looming, gravity, defying bridges that stretched between the buildings like umbilical cords. He couldn't help ducking his head as they passed under them.

"Don't worry," Jordan said. "They hardly ever fall down."

"Are you serious?" The words slipped from Tavish's lips involuntarily.

"Twice," Jordan said, seriousness showing through again. "Both times very late at night." There was real relief in his voice, not the gleefully scandalized mock-concern Tavish had expected, along with all the gory details.

Tavish stared at Jordan's far-too-pretty profile, and didn't like the inscrutability he saw there. "So did I pass your test?" he asked finally, because he had nothing else to say.

"What test?"

"I'm the son of a dead traitor and the brother of a living one."

"That wasn't a test," Jordan said dismissively. "I had to know where your loyalties lie."

"Hey, no, wait. I didn't say any of that. I said I wouldn't betray my brother. I didn't say I was disloyal to your father or my work here. And if you even hint that I'm not—"

"You'll do what, exactly?" Jordan asked, voice deceptively mild.

"Deny it," Tavish said firmly. "I would deny it."

"You've come all this way to help cure a dreadful, fatal disease," Jordan said. "I wouldn't dream of getting in the way of that."

"You're a very strange person, Jordan Patrice," Tavish said. "And you're very hard to read."

"Please," Jordan said, the grinning mask back up. "I've only got the one thing on my mind. Say the word, and you and I can be doing it together."

The clutter and bridges cleared up once they entered the center of the Alpha Site. Here, at last, the streets were clear, and the transport-bike could open its engines again. It took that much time for Tavish to realize what had been bothering him all this time about the site. As strange as he had found the mix of men and women six years ago, now he found it equally strange to find only men in the streets, shops and sidewalks. He remembered how shocked some of the other students had been when he remarked on the co-ed environment, but they hadn't come from a colony where everything, even the next generation of workers had to be bought and paid for like any other non-renewable resource. The company provided everything at a premium.

He supposed he was one of the lucky ones, to be gay by inherent preference. Royal wasn't, but took male lovers out of necessity. He wondered if Jordan really was, or if it was just another mask he'd thrown up.

Some had been unable to function in a monosexual environment and never returned after they'd completed their schooling, forfeiting huge educational deposits if the colony had provided any part of the finances at all. Others simply went completely non-sexual, as Tavish's father and brother had done.

Jordan bared his teeth and skidded into another stop. "Here we are, then. I'll have your man bring your bags to your room once he finishes navigating through the streets. Tell me, do you need one room or two for the pair of you?"

"Two rooms," Tavish said distractedly.

Just then, the big man himself came down the stairs in front of the original government building. It was also the grandest, and held what was laughingly referred to as the Parliament. Real bricks and marble covered the whole of the first floor and the stairs leading up to the mezzanine, brought to Midnight brick by brick and slab by slab, had a classic, rich feel that was lacking in all the other prefabricated plastic buildings. Still, it was a striking facade and the steps leading up made it an even more impressive sight. Against the haze of the air bubble overhead it was imposing. Tavish didn't know how his father had walked up those steps the day after he had tried to betray his leader.

That was obviously on Patrice's mind too, when Tavish climbed out of the transport. His expression was stormy, and he reared up to his full height. It helped that he was up a step, gaining the height needed to look down his nose at Tavish.

It was a needless gesture. The thought of betraying him terrified Tavish. The moment Patrice saw that on his face, he smiled.

"Now you're getting it," he said. "You know I would destroy you."

And Tavish knew he would. "You have nothing to fear from me."

"Of course I don't. Your father and brother, they didn't have the greater good to help them through their weak times. But you do. I need your research, Tavish. I've followed your progress through your studies. You're quite brilliant."

Tavish, not Doctor Pan. If there had been any doubt as to his position on staff, that answered it. Not that Tavish cared. As long as he was left alone in his lab undisturbed for long stretches of time, he was happy.

"You're late," Patrice said, glancing at Jordan. His annoyance was so sharp that Tavish would not have been surprised if he had raised his hand to his cheek and found blood where Patrice's glance had passed by him to skewer Jordan.

Jordan only shrugged, brilliant, empty smile back firmly in place. "I didn't want to scare the boy, Dad. I told him Alpha may be bursting, so I took him to the proposed Beta Site."

"I don't think any empty dune is different from the next on this damned planetoid." The look Patrice gave Jordan was withering, but Jordan's expression didn't change. That didn't seem to jive at all with the child Tavish recalled. His father, of all people, should realize the smile was an affectation, but the disgust on Patrice's face was quite real.

Jordan reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. And then that piece of paper crinkled like plastic, and the pieces started to fit together in Tavish's head. Jordan pulled a tab of Dose free and an instant later relief filled him, his face slipping into a near-orgasmic expression.

Patrice's lip curled back far enough to show teeth yellowing up by the gum line. He still had some of the handsomeness that was such a weapon on his son, but it was padded by years of the good life. He smelled of actual tobacco and the black hair on his head seemed too uniform to be natural. His off-world clothes were tailored perfectly, which meant either someone on his staff did it for him, or he had a tab with an off-world business who knew his body sight unseen. Neither option was cheap.

For once, Jordan's smile looked a little goofy. "Relax, Dad, it's all good."

"That stuff will rot what's left of your brain," Patrice snarled.

Jordan ambled up the stairs, threw his arm over his father's shoulder, and lightly punched his chin, in what for everyone else but Jordan, was slow motion. "It's non-addictive, remember?" he asked, and nodded his head to music only he could hear. It was possible he did have a personal media player running, what with the improvements in implants the last decade, but somehow, Tavish doubted that was the case.

"I'll have someone take you to your rooms," Patrice said grimly. "Both of you."

"Relax, Daddio. I can see us both safe and sound, if you know what I mean." Jordan took Tavish by the hand. "It's all good."

Patrice made the same disgusted sound he had when Jordan popped the tab of Dose, and swept up the stairs.

"You'll have to excuse him." Jordan reached into his pocket and pulled out a pair of shades. Dose users were photosensitive. So were people in early-stage Black Lung. It was one of the first signs that the organs were under attack. First went the cones in the cornea, then the muscles in the heart. The rods were left in perfect shape.

"You're addicted, then?" Tavish asked. That explained the mood swings. If Jordan was riding the weaker second wave of the drug, that would account for the flashes of familiar personality. He'd needed his next Dose. Tavish was just glad he hadn't been on that first euphoric high while out on the dunes or navigating the narrow city streets.

"Relax, Doc. I wouldn't risk your pretty neck," Jordan said, still nodding along to music only he could hear. "Besides, Dose lets you work smarter and harder, remember? The pretty holo brochure says so on the first page."

Tavish's mouth tightened. Jordan was quoting the promotional copy verbatim, but there was a reason the chemists who created it weren't users. Tavish had seen users at the university. Dose wasn't available commercially yet. They still had to settle that small issue of it killing the miners who dug for its raw components. But if you knew someone who knew someone from Midnight, it wasn't impossible to procure.

In less kind moments, Tavish had even thought Royal might have had something to do with it.

"Do you believe everything you read?" Tavish asked.

Jordan smiled wryly. Not grinned, smiled. It made him beautiful. Jordan was high enough that he wouldn't have felt the touch if Tavish had dared.

"I did."

A pause. And Tavish counted the seconds until the drug took hold again. He didn't get to four.

"Anyway, like I said, don't worry about the old man. He's just in an exceptionally bad mood. He's trying to decide by what margin of victory he's going to win. His advisors are trying to tell him to low ball it, but he wants to have an epic win for the CEO's visit. He's not telling me which way it's going to go. Pity, I could make a killing with the bookies."

"What you're saying is treason," Tavish said carefully. His father had been executed for less.

"Yes, it is," Jordan agreed. Tavish wondered how blown his pupils were. "What are you going to do? Arrest me? Turn me in to my father? Men have tried before. Funny thing, none of them showed up for work the next morning. Or ever, really, if one were to keep track of such things. He knows I'm too much of a coward to cross him again. And once he thinks he knows someone, he thinks it's set in stone. Tongues wag in the first wave. Again, it's in the small print. You'd do well not to listen to a single word I say when I'm Dosing. The chances are that any of it being remotely truthful is slim. Practically non-existent. I'd have my bookie do a sheet for you, but I'm

into him for a good long roll, so that's not really advisable. This is your room."

They'd crossed the street, gone up the lift in the huge prefabricated building opposite the state building, and up to the ninth floor, all the while that Jordan had let his mouth run in that amazingly slow way of his. They'd gotten off the lift in a long, empty hall with rooms running symmetrically all the way down, doors ten yards apart. The room was probably a closet when compared to Jordan's room or Patrice's, but compared to the dorms or the berths on the ship, Jordan was sure it would be large in comparison.

Tavish had taken Jordan's arm and propelled him along when the Dose had hit and walking and talking at the same time became an issue. He had been afraid that Jordan would lead them up and down the same halls for hours. But when Jordan produced a magnetic strip from one of the pockets of his leather jacket, it turned the door sensor green on his first try.

"Smarter and harder," Jordan said, and tried to point at his temple. He missed and hit his parietal lobe instead. The effect was somewhat of a mixed bag. "And in we go."

Jordan stepped in first. The room looked like a standard set-up, small for a luxury room or huge for a standard room, depending on your perspective—living space, a counter with a mini-refrigerator unit and a cooking plate. The couch was larger than Tavish's old bed. The bathroom was one of two possible rooms to the right—rooms, plural. The other was most likely a separate bedroom.

"Are you one of those people who needs to be humored with a grand tour of a ridiculously small space?" Jordan drawled.

"Nope," Tavish said. "Not me."

"Good," Jordan announced, settling the matter loudly enough that Tavish jumped. His face was frozen and expressionless, in a way that his father would have been proud to see.

He started to shiver. It looked like an overdose. He was having a diabetic reaction to the sudden excess sugar in his body.

Tavish tried to take his arm, but Jordan fought him off with an animalistic fury. Tavish backed off and pointed to the couch. "Let's sit down, then."

Jordan nodded, but with such severity that it looked silly. He straightened his jacket—again, too meticulously—and led the way into the living area. He sat down, something different in a room dedicated to boring sameness, from the prefabricated couch and carpet to the beige, bland walls. Equally bland curtains were drawn over one wall, but since the building didn't have any windows, Tavish didn't even try to open them.

Jordan's skin was too pale, made whiter by the contrast to his dark curls. Tavish patted him down until he found the insulin spray any Dose junky carried. It was in his right pocket, and Jordan, docile as a kitten should such beasts exist on Midnight, opened his mouth and lifted his tongue for Tavish to spray beneath.

Without a nailbed glucose reader, Tavish had no way to know if the single pump of spray he had administered was enough. Color returned to Jordan's cheeks, though, and the shaking stopped. He sank back onto the couch, and closed his eyes, settling into sleep. He would wake completely parched, but hopefully with no permanent damage done.

Much like Royal had for him, Tavish went to the fridge and found a bottle of water for Jordan when he woke. He had put it in easy reach and had just found which of the two doors was the bathroom when someone banged on the door, probably Royal from the angry force behind the blows.

Tavish opened the door, and Royal burst into the main living area without waiting for an invitation, Tavish's bags in tow.

"Don't," Royal spat, "ever do that to me again."

"Sorry," Tavish said guiltily. "I had no idea how the transfer arrangements were going to play out."

"But you certainly did nothing to change it," Royal said. He stopped dead as he noticed Jordan asleep on Tavish's sofa. For a moment, he said nothing, but then Royal bent down, and deliberately took the bottle of water, cracking the lid open. Tavish said nothing, deciding he owed Royal at least that much.

"That's a record for you," Royal said, once he'd downed half the bottle. "Seriously. First pull that took less than six months. Congratulations."

"It's not like that," Tavish said, not knowing why he was protesting.

"Sure, Tavish," Royal said. He looked back to Jordan, and shrugged. "I wish you the best, for what it's worth."

"Thanks," Tavish said. "Really, thanks."

* * * *

Eventually, Jordan stirred again. Without opening his eyes, he groped for the new water bottle Tavish had left to replace the old one. Tavish had no idea how he knew it was there, but Jordan had gone straight for it. He would have to flop over and free his other hand if he wanted to unscrew the lid, so instead he used his teeth to crack open the bottle. He drank all of it and sat up.

Tavish looked up from the desk. The organism stain was already up on the wall but the rest of the luggage was still at the door. The work ups done on the test subjects had been printed off—Patrice spared no expense—and he had the data fanned out in front of him.

"Welcome back," Tavish said when Jordan looked at him. His eyes looked bleary, but his pupils were right for the amount of light the room had.

"Thanks." Jordan's voice cracked like a broken egg on the single word. "And, uh, thanks for the spray, Tavish. I ... owe you."

"You do," Tavish agreed. Jordan looked down, found the insulin spray and pocketed it. He stood up, then sat back down quickly. "You wouldn't happen to have anything for a headache, Doc, would you?"

"You're probably just dehydrated. I could get you more water, if you'd like."

Jordan leaned back into the couch. "There is nothing I wouldn't do for you if you did."

Tavish stood up and left the papers where they were. The plight of the dying men wasn't going to change in the next thirty seconds. Or in the next week. It wasn't just a matter of replacing the lungs. Cloning was expensive, and took time to cultivate, but it was possible. The organism destroyed them again. The paperwork showed that all test subjects had been caught in an early stage and lungs had already been started for them. All he needed to do was find a cure, a way to...

"Water?" Jordan asked, more plaintive this time. Tavish shook his head to clear the problem from the here and now.

"Sorry," he said. It was probably the third or fourth time in the past twenty-four hours he'd apologized. He normally wasn't so distracted.

"Your face had glazed over," Jordan said. "I would have gone up and got it myself but my head, sadly, is going to explode any second now."

"I liked you better when you were offering thinly veiled sexual favors," Tavish said and grabbed the last two bottles. Between Royal and Jordan, they had cleared the fridge out. The salary Patrice had offered him was generous, but Tavish knew from experience that every little expense would come out of his salary.

"Nothing I said was thinly veiled," Jordan said. He was already looking better. Tavish hadn't thought he'd heard the plastic rattle of a Dose sheet. Tavish crossed the floor and passed Jordan the bottle. Jordan took it and touched Tavish's

with it, then stepped even closer. They were suddenly so close their noses were less than an inch away.

Jordan didn't smell like most junkies Tavish had worked with at the university. The stink of personal neglect and chemical dependency was pretty much universal. Jordan smelt of leather that was well worn and body heat. He smelled of conditioned air and of hair product. There was a touch of sweetness to his breath, excess sugar still not neutralized, but the muscles were hard under the thin T-shirt he wore.

Tavish looked up, blinking, and put his hands on Jordan's shoulders to steady the sudden rush of vertigo. Jordan put his hands on Tavish's hips.

Tavish's brain went suddenly blank. It was an interesting sensation to not have a billion thoughts hurtling themselves around his skull. It was ... nice.

And Jordan was nice, too. He was nice to look at and nice to touch. His blue eyes were wide, and although his face was still, there was one of those nice smiles lurking about the corners of his mouth and eyes.

Tavish slid his hand down into the warmth of Jordan's jacket and felt the plastic give way. He pulled out the sheet and stepped back. The sheet was empty but for two small, oblong blue pills.

"How high are you flying right now?" Tavish asked, surprisingly bitter despite the fact that Jordan's choices were really none of his business.

Jordan took another step forward. They were as close as they had been before, but with none of the intimacy. "Give

them back," Jordan repeated. "I'm not going to ask you again."

"Okay," Tavish handed them back.

Jordan snatched them from his hand and then put down his bottle mostly untouched and brushed past where Tavish stood half in the hallway.

Tavish followed Jordan to the door. He hung onto the now open door, and didn't want to ask Jordan to stay, even though he really wanted Jordan to stay.

Tavish wanted to apologize all over again, to tell him that he was wrong to even play at taking something so personal, but he couldn't. "You're not going to drive like this," he said, knowing how lame it sounded.

Jordan grinned, bitterly. He knew it was a weapon. It was an almost impossible mask to see past. "Don't you worry about me." He kissed the top of Tavish's head, sloppily. "I'll be just fine."

Tavish did worry. He wanted to call Jordan back but Jordan turned and started down the hall, however unsteadily. Whether in a straight line or not, Jordan Patrice did in fact have a nice ass.

Tavish watched until the lift took Jordan away but Jordan never looked back once.

All the way back to his desk, Tavish berated himself. Royal had been a Very Bad Idea and he couldn't begin to fathom how much worse Jordan was going to be. He used to have such sane, sensible taste.

The data sheets blurred the longer he stared at them. Statistics and percentages, blood work results, time sheets

for the amount of hours spent in the mine. There was nothing on the table that could save a life tonight, and without an assistant to shoo him off to bed, he had to decide for himself it was time for sleep. It felt like he was leaving things undone. There were tons of raw information he could memorize when his head was still in a relatively clear state, and not when the critical time had come for a bit of obscure chart detail to save the day. There was nothing more that he hated than feeling unfinished.

The blanket he stripped off the bed had pooled where Jordan had kicked it. He'd already screwed up enough for one day.

So he went to bed. His body was accustomed to snatching rest where rest was found, so a whole, uninterrupted night in a real bed was a rare treat.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Two

Jordan wandered past where Betty was parked with just a pang of regret. But he didn't doubt for a second that his father had the transport marked in some way. He'd spent hours looking for it, but his father's engineers were better at hiding than he was at finding.

As soon as he was out of sight of Tavish's apartment, he straightened his walk. The denatured Dose he took gave him all the side effects of the habitual drug, let him test positive to whatever drug test his father threw at him, but didn't cause any of the euphoria. Withdrawal, shakes, and potential overdose, of course, but no euphoria.

He made it down to the lower city. He avoided the boy-toys that swarmed him with an apologetic smile. When they all recognized him, they melted away. The days of abandoned darkened alleys were long since gone, but failing a good traditional clandestine meeting place, there were always places where men had more things on their mind than listening to neighboring conversations.

The Launch Pad was in an abandoned storefront at the base of one of the dormitories in the outer ring. It was a burnt-out shell, but Jordan didn't doubt for a second that the resident drug dealer still paid the standard rent of any storefront in the Alpha site.

Launch's smoke hung heavy, turning the blackened walls a bluish gray. Jordan counted nine men, huddled around the walls, launch cigarettes hanging in various lengths on half of

them. The other half had either curled up to sleep off the lows or shiver off the withdrawals. Launch cigarettes, unfiltered and uncut, brought the user up as fast as it brought them back down again.

"Switching poisons?" a voice drawled behind him.

Jordan turned around, startled, but it was just Fox coming out of the shadow. The leather slacks he wore hugged him in places Jordan would have found interesting if it hadn't been that he had a launch cigarette himself and Fox belonged to Jordan's father. His blue eyes were just slits to keep the foul smoke out, his red hair scraped back into a severe pony tail, and he was hugging himself. Fox was always cold, regardless of how temperate the site was maintained.

"I'll stick to my own sheets," Jordan said. "How are you?"

Fox waved his cigarette around. Two of the men around the edge leaned towards them at the wasted burning embers. "Won't complain."

He wouldn't, Jordan knew. Regardless of what Patrice did to him, Fox never complained. Patrice had broken him down. He'd been a young, successful engineer who had designed the air filtration and conditioning unit. Within a year Fox had become addicted to harder and harder drugs and he'd become his father's pet, taking table scraps by hand.

But his brain was still active, and he still relayed what messages he could. If it hadn't been for Fox, Jordan would not have been able to warn Tavish's brother to get out before the guards arrived. It was a dangerous game, but Fox didn't seem to care about the risk.

"He needs to see you." Fox took a deep drag from the launch stick, and his whole body relaxed as the smoke spread throughout his body.

A shadow broke up from the wall. "Mr. Fox," Archie, Fox's dealer, said. His skin was dirty, his bald head flaking with dried skin and his clothes oily from lack of wash. He held out a package. "Your usual."

Jordan turned. Archie looked him up and down. "And are you letting me give you a sample, Mr. Patrice?"

Jordan forced himself to grin at the man. "I'll keep to Dose," he said.

Archie shrugged. "When it stops giving you the same rush, you'll know where to find me."

"Absolutely," Jordan said. He kissed Fox's cheek, felt Fox slip the keycard into his shirt, and made his way out.

It was easy enough to get lost in the lower city. Jordan switched shirts a couple times, picking up and discarding off-world shirts that would cost the average worker a month's pay. He didn't look up, in case the cameras were on, and spent over an hour to make sure he wasn't being followed or if he was being followed, whoever was doing it would be completely lost.

Just as the sun was starting to set, Jordan went back to his apartment, went from room to room turning on and off lights and set the pattern to the random generator to ensure it looked like he would spend the evening in. Then it was a simple matter of hacking the door mechanism to show that no one had entered or exited. He took the emergency stairs down to where the transports were kept. A small group

transport, big enough for half a dozen miners at least, waited for him and he got in, silently. A moment later, four others joined him, gathering up his falsified papers with their legitimate ones, and the guards at the air curtain barely looked at the miners' papers.

So much of the stone forest had already been consumed. The wasteland of the rock formations that had been left behind looked like the rotten teeth of a leper. Once the core of the stone had been exposed to the rich oxygen needed for the miners to farm it, it turned black and the rest of the stone soon followed. The ground crumbled around the roots of the rock and turned the rich red into an empty gray. Jordan knew that Patrice had a symbiotic cloned successfully, but he chose to continue with the mining so that the rest of the rock forest was ground down and no one else would have access to the original raw material.

The men in the transport all felt the same way. Fox would've seen to that. Jordan had no idea if any of them had fallen under the suspicious eye of Patrice, and association with enough proof of guilt required. For Fox to approach him so overtly, it had to be very important that Jordan go to the caves that night.

Another transport waited for him a mile or so from the mine site. The mass transport rumbled to a stop just outside the gates and the driver made a show of getting out and inspecting the tires. He had turned off the headlights, and Jordan was able to slip in when the door was opened. The new transport was a bullet, with room enough for one and it

was the same color as the rocks around them. It was designed to travel fast, quietly and completely undetectable.

He'd been here many times before, using the same set up. Each time Fox slipped him a different keycard, then took Jordan's own bike out. They both knew that it wouldn't be stopped at security and that the tracking no doubt installed in it would report back to Patrice that Jordan had gone out to the new beta site and returned back to his apartment.

The packed sand here was a hard surface to run on. As the moon Remus, reached its apex in the night sky, Jordan flew across the desert floor. Three hours later, when Romulus joined his brother in the second half of the sky, Jordan had already passed the Badlands marking the journeys halfway point. The ground had changed. Huge boulders, bedrock rather than the living art of the stone trees, pushed their way out to the clay like ground and the hills striated with red and black streaks.

Jordan saw the light from the new communication shack being built, and coasted his little transporter to a stop while he was still hidden by the rolling ground. The engine let off no more sound than a sigh as it powered down. The door slid open, and Jordan got out. The little bullet had no reflective material in it, and he was fairly confident that the workers wouldn't be able to see him outside the bright-as-day potassium lights.

The communication workers, dressed in one piece brown uniforms and had placid expressions, finished working on the uplink shed under the blinding lights of the portable generator.

This time, the workers picked up the supplies they brought with them outside the city walls and headed back. The potassium lights sputtered, once, then kicked off with a spatter of liquid-sounding splash. Headlights of huge transporters came on, but the night felt about ten degrees colder without the lights burning. Through the no doubt bulletproof glass of the communication shed, a green light blinked.

Men got on the transport, some remained behind. It was only a skeleton crew, but they wore gray guard uniforms with body armor and carried rifles over their shoulders they carried rifles with full charges.

"Think it's ready?" Thomas asked beside him, softly. The words barely carried to Jordan's ear, forget all the way to the shed. Jordan had no idea how Thomas traveled so quietly; it was only once Thomas was beside him that Jordan felt how every muscle group, sympathetic or otherwise, ached inside Thomas. Still, there had been no sign of his approach. Not that he was surprised; there were things Thomas could do and there were the things that Jordan could manage. They were not all that different. They stood up, and the dust and rocks Thomas had covered himself with fell about them with a soft clatter.

"Are you asking me?" Jordan asked. Thomas was the one with the answers; he'd practically watched the shed being built one complicated electronic board at a time. Thomas touched his cheek. The grit embedded in his fingerprints and maybe even the pores themselves, scratched Jordan's skin, but he liked the rough touch. He didn't look like Tavish,

favoring their father more than Tavish did, but the set to their mouth was the same. His blond hair was braided back roughly today, and powdered with the same color dust as the dirt around them. There was a time when Jordan's stomach would have twisted nervously when Thomas had touched him, but that had been years ago.

"Maybe I am."

Jordan shook his head. "The satellite has been up for a while now." He didn't add that Patrice would not have allowed the control panel of such an important aspect of his regime so far away. He was going to say that, when he noticed the black circles under Thomas' eyes. It could have just been exhaustion, but when he opened himself to the feeling, despite how tight Thomas held his thoughts, it was still possible to feel the tightness across his own chest. He'd been fighting the need to cough for a while now; the sound would have carried far more on the night air than their whispered conversation.

"Stop it."

"Stop what?" Jordan asked.

"Feeling me out."

"I—" Jordan stopped. Thomas knew all about the side effect of the denatured Dose. He'd tried to isolate it and minimize it, in the beginning, but had given up. Whatever Patrice's scientists had done to the Arochos in the stone to give the mild euphoric high killed off what other long-term cumulative psychotropic effect it had.

Thomas was still looking at him. "I wouldn't dream of invading your personal space," Jordan finished off, lamely. He touched the back of Thomas' neck. "You don't feel so well."

Thomas didn't answer. He didn't have to. He cleared his throat and changed subjects. "He's hoping we'll attack it."

And Jordan let him. "Which means he probably knows where you are. You should move everyone again." It wasn't exactly his imagination that two of the men guarding the compound glanced up in their general direction, but Jordan knew they were far enough away and the ground was hot enough to hide their heat signature.

"Patrice still doesn't think anyone but miners are sick."

"Patrice is a moron," Thomas said.

"Let me tell him."

"If he doesn't know it already, Jordan, his head is in the sand."

Jordan supposed that was true.

Eventually, the men looked away and one removed his filter-mask to pop a Dose. There was no reason to suspect that the air here was bad. Thomas had been sick for a while, but he was the only non-miner that Jordan knew who had contracted the sickness without being in the mines at all. That just meant there must be others hiding it well.

"He wants you," Jordan said. The communication shed was nothing but fly paper. "Do you see the masks?"

Thomas crawled to the edge of the small rise they hid behind and looked down. "They started wearing them a week ago."

Jordan nodded.

"Is that what you wanted me to see?"

Thomas nodded. Jordan went to turn, but Thomas took hold of his arm. "Have you seen him?"

"Tavish? My father made sure I was the one who picked him up."

Thomas swallowed and looked away. "How does he look?"

"Good. He said he wouldn't serve you up. I have to think he won't."

The guards had moved away, though their laughter rang against the hillside. Jordan and Thomas both waited for the sound to stop echoing. "He wouldn't," Thomas said, softly.

Jordan was silent for a long time. "How's Gibb?" he asked, trying to make his voice sound casual.

Thomas groaned, then clamped his hand over his mouth. Gibb had been the man who had recruited Thomas, when he was still young and stupid, and had promised him how easy it would be to end Patrice's reign. Thomas had believed him, no matter how much Jordan had tried to talk him out of it, and Thomas had been paying for it ever since. Jordan and Gibb had been ... detained together, Jordan for warning Thomas to get out while he could and Gibb for getting caught in the raid that Thomas escaped and it hadn't taken Gibb four days to crack. After he had, he'd been allowed to "escape" and rejoin them in their new hiding place in the hills. Jordan felt Patrice's fingerprints all over him.

That was three years ago. They'd had to work out an uneasy alliance. Gibb had the charisma, but not the technical skills. Thomas had the technical skills, but not the patience or stomach for the sacrifices leadership needed. Fox wouldn't

work with Gibb, either, so it killed Gibb that he needed Thomas's connections at the very least.

"Gibb is hell bent on attacking. He thinks if he takes the communication center, he'll have Patrice by the throat."

Jordan laughed, but muffled the sound out of instinct. "If he thinks a shed in the middle of nowhere will bring Patrice to his knees, he deserves to be taken again."

"Shall I tell him you said that?" Thomas asked.

Jordan rolled his eyes. "I would really rather you didn't," he said. He didn't need to stoke that fire any more than it already was.

He took the bullet back to just outside the mines again, and slid into the line of exhausted miners returning to the Alpha Site for the morning. Jordan sat low in his chair, angling the cold conditioned stream of air to his face, and slept the rest of the way to the city.

* * * *

No buzzers went off in the middle of the night to tell Tavish to check an incubation tray or a generator. He dressed in slacks and a white lab coat that had his name printed on the breast. He was about to leave in search of some form of food when someone knocked. Tavish half expected it to be Jordan but then realized Jordan probably had a few hundred things more interesting to do than take more judgmental abuse from Tavish.

"Just as well," he told himself. He hadn't realized he'd spoken out loud until the short, mousy man looked at him expectantly. "Just as well as what, sir?" he asked.

Tavish stared, but only for a second. The man's white uniform with so crisp it didn't sit next to his skin along the arms. His nose was pointed, abnormally so, and despite the fact that surgery for corrective vision was as common as sublingual spray, the man still wore round eyeglasses. The metal that held them to his face was as thin as spider webbing.

"I was speaking to myself," Tavish said.

"Oh yes," the man said, cocking his head to the side. "Your dossier says that is an unfortunate habit of yours. If you will follow me?"

"I have a dossier?" Tavish demanded. The feeling of violation was automatic. "Why? And who are you, anyways?"

The man held up two fingers. "To start with, Mr. Patrice has dossiers on every person of interest on Midnight. Forgive me for pointing out the obvious, Dr. Pan, but you were one before you even left for school. And after your family's ... fall from grace, shall we say, observation became even more important." The man folded one of his long fingers down.

"And secondly, I am Mr. Rees, Mr. Patrice's assistant." The second finger came down. "Is that all for question time? Mr. Patrice is waiting for you. You are to have breakfast with him before the press meeting and Mr. Patrice does not enjoy being kept waiting, as you could probably well imagine."

Tavish could. He followed the little man to the lift and they crossed the street together. Members of the press were already waiting like caged animals in front of the podium set up on the rich blue carpet. They hustled for space; a ruler could be used to define the nine-foot square they inhabited. If

Tavish had to guess he would say that was the exact number of bodies necessary for the holo cameras to give the illusion of a packed street.

Mr. Rees led Tavish past the press, but there wasn't a ripple of interest. Tavish did not exist on Midnight unless Patrice introduced him as existing. It had been a fairly closed government before Tavish had gone away to school but that was nothing when compared to this level of control.

The entire ninth floor of the Congress building was Patrice's private suite. The same level of craftsmanship that showed in the façade and grand entrance carried through in the apartment. The marble floor shone with an almost liquid surface and although there was probably an entire branch of jobs dedicated to its finish, Tavish couldn't get the image out of his head of Rees on his knees scrubbing.

The walls were all the same shade of muted gold, tasteful despite the color, and the recessed areas and pedestals all contained artifacts of huge artistic importance, from the bust of a famous explorer to old-fashioned telescopes that looked ready to use. The sitting room off to the left had real wood furniture, no doubt of Earth origin, but Tavish did not have time to stare. Rees took his arm and led him past a small formal dining area to the patio outside.

On the way, Tavish passed Royal, who had just then come from the patio. His face was pale, a mixture of fear and ... well, actually more fear, and it made his eyes seem impossibly large. He wore the same kind of lab coat that Thomas did, but as always it was just that much better fitted.

"Royal," Tavish called, but he was led away before Royal could answer him.

Patrice waited behind a table covered in mosaic tile and the city stretched out behind him. Tavish supposed that it had once been a beautiful view but now that the city was snarled and crowded, it made the even noblest building among the masses look slummy.

Royal, when he had been summoned, had obviously not been asked to sit. The single other place was still pristine and complete with a napkin artfully draped over the plate. It looked to be real cloth. Tavish had never seen a proper placement of stemware being used for breakfast before.

"Will you join me?" Patrice asked, and Tavish was glad he had waited for the invitation. He sat, Rees pulling back his chair and Tavish placed the napkin over his lap before Rees had the chance to.

It was then he noticed that there were not just three of them on the patio. A young man, looking to be about Jordan's age, sat against the patio wall amongst the pots of flowers that were either real or synthetic enough that they could pass for real. His red hair framed his face, which was as feminine as one of the women coeds from University. He wore a tight T-shirt, and real leather pants that were tight enough to have the same wet finish as the marble floor. He also wore a thick leather collar around his neck. The D ring attachment was thick enough to restrain a horse. He looked up as though he realized Tavish was scrutinizing him, and his blue eyes had pinpricks for pupils.

"Very good. Most people do not notice him. He's been trained not to draw attention to himself," Patrice said.

"In those pants?" Tavish asked. He didn't mention the collar even though he found himself unable to look away from it.

"Perhaps I should have said most people invited into my sanctuary know better than to notice him. He's my personal property, as much as the chair you're sitting in or the position I'm about to offer you."

"He's a slave," Tavish said. The disgust was too much to keep out of his voice.

Patrice shook his hand, motioning Rees to begin serving them. Tavish had been starving, but he found he'd lost his appetite. "Slavery is illegal on Midnight," Patrice said, and snapped his fingers. The young man crawled to Patrice's feet and melted without being told. "Fox has his own reasons in his servitude. But if you feel you have a right to know, he is free to go any time he chooses. Do you not, Fox?" Patrice asked, but didn't look down.

"Of course, Sir," Fox said. His voice was low but beautiful. Once he had come closer, he looked older than he had by the wall. Mid to late 20s, possibly very late 20s. He was roughly the same age if not older than Tavish was. If he was from Midnight too, they could have possibly gone to the same schools, but Tavish didn't recognize him.

"My son spent most of the evening with you," Patrice said to Tavish as the first course arrived.

It was fresh fruit, totally unblemished. Tavish had never seen unblemished fruit before. He picked up a whole mango,

and it was perfectly red and yellow. He brought it under his nose and the smell was beyond exquisite, to the point of being heady. He picked up one of the small knives that accompanied the platter and began to cut the mango up. "He did."

"You have surgeon hands," Patrice said, changing the subject yet again. Rees was cutting up a horned fruit Tavish didn't recognize. Patrice didn't eat it himself, but took the sliced pieces of orange flesh and fed them to Fox. "Yet you became more interested in microbiology."

"I did." Tavish felt the unsaid words about Jordan hanging over his head like sharpened steel. Surgery, for the most part had become a point and shoot up enterprise. All surgeons were trained in the same classical methods, of course, but even the most backwards of colonies were equipped with guided laser machines. On almost every colony, the human resources were the most valuable commodity, with zero room for error. Midnight was no different and sickness could cost immeasurable amounts of credits.

"So you're a glory hound. You want everything that accompanies the big discovery," Patrice said. His face was a lot like Jordan's, and just as unreadable. He kept feeding Fox who licked his fingers clean. Tavish found himself hoping that Patrice had at least washed them first.

"It has nothing to do with glory," Tavish said. "I can help people."

"Yes, you can. Is it to clear your name, then, if it's not for your own personal need? Are you hoping that I might clear

your brother's name so that he may board one of my ships and get off this rock?"

"Is that even an option?" Tavish asked. Patrice must've known as well as Jordan that he had no idea where Thomas was.

"If I said yes?" Patrice asked.

"I don't know what you want me to say. It's not as though I am ever going to be in a position where working harder is even an option. I came here to do my best, and that is what I'm going to do."

"I know," Patrice said with a smile. "But you have to know your task now is only a small portion of what I want from you."

Tavish did not look at Fox. The pet was where his thoughts immediately went. Patrice could not be serious. Patrice waited long enough for Tavish to think exactly that, and then he smiled. "Please credit me with some respect for your talent. I want you to know that I want total control of everything that comes out of your mouth. You can resist, in the beginning. I actually enjoy that part. But when you realize I can offer you anything and everything you could ever ask for, it will seem like such a silly thing that you didn't give me what I wanted from the beginning."

"Does my dossier say I'll agree to this?" Tavish asked dully.

"Your dossier states that you will return to the colony and work for a regime that has outlawed your entire family for the cost of your tuition. I extrapolated the rest. Once you are settled in, I will arrange time for you to sit down with a

lawyer and discuss your father's estate with you. Ordinarily, I would have seized everything, but as your first reward for playing nicely, I'll have everything transferred to your name."

"Thank you," Tavish said, because that was exactly what he was supposed to say. The mango, barely touched because what he had put into his mouth tasted dusty, was taken away and an expertly folded omelet with real bacon was put in its place. It was just too bad it tasted dry and bland as well. Tavish forced it down anyways. He knew he'd need his strength.

"I think we're done here," Patrice announced. He'd eaten even less of the eggs, but touched Fox's cheek once and pushed him away. Fox stumbled to the side from the blow. "One last thing, Tavish. My son is completely off-limits to you. Do you understand? If I catch you getting involved in his mess, my good will ends."

Tavish nodded. He saw that the moment he stepped onto the ship coming to Midnight he had only had two possibilities. He was either going to cure Black Lung and become a hero, or he was going to disappoint Patrice in a real or imagined way. Patrice would get as much pleasure condemning Tavish as holding him up to the masses. There was always going to be the next scientist who would give anything for the chance of doing something new in the branded and corporate world. Tavish's family history just provided added sport.

Patrice nodded at Tavish's realization. "And in case you were wondering, I really do wish you the best in your attempts at a cure. Regardless of what you think of me, you

will do me much better as a symbol of my good will and forgiveness."

"And yet, as it stands now I have neither," Tavish said.

Patrice's lip curled. "No. Of course you don't." He turned his head and coughed.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Three

The press conference was a blur. All during the set up and lighting stage tests, the reporters remained placidly within their parameters. It wasn't until Patrice cleared the technicians from the camera's view and the hot lights shone down and burned the back of Tavish's neck that the reporters seemed to wake from their stupor.

Midnight only had two newspapers and both of them might as well have put Patrice's name down as the chief editor. At most, there might have been two other colonies that would have been interested in the story but from the sudden rapid interest, Tavish wouldn't have believed it if he hadn't watched. When Tavish counted, however, he only saw four cameras that had working lights. All the others were dummies.

It was surreal. Tavish answered the slow-pitched questions one at a time. Yes, he thought Black Lung was horrible. Of course he was going to work hard. He had no idea what the cause was and he wasn't going to rest until he found it. He looked at Patrice halfway through for guidance despite his fear of the man and Patrice put his hand on Tavish's shoulder. Cameras flashed.

"Don't worry," Patrice said, into the microphone. All Tavish could think about was the fact that the hand on his shoulder had fed Fox. "You will sound brilliant tomorrow."

Tavish didn't doubt it. He smiled and concentrated on it not looking like a grimace. He didn't start feeling comfortable

until after Patrice had given him his identification badge in front of the rest of the hospital. The reporters had followed them into the hospital and the badge giving ceremony seemed to last forever. Patrice finally dismissed everyone except Tavish. The hall between them suddenly seemed huge. With the dim lights of the hall having a slightly reddish tinge, the wing looked as though they'd been swallowed by a huge whale with industrial flooring.

"Anything that you need will be provided," Patrice said. "We have outfitted the laboratory to your specifications. Anything else that is required, tell Rees. I'm expecting results. Anything other than a complete success is a failure in my eyes. You will give me weekly progress reports delivered over breakfast and if you are not at my beck and call during your time off, I will start to become suspicious. I'm telling you right now that you do not want me to become suspicious. You have any questions?"

"Just a recap. If I succeed, I'm in your pocket. If I fail, or fail to succeed in the short amount of time you give me, you'll destroy me. Is that it?" It was impossible to keep the sarcasm out of his voice so he didn't even try.

Patrice ignored the tone. It was probably just as well. "Yes."

"I didn't come here to fail," Tavish said.

"Good," Patrice said. The remembered taste of mango filled Tavish's mouth. It could not have been stronger if Patrice had just fed it to him. By hand. Tavish swallowed. Patrice smiled at him, showing all his teeth and followed the reporters out. All of the nurses, other doctors and hospital

administration had disappeared as well, but Tavish didn't need them. He found his way to his laboratory and got to work.

Patrice had been true to his word. Not even the University had access to newer equipment and machines. The long laboratory was full down both walls. Centrifuges, refrigeration units, deep freezers and fume hoods with a state of the art sonic control panel for micron measurement units were all crowded together. The workspace down the center of the aisle had sinks every dozen steps and the entire laboratory could be sanitized with the push of a button. Along the far wall was a glassed in workroom.

Royal joined him sometime later. He still looked pale, and his lips were rough from being worried with his teeth. Once upon a time in Tavish would have gone up to him and kissed him—and probably teased him more than just a little—but that was no longer his place. Still, he meant it when he'd said he wanted to be friends and Tavish hadn't seen Royal look so lost in years.

"This was a mistake," he said and looked at Tavish for the first time. "We should go." Royal's face was white, and on him that was saying something.

"You know that's not possible," Tavish said. He wasn't just being dramatic. Patrice controlled exit visas with the same passion he controlled everything else. And Tavish doubted that Patrice would be happy to just call the whole thing off. "We're stuck here."

Royal looked even sicker. "Tavish ... I..."

"What did Patrice threaten you with?" Tavish asked.

Royal shuddered. "He didn't threaten me. He just ... looked at me. I'm not as strong as you. I can't—"

"He threatened me, too," Tavish said. "He likes control. It's nothing personal to him."

Royal nodded, but there was no relief on his face. "Let's check each other's work," he said. "For both our sakes."

Tavish agreed.

They spent the rest of the day drawing blood from the test subjects. Tavish did the actual blood draws, something he hadn't done since his last year of med school. Royal took case histories in the same room. Tavish watched him as he started the preparations. Royal may not have had the intuitive mind necessary to follow hypothesis through all the bends and curves necessary in order to get to the solution, but he did have excellent people skills. The miners were afraid. They had seen first-hand what Black Lung could do. The test subjects were also concerned. Not that they were going to die, but Patrice had obviously threatened them with something in order to participate in the test. Royal handled them all. He was also a genius computer programmer and actually enjoyed the daily calibrations. Tavish didn't doubt he couldn't do the job without him.

When they'd finished labeling all of the vials and entering in the last of the data, Tavish called it a day. It was his first early day in a decade. But he was exhausted and Royal didn't look much better.

On his return, his door was still locked. But when he pushed it open, he saw his lights were on. He came down the small hall to see Jordan sprawled on the floor but with his

legs up on the couch. He was bobbing his head up and down again, but this time to music had an obvious source. Jordan pulled off an actual set of headphones—nothing implanted—and Tavish found himself liking Jordan even more. He used headsets as well. It wasn't the cost of the implants that stopped him but the idea of drilling into his skull. He wondered why Jordan hadn't gotten the cosmetic surgery "Hey, Doc," Jordan said, upside down still. "Did you have a good breakfast with daddy?"

"He threatened my life and the last bit of my family's name. The mango was good."

"Sounds about typical."

"Who is Fox?"

"I'm sure my father gave you the spiel. He's been dragging Fox around with him for years."

Tavish made a face.

Jordan shrugged. "Fox made his choice. I've made mine. Do you want to go for a ride?"

"Yes. He also warned me against you, too."

"Oh," said Jordan. He grinned, but for once he didn't look high. At least his eyes were clear. "Do you still want to go for a ride?"

"What makes you think I'm not going to heed his warnings?" Tavish asked. But he leaned against the wall. Jordan looked like a huge cat, stretched out as he was. All the tension in Tavish's body leached away slowly.

"Our continued conversation, mostly." Jordan stood up slowly and stretched again, muscles shifting in all the right ways. "What do you think?"

"You're probably going to get me killed," Tavish said truthfully. "Probably in a messy and public way."

"At least you understand the stakes," Jordan said, and came up to him. Tavish was pinned against the wall and the extra hint of sugar was gone from Jordan's breath. Which meant that if he hadn't been dosing for a while, he must be hurting. Tavish tested it, running his hand up Jordan's arm, and sure enough, Jordan flinched away.

"I'll be all right in a day or so," Jordan said, but didn't let a drop of apology slide in between the words.

"Unless you Dose again," Tavish said, not exactly sure why. A stab of pain behind Jordan's eyes flashed and Tavish felt bad he'd said it, but he did feel Jordan's regret, too.

"There's always that chance," Jordan said, voice light despite himself. "I do try to go a few days between overdoses, but if you want more ammunition to judge me with, I can always break out the new package now."

Tavish put up his hands, which because Jordan was so close, meant they were almost touching. "That was a stupid thing to say," Tavish said. He didn't want to cross the few millimeters between them, for he knew how soft Jordan's shirt would feel on his palm. It was a knit, black where not frayed gray with use, and despite its age it still fit Jordan tight across the chest and shoulders. The sleeves were rolled up over his elbows. The room temperature was probably controlled somewhere on the site to within a fraction of a degree, but Jordan's exposed skin still had goose bumps on it. Touching, no matter how soft, would be hell.

"I have something that might make it easier," Tavish said instead of apologizing again. If Patrice was his father, Tavish didn't know if he would stop at taking a drug with such a low ceiling.

Jordan groaned. "No more drugs, though. That's the last thing I need."

Tavish shook his head. He slipped away from Jordan and went to his bag. The seal had been broken, but the contents had mostly survived both planets' baggage handling. No other bag had been so lucky. Jordan followed him, but it was his turn to lean against the wall. "No drugs," Tavish repeated. His father had been the one who got him into the herbs. They had spent hours wandering when he was younger, with Thomas following them on short stubby legs, as they identified different native plants. His father's huge laboratory had enthralled him. Each plant was tested, from the leaves, stems, berries and fruit, and his father had written his findings down in a leather bound paper notebook in his tiny, meticulous handwriting. Tavish had been the only medical student who could still make potions and tinctures. "Herbs, only. They should give your liver a fighting chance against what it's facing."

"You don't have to," Jordan said, again. He hesitated, opening his mouth to say something else, but then closed it again. He took the bottle.

"I want to," Tavish said. "But take two, four times a day until you either feel better or Dose again."

"See, Doc? I knew you could say it without judging," Jordan said, but his hand shook. The gelatin capsules inside

the bottle rattled. He put it away quickly in his jeans. "I appreciate it."

Tavish nodded. He got changed out of his lab coat, swapping the slacks for jeans as well, and followed Jordan out.

The transport had been around the corner, which was why Tavish hadn't seen it. Jordan activated the doors remotely and then waited for Tavish to get inside before following him. The trip out of the city wasn't as hair-raising as it was the first time, even with triple the number of people out in the street. Every inch of space seemed occupied by someone buying or selling something, but the narrow lane in the middle of the road was respected as much as it could be with the crush of people on either side of it. Tavish was used to holding his elbows by his side despite being in the transport by the time they reached the air curtain, and suddenly all Tavish wanted was the freedom of space.

Once they had cleared the guards, the line-up out of the city wasn't nearly as bad as the line-up to get in. It was full of miners finishing a week long shift cocooned away in their highly controlled conditioned transporters, and farmers in their open transports coming back from a shift on the hydroplots. They passed the occasional official looking transport with tinted windows all the way around. Those were the most interesting.

They didn't speak until they reached the Badlands that stretched almost equal distance between the mines and the hills off to the far east. The ground had managed to shrug off the best of what the terra-formers had thrown. The stretch of

gray rock had crumbled even further since the last time Tavish had visited. Tavish bent down and picked up one of the hand-sized rocks that had flaked away from the bedrock. All it took was the lightest touch to turn the solid rock into a gray powder.

Tavish hesitated. His father had taken them here on the last night the three of them had ever been together. Thomas had been a typically moody teenager and had refused to even get out of the transporter because of how late the night was. Their father had seemed distracted.

The next day, he had turned himself in as a traitor. The overthrow attempt had crumbled under his betrayal and Patrice had crushed the remaining conspirators. Years later, Tavish had learned that his father had traded his life for Tavish and Thomas. When Patrice struck back he took everything. Even if he hadn't killed them they would've had a half-life at best. If they had managed to get off Midnight, they wouldn't have had the proper papers that would've made them citizens. They couldn't have held a job, gotten an education or even received healthcare without proof of their home country.

"Thomas never really understood," Jordan said. "Why your father did what he did."

"Betraying your father?" Tavish asked. Jordan started to walk down the slight slope. There was a dry riverbed here, the only sign of water being the smooth rocks at its base. There had been a small trickle of unpotable water before Tavish had left, but now there was nothing.

"Actually, he couldn't understand why his father betrayed the plot to kill Dad," Jordan said. He spoke as though the idea that Patrice could be killed was a hypothetical one at best, and Tavish really couldn't blame him. Patrice did seem as though nothing could touch him.

They were again a hundred yards or so from the transport, which loosened Jordan's already loose tongue. "If Thomas had told me what he was doing, I would've tried to stop him. Dad had so many double agents stumbling around that they betrayed themselves in an effort to seem most loyal. The chances of any plot getting beyond late night talk ... it wouldn't happen. I would've stopped him to protect him. But the wrong sort of people got their teeth into Thomas and he thought that he had so much to prove. I did warn him, a couple minutes before dad's men burst in. It's probably the only reason he's still alive."

"Did he ever thank you?" Tavish asked.

Jordan looked at him. "Surely you're not implying that I've had contact with a traitor since his death warrant was signed?" he asked, but his voice remained flat. "Even then, Dad almost killed me in his place. I spent most of the summer locked away. He thought it was only a matter of time before he found Thomas. All I had to do was apologize."

"And did you?" Tavish asked.

"I'm here, aren't I?" Jordan asked. "I started Dosing shortly after." The moons were huge behind him, and he laughed. "But all junkies have their reasons and excuses, don't they?"

If the touch wouldn't have been hellish for Jordan, Tavish would've kissed him. The desire for it left him shaking. Jordan saw it, too and made a face. He backed up carefully so that he was on safer ground. Tavish joined him. Jordan pushed him back and Tavish didn't fight. The heat trapped in the crumbling rock made him flush. So did Jordan when he climbed on top of him.

Jordan pulled off his shirt, and Tavish watched as his skin twitched. Jordan had dozens of scars running over his skin, the sheer number of scars some linear, others star shaped, across his chest and sides was shocking. It could have been from a crash, but Tavish somehow doubted it. There were, after all, fairly painless procedures that would make even the most severe scars looked superficial. "What happened?" Tavish asked.

"An accounting error," Jordan said, grimly.

So, Jordan had kept them on his body. It was a matter of choice, as a way to tell off his father. Jordan saw what he was thinking and smiled. But he didn't say anything more. Instead, he leaned forward and kissed Tavish. Tavish had been expecting it, but its fierceness still surprised him. Without breaking contact, Jordan fumbled with Tavish's jeans. He yanked them down as far as he could without Tavish's cooperation.

"Jordan," Tavish said. Jordan slid down and straddled Tavish's bare thighs. Tavish's jeans didn't let Tavish spread his legs very far at all.

"Does the touching bother you?" Tavish asked.

"I'll let you know when it does," Jordan said. He stretched out along Tavish's body, his head in the crook of Tavish's arm. This close, Tavish felt Jordan's heartbeat. His breath touched the skin on Tavish's neck. It was good to be so close.

"I like watching your face," Jordan said. "You're not pretending I'm someone else."

"I'm not," Tavish agreed. He was glad that was all Jordan read in him. He wasn't a stupid man. What he should have done was thank Jordan for the hard-on, push him off as delicately as possible and go wait in the transport until Jordan came to his senses, as well, but he didn't move.

Jordan's lip twisted and he pulled back a quarter inch. "You don't have to push me away. You can go, if you want."

"I don't want to," Tavish said.

Jordan's mouth twisted again. "But you should."

"If I knew what was good for me, Jordan, I wouldn't have come here to begin with," Tavish said. Jordan went to stand up but Tavish grabbed his wrists. He felt Jordan flinch at the contact but he didn't let him go. Jordan fought him for another second, then settled his weight down carefully again. "But I'm here now."

"How convenient for you," Jordan said, but wasn't looking at him. Tavish didn't have another hand free to lift his chin so that he would look at him, so he lifted his hips off the ground. Jordan rode the wave, fighting the grip Tavish had on his wrists for another second, and then mulishly looked up.

"You can't say your assistant ever once made you feel like this right now."

"You can read my mind now?" Tavish asked, quietly.

"Would you believe me if I said yes?"

"Royal and I weren't..." Tavish ran out of words. "We weren't like this," he tried again, and that came close. "Does that satisfy you?"

Jordan looked down to his wrists. "No," he said. "But it's a start. Kiss me."

Tavish pulled him down. Jordan didn't fight him, even though the angle couldn't have been very comfortable. Tavish felt Jordan's stomach muscles clench at the effort of trying to hold himself still, but when he went to let Jordan go, Jordan twisted his hands around so that he was the one gripping Tavish's wrists. "Just like that?"

Jordan arched an eyebrow. "If you don't want to wait I can suck you off and we can call it a night. Or..." Jordan didn't finish.

"Or?" Tavish prompted. He was suddenly very aware of how strong Jordan's fingers were around his wrists. He must have been doing something other than just Dosing these past few years to build up the sinewy muscle Tavish was feeling.

"Or we can get you out of that shirt. I can kiss my way down your chest and we can go from there."

"Let's do that," Tavish said, but Jordan didn't let him go.

He looked up, surprised, but Jordan's face was unreadable. "I don't want you to touch me."

"I won't."

The fingers tightened, hard enough to hurt, but just for a second. "Promise me."

"I promise. I won't touch you," Tavish said. He blinked back the sudden water in his eyes. Jordan was much stronger

than he looked all over. Jordan didn't let him go, but stared down at him for the longest time, as though that were enough to read his mind.

"Okay. I believe you." He wasn't being facetious. Tavish was out of his depth here, and getting deeper by the second. He wanted to ask why Jordan would doubt him, but there was a wall between them now. Jordan's face was again unreadable and he let go of Tavish's wrists. Tavish rubbed away some of the stiffness and rested his head on his forearm. Jordan pulled Tavish's shirt as far as it would go over his shoulders and sat back high on Tavish's thighs.

Jordan shivered, even though the wind touching his shoulders couldn't have been cold.

The pain was there ... here, Tavish corrected himself. He felt it inside him, too. The need was in his skin, now. It tightened his lungs, made his body hot and tired, but cold and sweaty all at the same time.

Jordan shifted back, and the feeling snapped back with him, like something elastic. "Sorry," he said. "I thought I had better control than that."

"Jordan, what..." Tavish began, but Jordan shook his head. "Not now. I'll explain what I can, later. Please."

Tavish nodded and lay back down again. A new wave of sensation crept over him, slowly at first, like the first turning of a lunar tide. It wasn't unpleasant, not like the last time, but there was the ghost of that need still inside.

Tavish looked up. Jordan had the first moon Remus directly behind him like a halo. The moonlight softened the

shadows that had lined his face and smoothed the hard features. He was at peace, and beautiful.

Jordan didn't look down at him, but he smiled. "It's easier if you close your eyes."

Tavish didn't ask what "it" was. He just shut his eyes and leaned back into the crook of his arm. At first, for a heartbeat, Tavish felt nothing but slightly foolish. Then, as though he'd opened his eyes again, the dim line of the horizon, brighter only by a degree or so than the sky came into focus. Tavish touched his face, but his eyes were definitely closed.

"Good. That's more than most see their first time. Relax, let me show you more." Jordan sounded like his mouth was right next to Tavish's ear, but he hadn't shifted from where he'd perched over Tavish's thighs.

Jordan moved up, just a quarter inch. A lapping sensation of waves began, first along Tavish's face, and then down his thighs. It should have been alarming, but it calmed him. Jordan touched his pelvic bone, and his cock woke up with the new contact.

The horizon became clearer. Tavish could see the ripples where the wind had eroded a path through it. As he watched, the ripples in the sand became ripples in the surface of a huge body of water. The moon over Jordan reflected a thousand times in the waves.

It was then that Tavish realized his hair was wet, and that warm water was lapping at the side of his face. He should have been panicking—he'd never learned how to swim—but he wasn't really floating. "It's just a memory," Jordan said,

and his voice seemed to float down and touch him. He was all alone with Jordan with the water and the moon, and though he should have been terrified, he'd never been more relaxed in his life.

"Whose memory?" Tavish asked. "Yours?"

Another laugh. It was warm, like the water touching him. The few times he'd been caught out in the rain on a planet that didn't regulate its water consumption, the water had been cold and his wet clothes had smothered him. This was nothing like that.

"What is this?" Tavish asked. He took a deep breath, and the empty burn of the unconditioned air was gone. Each swallow of air lubricated his throat and lungs. "Where are we?"

"The same place," Jordan said, his voice floating down from somewhere up with the stars. It was hard to see where the ocean ended and the sky began.

Something nudged his legs apart, a feat possible only in the memory, and gone was the feeling of clothing around him. "The rocks remember. They let me tap into their dreams."

"Since when?" Tavish asked.

"If you're wanting to analyze the local phenomenon for later study, I can leave the two of you alone," Jordan said, voice dry.

Something licked him, from the back of his testicles to his ass. It wasn't Jordan, he could still feel Jordan over him, but Tavish didn't doubt for a second that Jordan had caused it to

happen. He was licked again, slowly. And when Jordan laughed, Tavish felt it inside.

"I want to fuck you," Jordan said.

No question, no discussion. Tavish nodded. He leaned back even further. Jordan didn't touch him, even when Tavish felt warmth rushing over him, the current slid over him. His cock was hard again. The not-tongue slid over him again, along his length, and then engulfed him.

Tavish lifted his hips up. Jordan laughed again, sounding right next to his ear. There wasn't any contact, the touch was inside his brain in the same way the water was just a memory and the clean, cool air was, but he didn't need it to be completely real, not in this space.

Jordan pushed inside. There wasn't any pain or discomfort. There was no awkward fumbling, either. Just a sense of fullness that Tavish hadn't even realized he'd missed with Royal.

Waves lapped at his bare skin. Jordan moved against him in a matching rhythm. He liked it harder and faster, with the grip on his hips bordering on painful, but this gentle touch worked as well, as long as the sensation built in such small increments inside him.

Jordan stayed with him. The water became bath warm. He reached down his own body, avoiding Jordan entirely. But it was never quite enough. He couldn't will himself to come just with the lapping sensations alone. It crossed over from being pleasant to being frustrating in an instant.

"You don't have to do it all by yourself," Jordan said, again sounding like he was coming from a long way away.

"Although you can take matters where they need to go."

It hadn't occurred to him to use his hand. His cock felt so good in the slick water. Jordan exhaled, breath catching in his throat.

"Can you feel this?" Tavish asked.

The memory of being licked touched his throat, ran down his chest, and over his stomach. "Yes," Jordan said. "Here I can."

"Will you show me?" He found the right speed, the right grip and the right angle. For the first time he was close enough to touch Jordan, but drew back.

"Eventually. Hopefully." Jordan exhaled again. "Just keep doing that."

It worked. Not just the proper pressure or the right speed, but to know that Jordan was riding it as well was even better. The sound of the waves receded, so that it was only their breathing in the world.

"Tavish," Jordan whispered, the word becoming a prayer. The whole memory around them shimmered. Jordan couldn't hold it while his body shuddered with the shared orgasm. Tavish smiled, drawing out each touch until he couldn't bear it any more. Jordan came, his body shaking. And for a brief second, Tavish felt it. He felt the muscles tense and relax, he felt the cresting rush of orgasm run through him.

Tavish's own came swiftly on its heels. It was a rush—the sexual pleasure consumed him. Now that it was over, Jordan could take Tavish's cock in his hand, bringing him back to the

flat, hot rock even as he milked the last little bit of aftershock out of him.

Tavish relaxed against the rough ground. Jordan had moved off him, and stood on the edge of the narrow stream. Tavish supposed that the water over the rocks could have explained some of the wave sounds.

"Don't do that," Jordan said, but didn't turn around. "Don't try to explain it away."

"The rock has memory," Tavish repeated.

"I told you it does."

"And it ... shares the memory with you."

"I told you. It does."

"And the mind-blowing shared orgasms?"

Jordan looked at him, smile twisting up the corners of his mouth. He wasn't very good at hiding how concerned he was that Tavish may have rejected the experience. "A perk."

"A damn good one," Tavish said, and Jordan visibly relaxed. "How many others have perked with you?"

"Do you really want to know?" Jordan asked.

"Yes." Tavish didn't care about the sex, he wanted to know how easily the connection was made. Jordan nodded, as though hearing the other man's thought and who was Tavish to say he couldn't.

"No one," Jordan said. "No one else saw more than the horizon line. It was ... disappointing, to say the least."

Tavish stood up which took longer than he thought it should. Jordan rubbed down his arms, but did so gingerly. He was still hurting, then.

"Thanks," Tavish said. "For that. Thanks."

Jordan laughed, humorously. He was still shaking as he dressed. Tavish wiped his belly off as best he could and got dressed as well.

Even with his clothes on, Jordan still looked like road kill.

"It will pass, by tomorrow," Tavish said.

"This isn't my first time," Jordan said. His shoulders quivered, but he stopped laughing.

"Is it always this bad?"

"Each and every time," Jordan said. The air was thin again, and Jordan was having difficulty breathing. Tavish realized he was, too. His chest was tight with the burn from the dry air.

Tavish stared at him. He wanted to know why Jordan would keep doing the withdrawal. It would be easy for him to go from new package to new package. Patrice's government recommended it as a coping skill. And yet Jordan still suffered. "We should go back," Tavish said. The bad air was probably making Jordan's body hurt more.

Jordan nodded and Tavish led him away. They were shivering now, both of them, but Jordan was too far gone to drive. Tavish had driven transport before, but it hadn't been as fancy as Jordan's. The principle was the same, however. He put Jordan in the passenger side and went around the vehicle. Starting the transport up with the most difficult part, but he managed it, the control panel coming to life with reassuring green light. He drove them back to the site, slowly. They weren't supposed to be seen together, but since he didn't know where Jordan lived, back to Tavish's apartment they went.

* * * *

Rees looked down from the formal balcony. Jordan's transport inched along the crowded street at an RPM it had probably never even idled at. "They're together again," he announced.

"Of course they are," Patrice said. "They're like meaty bones to each other." Rees looked at him. Patrice was always saying stupid things like that, that meant nothing.

Rees kept his face dubiously blank. "So shall I have him brought up?"

"No," Patrice said.

He stopped, turned and stared before remembering himself. "But Sir. He deliberately disobeyed you."

"He is not the fly I'm trying to catch. It is enough that he has disobeyed me. That insult will be dealt with in time."

Fox moved to the balcony, silent as a ghost, and brushed past Rees like he didn't exist. In the young man's pretty head, Rees probably didn't. He took Patrice's hands. "Let's go to bed," he whispered and glared at Rees before he could do anything more than open his mouth.

"If you will excuse me," Patrice said. "Apparently I am being summoned."

Rees looked down at the transport still carefully making its way down the road. "You trust too much," he said.

"I'm glad you think so. See yourself out."

The transport had finally turned the corner. Patrice had gone, and Rees sat down to wait. He trusted Fox less than he trusted anyone in Patrice's circle. It wasn't just that junkies were always for sale. Rees did well with junkies. He liked to

give them what they needed, and exploited their appreciation later. He'd tried that the first week, giving Fox a whole box from his new shipment of Launch, but Fox had given him a look of pure disgust and stalked off.

Rees had thought, briefly, of telling all his suppliers not to sell to Fox as punishment, but a withdrawing lover of Patrice might cause waves Rees didn't want.

Fox came out of the bedroom a few hours later, bare-chested. He headed straight for the balcony, Launch stick loose in his hands. He waved the stick for it to catch fire. He leaned over the railing, flicking his ash into the street below. Rees stepped up behind him, and although the hand holding the cigarette hesitated for a second, he brought it back up to his lips again.

"Is there something I can help you with, Mr. Rees?" Fox asked, not turning around.

"No," Rees asked.

Fox turned around. The Launch's smoke was so cloying it was hard to breathe around it. "Are you sure about that, Mr. Rees?"

Rees turned away and left the apartment.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Four

Jordan was heavy, but Tavish managed to get him up the lift and down into his apartment. He studiously ignored his time display's crisp blue digits, but his body told him how few hours he had before he had to wake up again.

Jordan dragged his heels without saying a word as Tavish tried to lead him past the arch to his bedroom to the couch. Tavish took him to the bed but they were both fairly dusty from the ground, so he started beating Jordan clean first. That woke him up, and Jordan tried to fight him off until he realized what Tavish was doing. "I'll take them off! I will! Dammit, stop hitting me!"

"Whoops," Tavish said. He backed away and stripped off his clothes. As they fell, a cloud of dust rose around them. Being naked was only half the battle. The grit had worked its way into their skin. Showers in the evening cost credits and Tavish's money hadn't been transferred to Midnight yet. So Jordan keyed his numbers in and the shower began.

There must have been something about Jordan's code, because the water seemed hotter, the time longer, and the soap dispenser was a hell of a lot more generous than it ever had been before.

"I use double credits," Jordan told him, then turned around. Wet, his skin was a lot less sensitive. Jordan arched his back when Tavish began scrubbing off the grit from the back of his neck. The curls should have been snarled, but they were soft and easy to control.

Tavish moved down to Jordan's back, the silky shine of his skin made it almost lickable. Tavish restrained himself, however hard it was. Jordan leaned against the wall on his elbows and at Tavish's gentle prodding, spread his legs apart. He shivered, but not in the bad way. Tavish worked out the knots between Jordan's shoulder blades with his thumbs. The shower cream warmed between his fingers and Jordan leaned further towards Tavish. Tavish carefully put his arm around Jordan's lower belly, supporting both their weight. "Is this good?" he asked. Jordan turned his head and nodded. Tavish dispensed more lotion and let his fingers slide down his stomach.

"And does this bother you?"

"Not anymore, no," Jordan said. He turned his head away and arched his back, spreading his legs a little more. It was an awkward angle, but Tavish could still slide his fingers inside. Jordan tensed. "Too much?" Tavish asked.

"No. I'm ... it's good."

The hot water ran over both of them, but it still wasn't as hot as Jordan was inside. Just then, the water cut off. Jordan howled. Tavish didn't know Jordan had the sound in him. Jordan straightened, cursing some more, and stalked off to key in his information, but the box had locked.

"Blast the rotting thing," Jordan shouted from the other room. "There aren't any more refills."

Tavish got out of the shower and grabbed two towels. He blotted that which he could off Jordan's skin and was careful not to rub. They kissed.

"Bed?"

Jordan nodded. They folded the sheets back, and Jordan got in first and knelt on the mattress. He looked over his shoulder. "Coming?"

Jordan took out the lubrication spray, and the hiss Tavish made was louder than the dispenser. "I will need to touch you for some of this."

"I get that," Jordan said. "I'm sure you'll keep it to a minimum."

Tavish tried. He slid his cock inside, slowly, and let Jordan get used to the feeling bit by bit. Jordan leaned forward, against a shelf over the head of the bed, bracing himself with his forearms. Tavish had underestimated how tight Jordan was. He held Jordan's hips with his fingertips and the spray made it easier. Together they found a rhythm that wasn't too rough.

Jordan groaned, and a new sheen of sweat spread over his shoulders.

Tavish pulled him back delicately with the slightest amount of pressure. Jordan groaned again. It felt pretty fine from where Tavish was, as well.

"Harder," Jordan said, not looking at him. Tavish tried. It was easier if he put one foot up on the bed, to fuck Jordan with short thrusts without touching him as much as possible. He picked up the pace, and Jordan found the new rhythm Tavish had established. Jordan left one hand on the shelf, and placed his other over Tavish's. And that made it even better. Tavish had already come once, and he had no idea how fried Jordan's nerve endings were.

But there was no tension. It was quite different than it was with Royal. With only the sound of their breathing, their heartbeats and the occasional grunt or groan as the right spot was hit or just missed, Tavish didn't feel his muscles tire. Tavish could have kept up the pace all night, but as the tension built and the sounds from Jordan became more and more needy, the rhythm broke. Tavish's testicles began to ache, sweetly. He needed the feeling of release, and to be allowed to let go but he wanted to push himself just the extra second for Jordan. His body was too hot, his joints hurt and the delay brought him delicious feelings that peaked higher and higher each second.

Jordan called out, letting go of Tavish's hand to steady himself again on the shelf, then he reared back, the control it took surprising Tavish. Jordan found Tavish's hips, gripping on to them hard as he drove himself back down on Tavish's cock. Desensitized skin became sensitive again, and Tavish came, forgetting himself in the tight rolls of pleasure. He could rest his head on Jordan's shoulder, and Jordan's back pressed against his heaving chest.

After a moment, or a couple hours, time no longer was linear just then, they disentangled. Tavish's muscles and joints protested the sudden movement; he could only imagine how Jordan was feeling.

Jordan laughed. "I'm sore, too. But in the best possible way."

"I didn't say anything," Tavish said.

Jordan collapsed against the bed. "Yes, you did. You just didn't open your mouth to form the words."

Spaces Escapes
by Angela Fiddler, Jason Edding

After all they'd been through, accepting the telepathic Q and A period was such a small stone throw. He nodded. "Stay," he said, instead of wrestling with the obvious any more.

"Try to get me to leave," Jordan mumbled, already claiming Tavish's pillow, the good one Tavish had brought with him across a million miles. "I dare you."

Tavish banged on the wall, turning off the overhead lights, and set his alarm in the dark. Two and a half hours sleep was better than none at all, he knew from years of experience. He lay down, too, and Jordan curled up behind his shoulder blades.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Five

When Tavish woke up again to the alarm, Jordan didn't stir. Tavish quickly turned off the beeping and sat up. The level of exhaustion he was feeling was familiar, and he'd thrived on less. His only regret was leaving Jordan, but since Jordan would probably still be asleep for hours, it seemed cruel to even think of waking him just to tell him he was leaving.

Still, when he turned back after dressing in the dim light the alarm had set off to imitate dawn, Jordan had opened his eyes and was watching him. "You're leaving?"

"Work," Tavish said. "Besides, this is my room. I think the more important statement is the fact that you are staying."

"Am I?" Jordan asked. He sprawled further, encroaching into the warm spot Tavish had left behind. His hair was all flat on one side, and his eyelashes seemed somehow longer on his pale cheeks.

"As long as you want," Tavish said, his throat suddenly tight.

"Good," Jordan said, and closed his eyes again. "Then I suppose you can go."

"Thank you," Tavish said, but Jordan ignored him. He was snoring again before Tavish closed the door behind him.

* * * *

Jordan woke up several hours later. The apartment had been set to natural light, so it was very bright by the time he

surfaced again. He quickly disabled that, preferring the dim light of dawn regardless of the actual time.

His body still hurt, but the sheet that touched his hip and shoulder no longer felt like the hardened clay he set land-speed records on. When he stretched, his muscles felt tight and abused. Next time he was going to have Tavish stop and reapply the spray halfway through.

Once the blood started moving around inside him, the need hit him, and he sat back down. There was a package of modified Dose in his jacket, somewhere in the dim room. Thomas had denatured it, but it wasn't completely toothless. He made a face, but left his jacket where it was. He wondered if Tavish ever thought his brother had been paying attention on all those trips with his father. He didn't think he could take as much Dose as he needed in order for Rees to think he'd been broken if Thomas hadn't worked his magic.

Jordan found Tavish's player, looped the headphones around his head, and scrolled through the roll now displayed on the wall in front of him. It wasn't bad, a bit softer than his usual taste, but it was easy enough to pick a playlist that could be listened to.

His appetite came back with a snarling roar. Jordan headed for the small kitchen. Tavish hadn't had a chance to restock his fridge and the water he grabbed only took the edge off. He turned to go back to the bedroom, planning on dressing and bringing back enough water for both of them, when he heard the door open and close.

Jordan turned around. Rees stood with his arms crossed. "Well, young master Patrice. You almost look human."

Jordan forced himself to grin. His face hurt from the strain. "I know. Better luck next time. Maybe then you'll have permission to carve parts off me."

"One can only hope." Rees was smiling too, but he wasn't joking either. It had been a stroke of pure genius on Rees' part that he had been the one who had carved into Jordan's back. It wouldn't mean anything if Jordan told his father; Patrice would think it was Jordan trying to destroy Rees and Rees' reputation. Patrice did not think it was possible for his head of security to be disloyal, and Jordan knew that would be his first, and last mistake.

"Your father wishes to see you," Rees said. He licked his lips. Jordan stared back, flatly. The denatured Dose gave him impressions from everyone, not just Tavish, and he hated the impressions he got from Rees, of Rees remembering how much he'd enjoyed hurting Jordan. He shook his head and tried to clear it.

"Of course," he said, like everything was just fine. "Tell him I will be with him as soon as I go home and change."

"You're going now," Rees said.

And that was that. Tavish had done a fairly good job at beating the dust off his clothes, but the silt that remained scratched him, which was just fine. He wouldn't have to remember to itch as part of his cover. "Lead the way."

* * * *

At least Patrice still had food out. Jordan brushed past Rees and threw himself down on the empty chair across from his father. Rees had led the way to the formal dining room

area. When Patrice had first moved into the huge apartment, Jordan had been five or six. Before that, Patrice had just been another high-ranking civil servant, and before that, the memories Jordan had were fleeting.

The spread Patrice had laid out for Tavish the day before must've put a dent into his finances, or at the very least he didn't think Jordan was that important. Not that Jordan cared. He ripped open a photo package with his teeth, ignoring the real bread and cheese and gobbled down the soy protein bar. It was better on his stomach when he was coming down.

"Hey, Dad," Jordan said, once he'd washed the bar down with water. "You summoned?"

"Are you high?" Patrice asked. But it was a perfunctory question, as though he were inquiring of the weather.

"Not yet," Jordan said. "Why?"

"What if I told you that Thomas Pan has been sighted?"

Jordan kept his face blank. "Has he?"

Patrice said nothing. Jordan kept his face still.

Patrice looked at him, coldly. "Would you like to try one more smartass remark?"

Jordan looked down. He had threatened before that if Patrice ever thought of taking away his transport, Jordan would disappear. And he meant it. Patrice needed him to be visible, and Jordan needed a method to blow off steam. It was the only bargaining tool they both had, and they both used it.

Jordan knew he didn't have a chance of out-staring his father, so he gave up trying. He dropped his gaze down to his

hands on the desk. "So what is it you want?" he asked, before he was threatened with something new.

"A trade."

Jordan glanced up, surprised. Patrice had stood, and was pacing again. The smell of rich coffee followed him in his wake.

"For what?"

"Permission to see your doctor."

"Could you stop me?"

"Do you really want to see me try?" Patrice asked.

"Why do you hate me?" Jordan asked. The question came up before he could stop it. But he didn't take it back. Eye contact bordered on another challenge, but he didn't look away.

"Why are you such a disappointment?" Patrice shot back.

There was no answer to that. Jordan shrugged, conceding the point. "So I can see my doctor. What do you want in return?"

"A bright face beside me."

Jordan stood. "What?"

"It's time you stopped playing games. I need you as my successor."

Jordan blinked. "You can't be serious," he said. He'd spent over a year trying to make his public image as useless as possible.

Patrice smiled again, all but reading his mind. "None of that will be remembered. The cameras will show what I want them to show. They always do."

"You think it's just that simple? You tell people what to believe and they'll believe it?"

"Yes," Patrice said.

And Jordan knew he was probably correct. The city was too crowded, and the workday was too long. Patrice controlled the air they breathed. Everything else was less important than that.

"All right. Fine. Just leave Tavish alone."

"Done," Patrice smiled. "Betray me again, and I'll destroy him, first."

"Of course you will," Jordan said. Patrice dismissed him.

Jordan turned and walked three steps away before turning back. "People are getting sick outside of the mine," he said.

Patrice stood up. He walked around the table and stopped just shy of where Jordan was. "There is no proof of that. There has never been any proof of that."

"There has never been any proof of that because you never looked for it. I'm telling you, it isn't just the miners getting sick." Jordan felt how tired Patrice was over Jordan's continual accusations. Jordan was under strict orders to never mention the fact that Rees was out to destroy Patrice again or he would face more prison time. If Jordan had been completely removed from the situation, he would have found the irony funny.

"You are getting paranoid, Jordan. It's not your fault, and I don't blame you. It's true that half the things you say are treasonous, but we both know you're not yourself. So it's really up to you. You can get off the Dose and be a respected member of my Cabinet, or you can continue your frivolous

lifestyle to do whatever you want, including your sweet doctor, if you allow me to use your image as a caring prodigal son who has returned."

"Those are my only choices?"

"They have always been your only choices."

"Frivolous lifestyle it is." Jordan grabbed the bread off the table and stood up. "But answer one question?"

"What?" Patrice asked.

"Why do you need me now?"

Patrice smiled. "Bailey Jahanna is on the way in tomorrow, you know. He'll be looking for a successor. I want him to select you."

Jordan hesitated. "There is no way he's going to choose me."

"Midnight is making a profit. The home office will choose whomever I want them to."

"But I don't want to be your successor," Jordan said.

"That, Jordan, is irrelevant. You will be."

"Can I go now?" Jordan asked.

Patrice nodded.

Jordan made it to the lift before Fox stopped him. He wore his leather pants, and a loose white shirt and his skin tone just about matched it. His hair was loose again. Jordan wanted to brush it off his forehead.

They'd been friends when Fox had first come to Midnight. Fox's air system should have been hailed as a modern marvel. Patrice had wanted him and Thomas, of course, had hated him on sight.

The design had been flawless, and yet Patrice had still ruined his career. He had gotten Fox, through Rees, addicted to Launch and cut the budget and time necessary to complete the job by half.

He also bought out Fox's contract for the rest of the year and systematically destroyed Fox's confidence and ability to cope. The result was the pale shadow that remained. And Jordan hated his father for it. If Patrice or Rees had succeeded in his attempt to break Jordan, then he would have been the same pale wraith.

"Is it...?" Jordan didn't say Thomas' name. Fox didn't answer him until Jordan had stepped into the lift.

Fox hugged him. Jordan felt Fox's long fingers slide into his shirt. Fox pulled his transport keycard out and replaced it with another. "Don't be a stranger," Fox whispered, and kissed him.

Jordan nodded. Rees was watching him from the entrance of the dining room. Suspicion rolled off him, like something hot and prickly.

Jordan kissed Fox back, staring back at Rees blankly.

Tavish was working with Royal in the lab. Jordan let himself in; his ID badge didn't have many doors that it didn't open. Not since his incarceration. It had cost him half his stipend from his father to find a hacker off-world who could not only hack the existing codes, but come up with an algorithm for breaking any future codes, but it had been worth it. Royal looked up at him first. Jordan nodded at him, and was glared at. He supposed he deserved it.

"Where is Tavish?"

Royal didn't answer, just glanced behind him to the work room, and went back to his slides. Jordan left him and continued on.

Tavish had a hologram of a blood sample up, and was standing in the middle of it so that half of it displayed on his white shirt. "Tavish?"

"This blood is oxygen rich," Tavish said.

Jordan blinked.

"All the blood is oxygen rich, right up until the very end. And yet the organs were starving for it. The organism must be doing something to the chemical chain." Tavish didn't seem to notice that Jordan hadn't answered him. He began pacing back and forth. Jordan opened his mouth, but then closed it as Tavish looked at him again. Jordan knew he wasn't seeing him. His dark hair was still neat, but had grooves from where he'd raked it with his fingernails.

"Tavish, I need to speak with you."

It was Tavish's turn to blink. "Jordan," he said, like coming out of a stupor. "Did you say something?"

"Yes."

Tavish nodded. "There's something happening with the bond between the oxygen and the hemoglobin. It's not normal."

"I see," Jordan said. "It's not that important." He picked up a stylus and a scrap sheet of paper that had a test result on it. He wrote, in scrawling letters. "It's really important that you come with me."

Tavish began to shake his head, but then hesitated. "What do you want?"

"Dinner tonight. I know a place in the lower city."

"The lower city has restaurants?" Tavish asked, while writing "Where?"

"The lower city has everything," Jordan said. Tavish exhaled. He glanced down to his wrist, checked the time, and then rubbed his face. "Okay. Let me run some things down with Royal. What time?"

"As soon as you can. I'm starving."

Tavish nodded and went to where Royal was working. "Can you run the test results one more time anyway to see if the abnormality is still there?"

Royal glanced behind to Jordan, and quirked his lips. "My educational background states that there's a high probability I can. Would you like me to?"

Tavish looked at him.

Royal rolled his eyes. "Of course I can. What time will you return?"

"I may make it an early night," Tavish said.

Royal snorted.

"I'm serious," Tavish said.

Royal stared at him. "You really are, aren't you?" He glanced back to Jordan. "So, it really is serious."

Tavish looked behind him, too. Jordan hung back, but couldn't stop the curl of pleasure in his stomach when Tavish smiled at him. He found himself smiling back.

"You both deserve each other. I'll finish up."

"Thanks, Royal."

Royal only waved the two of them off.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Six

Jordan didn't lie. He did take Tavish out to a restaurant, and despite the drug dealers on the corner and the pretty boys hawking their wares, the interior looked about the same as any of the eateries outside of the university. The chairs didn't match, two or three could have come out of Patrice's apartment, half of them from an alleyway somewhere. The tables were all different sizes too, but the plastic red covers over them were clean. The meat, of whatever origin, sizzled on the spit and the flat bread was soft.

The owner obviously knew Jordan, who started piling food into two take out containers. Jordan paid, and then opened up his transport. An hour or so later, they were sitting back in the badlands, watching the sun begin to set. The sky was a ribbon of pink and orange, and the indigo light starting to grow was as brilliant as an ink stain. Tavish hadn't thought he was hungry, but after all the time traveling with the smell of the food on his lap, he dug in as ravenously as Jordan.

When he'd eaten as much as he could, he sat back. Jordan put his hand on Tavish's lower belly, stroking his way down to his cock. "Do you miss your father?" Jordan asked.

Tavish turned his head towards him. The hand over his upper thigh was hot. "Of course I do," Tavish said. "I just really didn't let myself think about it too much. I don't think anyone could have and kept sane."

Jordan undid the button of Tavish's jeans, sliding the zipper down, slowly. "It just about destroyed Thomas."

"I remember they fought a lot. He reminded Dad a lot of Mom, I think. They spent a lot of time butting heads."

"Do you remember your mother?"

"Of course," Tavish said. He'd been eight when they'd come to Midnight. "When she'd gotten sick, and the opportunity in the company came up, they both decided it was what was supposed to happen. What about you?"

"What about me?"

"Do you remember your mother?"

Jordan laughed. "I never had a mother," he said. "I mean, I suppose I must have, but I was bought and paid for by my father. I'm sure the surrogate meant nothing to him."

"Let me guess, you and Patrice had a talk?"

"Oh, yeah," Jordan said. "My bill of sale was waved in front of my face. The bigwigs are coming up tomorrow to appoint a successor, and Patrice wants me to behave for them."

"I thought Midnight had elections," he said.

"Oh, they do," Jordan said. "But if you think the outcomes haven't been fixed, you're fooling yourself."

"Will you be the successor?" Tavish asked.

"If it keeps you safe, I will."

"Really?" Tavish asked. He looked up. The color was draining from the sky, taking with it the contours of the ground. His lungs were adjusting to the weak air, and if he could have spent the rest of his life out here with Jordan, especially if his hand remained over his cock, he would.

"What do you think?" Jordan asked. He stretched out along Tavish so that his groin was aligned with Tavish's hip, and the heat radiated from him.

"I think you would," Tavish said. "I would, if I were you."

"Good." Jordan kissed him, and licked Tavish down his throat.

"How good?" Tavish asked. Jordan kissed across his clavicle, over his shirt, and then downwards to his belly.

"Very good," Jordan murmured, lips still on Tavish's skin, when he heard a throat clear over him.

They both looked up. Something huge blocked the moon. In a colony where the food was carefully rationed outside of the black market, the man was massive. His arms were as broad as Tavish's thighs and his belly jutted over his belt making the material of his shirt stretch beyond its best intentions.

Jordan's eyes narrowed. So did the man's. Tavish looked back and forth between the two, trying to read the story, but then a second figure broke away from the shadows. "Gibb, stop it," Thomas said.

Tavish stood up, doing his jeans up as he scrambled to his feet. "Thomas?" Tavish asked.

Thomas didn't look at him, staring down at his shoes instead. Tavish wasn't going to have any of that. He grabbed his brother, tightly. Thomas fought him, just for a second, trying to get away, and then gave up. He grabbed Tavish hard enough that Tavish had a hard time breathing.

Tavish eventually pulled away, smoothing Thomas' hair. He'd filled out a lot from the surly teenager that Tavish had left, and he'd broken his nose somewhere along the line, but the soft brown eyes hadn't changed. "You finished growing up," Tavish said.

"Tavish, I'm sorry. I was so stupid."

"I'm sorry I left you."

Thomas rubbed his face, just like Tavish did when he was upset. Tavish touched his face again. He was tired, Tavish saw, but it was more than that. He touched Thomas' forehead, then put his hand over Thomas' chest. On his next exhale, Tavish felt the crackling feeling in Thomas' lungs. "Jordan says you're working on a cure."

"I'm trying," Tavish said. "You..." he couldn't put it in a sentence.

Thomas continued on, ignoring Tavish's unasked question. "I've been looking into the treatment, with what dad taught us. If I'd known you'd be here..."

"I can bring what you need to him," Jordan said, quietly.

"Thomas," Gibb said, voice low in warning. "We have to go."

Thomas nodded. He looked down to his wrist strap. "The satellite is going to be sweeping over soon."

"Fox needed to tell you not to try anything," Jordan said, speaking to Gibb, but only looking at Thomas. "Patrice will be far too heavily guarded when Bailey Jahanna is here. Forget the statement it is going to make, it's not going to be possible."

"Convenient, isn't it? When the master's pet is the one warning you?"

Jordan grabbed Gibb by the shirt, pushing him back so hard he stumbled and fell on his ass. "Fox's putting things on the line you don't even have to offer up," he snarled. "You don't want to be ignoring his advice."

"Gibb won't," Thomas said, breaking away from Tavish in order to pick the big man up. "And tell Fox that we always appreciate any news he can share."

Gibb said nothing until Thomas elbowed him. "What he said," he spat out.

"See? We're all friends here," Thomas said, but still stood between Jordan and Gibb. Tavish went to him, and squeezed Thomas' hand one more time. He still wanted to ask how long Thomas has been sick, or whether he'd been coughing up blood yet, but just as he opened his mouth, Thomas shook his head.

"Come on, Thomas. Where Jordan goes, Patrice's goons always follow," Gibb snapped.

"Get over yourself," Jordan snapped, running interference for Tavish automatically. "My father's goons are everywhere. Do you need me to explain about statistical probabilities?"

"We have to go," Gibb glared back, fierce.

"We know," Thomas and Tavish said, together. Thomas pulled away, using his free hand to stifle a cough, and Tavish watched until he was completely gone before turning to Jordan.

Gibb said Thomas' name again, and they both melted back into the darkness.

"How long has he been sick?" Tavish asked Jordan, once the flashing light passed over from horizon to horizon.

"A while. He's been fighting it."

"You could have told me," Tavish said, trying not to let too much accusation enter his voice.

"I could have," Jordan agreed. "But believe me when I tell you it was the very last thing I wanted to do."

Tavish exhaled. "Thank you."

Jordan put his hand over Tavish's shoulder, but didn't tell him he was welcome. They were half way back to the city before Tavish spoke again.

"Who was the other guy?" Tavish asked.

Jordan told him who Gibb was, and of their history. Tavish tapped his finger against his lips. "I don't trust him."

"I don't think anyone does," Jordan said.

"Let's head back."

Tavish nodded.

* * * *

Jordan had barely put his head down after Tavish had left for the hospital the next morning when there was a bang on the door. He tried to ignore it, knowing it wasn't for him, but the banging continued. He put the pillow over his head, which dulled some of the noise if not the vibration, and the next thing he knew, the door had been opened. Guardsmen poured in, all wearing the uniform of Patrice's personal guard, but it was of course Rees who stepped through the bedroom door.

Jordan rolled onto his back. "Go away, Rees. I'm allowed to be here. Patrice said it was all right."

Rees' sneer turned his otherwise bland face into something quite evil. Jordan kept his mind blank, not wanting to even think of the one-way mirror in the room he'd been questioned in. Watching the low-tech knife cutting into him hadn't been the worst part. The worst part was imagining Rees' face

behind the mirror, watching Jordan hurt. They both knew Rees had enjoyed it.

"I'm here to collect you. The bargain you've made is due. You're supposed to report to your father's people for wardrobe consulting and then you've got several appointments with him. The rehearsal dinner for the CEO of the company is this afternoon, and if you miss it, he will skin you."

Jordan closed his eyes, his body needing sleep, but he pushed himself up. "Tell him I'll be there in ten minutes."

Rees stared at him impassively as though he hadn't spoken.

"Ten minutes," Jordan said. He pushed into Rees, using whatever part of him that tapped in the memory of the planet. He didn't do it very often, because it gave him a splitting headache, but when he did, whomever he pushed usually backed down. It surprised him, then, when Rees pushed back. Jordan had never felt anyone try to counter him. He stepped back, surprised, then pushed with all his might. It was Rees' turn to stumble, and when he did, he brought his hand up to his mouth and dabbed away blood. He stared down at it as if in shock, and then back to Jordan, begrudgingly.

"Ten minutes," Rees said.

Jordan nodded. Rees stepped backwards out of the room and turned, taking his men with him. Jordan waited for them to go, had a fast shower that was as good as a nap, and dressed in whatever clothes he found from Tavish's dresser.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Seven

When Tavish returned from the hospital that night, Jordan was still gone. It occurred to him, suddenly, that he had no way of contacting Jordan at all, and the idea of spending the night alone in his apartment was suddenly a disappointment, where before he'd always viewed it as a great reward. He sat down to work on the files he'd brought home, but the dim light from the single desk lamp and the complete quiet got the best of him. He put his head down, thinking it would be only for a minute, but when he woke up, hours later, the lamp had turned itself off and the room was too still. His clothes were stuck to his legs and the small of his back, and he wiped off the corner of his mouth with his fist.

The light over his desk was still on and his cheek felt creased from the folders he'd been sleeping on. "Jordan?" Tavish called, turning around. The apartment was still dark and no one answered, but Tavish swore he'd heard the door open and close.

Tavish stood up. "Who's here?" he called, and banged the wall. The overhead lights clicked on, and Tavish jerked. Rees stood less than two feet away.

"You don't knock?" Tavish snapped, angry at himself for showing the amount of fear he had.

Rees didn't answer, but his slick smile didn't change. He crossed his arms over his chest. "You failed to report to your first progress report."

"It's not until tomorrow," Tavish said, crossing his arms as well. Rees was invading his space deliberately. Tavish briefly wondered what would happen if he tried to force the issue. Rees wanted him to react so he could hurt him. "I have it marked in my calendar."

"Not Patrice's. Mine. And you are late for it."

"And what is it that Patrice's assistant thinks that he needs to know before Patrice does?" Tavish asked.

"I need to know everything before Patrice does," Rees snarled. "What have you found?"

"Nothing," Tavish said. "I'm sure it's airborne, but that is nothing you haven't already been mostly sure of. And I'm not going to tell you anything else before I tell Patrice. I don't answer to you."

"You only think you don't. Jordan's been a good friend of yours since you've been here, hasn't he? You've spent some good times together?"

"What do you want to hear? You obviously think you know the answer."

Rees moved to the desk to flip through Tavish's papers. Tavish would have blocked him, but Rees gave him another warning look and Tavish backed away, and hit Jordan squarely in the chest. Jordan put his hands on his shoulders. "It's okay," he murmured, softly. "I'll take care of this."

Tavish was quite glad to step back this once.

"He may be a good ... companion, but I wouldn't get too attached," Rees said, softly. His eyes were cold.

"Oh really?" Jordan asked. "And why is that?"

Rees jerked. The stab of vicious pleasure Tavish felt at the man's discomfort was entirely disproportionate. Rees glared, but after the first look of surprise, his face had gone back to the same blandness it had always had. "Oh. Jordan. I didn't see you there."

"Obviously," Jordan said, voice just as bland. "If you're done poking through the good Doctor's things, I think I'll be taking him now."

"Of course," Rees said. "I'll have my men photograph what I didn't get a chance to look at."

Jordan shrugged. He turned his back to the man, casually, but from where Tavish stood he could see the tension running in rivers under Jordan's skin. His jaw, dusted with the shadow of the late night stubble, clenched. If Rees was particularly observant, and of that Tavish didn't have much doubt that he was, he could have heard Jordan's teeth grind.

Rees was oblivious to Jordan's presence, somehow. Tavish still heard the muscle in the hall. How Jordan had gotten past them without raising the alarm was beyond him. Jordan crossed his arms.

Rees wagged a short, stubby finger at him. "Don't try to be brave, Doctor. It doesn't fit your personality profile."

Tavish felt his teeth clench. "What do you want from me?"

"I want your assurance that you will obey me."

"Obey you? I'm not a dog. Get out of my room."

"Or you will do what, exactly?" Rees asked, lightly, but his eyes were flat and reptilian.

"Tell my father," Jordan said. "Are you ready for the ride, Doctor?"

"Yes," Tavish said, but he couldn't shake the way Rees was staring at him. Turning his back and walking to the lift was about the bravest thing he had done in his life. Jordan's hand on his arm didn't relax until they were in the transport and flying away from the Alpha Site.

The air on the dune was cooler than over the mining area. The sun had set, but away from the Alpha Site the sand around them gave off a luminescent glow. The glassed in dome reflected the light back to them like a buffed copper mirror, and the forest of rock that was being mined reached for the bright moon hanging just overhead with dark, bare fingers of branches.

Patrice had been busy indeed. The huge hollow formations jutting out of the sand were being ground down and processed on the spot. In the day, the rocks were bright orange, red and gold. They made up a glistening forest, and when the wind blew through them the music produced could be heard from where they were.

"Patrice will take them all," Tavish said. "And then what?"

"He's learned how to clone Arochos. It's only the calcium it creates from the rock he needs," Jordan said, and started down the dune

Tavish followed him, almost slipping once. His shoes filled with sand and formed uncomfortable lumps in them, and he heard Jordan curse beside him, sending a cascade of hard packed sand behind him.

Around the huge trees of rock the ground was hard. The rocks were slightly lumpy, and looked rough to the touch.

Tavish touched an orange one. It hummed with the others. This rock was marked with a three.

"It's one of the next to go," Jordan said. "The dome's going to move in a month."

"It doesn't make any sense." Tavish turned to look at Jordan. "Arochos is completely harmless. At no stage of its development is it remotely dangerous."

"There has to be something Dad didn't tell you. The company is threatening to withhold more miners until there's a cure or the problem has been resolved. That's part of the reason Jahanna is coming down."

"No. He didn't tell me that." Tavish looked to the dome. The wind shifted and it brought the sound of breaking glass "Come." His lungs hurt from breathing the raw air. "I want to see the plant."

"No one but contracted men are allowed. Dad's strict order. I'm sure you'll need his express permission to go in there."

"You're joking." Tavish stared at him.

"As far as Patrice knows, only the miners are sick. It's a quarantine issue. The plant is treated, the vehicles they drive are conditioned and they are only allowed certain contact with the Alpha Site. The air is scrubbed, but they are still getting sick."

"It has to be something here." Tavish felt weak. The air took some getting used to, and he was obviously out of practice.

Jordan, looking serious for just a second, shook his head. "You should look for something else."

"I'm not going to overlook the obvious," Tavish told him.

Jordan looked down to the protected dome over the mine site. The miners worked in darkness, and if it wasn't for the cold air instead of the warmth, it was perfect incubation conditions.

"Say what you will about my father, but he is not a stupid man. He's had the mine scrubbed down, sanitized and rebuilt from the bolts upward. He's had the rocks analyzed down to the molecular structure. Nothing here is causing the sickness."

"You're sure about that?" Tavish asked.

Jordan smiled, though it looked sad. Tavish wished he could read Jordan better, or really, at all. The pain that the drug tried to mask was painted on his skin. Despite every warning sign, Tavish reached over and took Jordan's hand. Jordan stiffened for a second, then relaxed. "We should be getting back. I'm sure you're expected."

* * * *

Rees let himself into the workroom silently. Tavish had been expecting some sort of observation, so he wasn't really surprised. That obviously disappointed Rees somewhat.

The lab was dark. Midnight was nothing if not concerned with wasting resources. Royal had refused to work in the dark after the first evening, so Tavish was alone.

The long lab was cold in its stark metallic machines and refrigeration units, but the workroom in the back was warm and inviting. The lack of windows didn't bother him, and the only source of light was the old-fashioned lamp he'd taken

from his bedroom. It cast warm yellow licks of light on the industrial gray walls and floors.

Rees stepped into the room. "Shall we continue our conversation?" he asked in a silky voice that implied the question itself was ridiculous considering to whom he had just addressed.

"What conversation?" Tavish asked.

"The one where you were about to give me all your findings."

"I just processed the preliminary test results confirming the status of the test subjects," Tavish said, speaking slowly as though he wasn't quite sure the polysyllabic words would be understood. Two could play the tone game. "You have to understand that this isn't a matter of plugging the problem into a calculator."

"And you have to understand how important it is that you show immediate results," Rees said.

"Or?" Tavish asked. "I couldn't be the first person you've thrown at this. Black Lung has no genetic indicators, no obvious environmental causes, and no reliable test until after the victim is already infected. Patrice has every aspect of the miner's life controlled to the parts per million scale, and people are still getting sick. So tell me, if you don't see immediate results, exactly what will you do to me?"

Rees didn't answer him, but he narrowed his eyes. They were flat, like something reptilian. If he had licked his lips with a forked tongue, Tavish wouldn't have been surprised.

Instead, the main door of the lab flew open with a bang. "Doc?" Jordan called, and his voice rang on all the metal.

"Hey, Doc, you in here?"

"The workroom," Tavish called.

"And where's that?" Jordan shouted, too loud for the distance between them. His words slurred a little, and the dangerous stillness that had been in Rees had passed. He exhaled, loudly, and rolled his eyes. There was no love lost between the heir apparent and the personal assistant, then. Tavish turned away.

"Keep going. It's at the end."

A moment later Jordan all but threw himself through the second set of doors. "There you are," he said, sounding very pleased with himself. A moment later he apparently noticed Rees with an over-exaggerated double take. "Oh, Rees. Father is on the warpath. Maybe you should..." he didn't finish, like it was a huge secret as to what followed.

"Find him?" Rees finished, the silk in his voice having turned to oil.

Jordan snapped his fingers. "That's it." He grinned at Rees as though he couldn't see the animosity dripping from the man. "You should go find him. He was..." again he didn't finish, but waved his hand in a vague gesture that could have been any point on a map.

Rees rolled his eyes again and was gone. Tavish kept quiet until the sound of the second set of doors slamming. "What is Patrice on the war path about?" he asked.

Jordan slumped against the door. "I haven't seen him all day. And for most of yesterday, too, now that I think about it.

But the chances are pretty good he's currently annoyed about something right about now."

"And he needs his personal assistant."

"Personal assistant, no. Head of his personal security, yes."

"Rees?" Tavish asked. That made so much more sense.

Jordan nodded. He looked tired without the mask he had worn for Rees' benefit. Tavish had watched the news on the television; the company's men had arrived with great fanfare. He'd been right, the number of reporters that had covered the story had just been enough to make the story seem huge. Jordan had been right beside his father through the landing, the numerous handshakes and introductions had taken over an hour, and through it all, Jordan looked as though he were a puppet on strings. He stood behind the other man, dark hair and tall, wearing wraparound sunglasses.

When the sleek transport had picked them all up, the cameras had switched to the mine site visit.

Tavish took him back to his apartment, and as Tavish was getting ready for bed, he heard Jordan's heavy breathing. Tavish pushed him over so that he was more or less on his side of the bed and joined him, taking just a few seconds longer to fall asleep.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Eight

The miner, one of the strongest of the infected, lay inside, a plastic bubble over his bed. It was worse, Tavish thought, that the man didn't look wasted. Physically he could stand up and take another shift in the mine. Only his lungs were shutting down and he was drowning in the plasma that had filled them. Royal was taking another blood sample, but it would show what all the other tests have shown. Oxygen rich red blood cells that were failing to do their job.

"It has to be a chemical reaction," Royal said, once they were back in the workroom. Tavish sat down and began to reprogram the molecular measure calculations to compensate for Midnight's gravitation for the hundredth time.

"Of course it is," Tavish said. "But from what?"

"Do you want me to schedule another air quality control test?"

They had reams of paper around the room with a dozen such test results. The one thing that came back time after time is how perfectly normal the air quality was. The percentages were down to a tenth of a percent of how clean and normal the air was. Oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen and carbon dioxide. It was as close to Earth ecology as Tavish had ever been on. There was nothing else biological or otherwise in the air at all. Not at the mine site, not in the air purifier site, not in the city. Not even outside the air curtain. There was nothing in the air that could attack a healthy set of lungs.

And yet, the miners were getting sicker, and the control group was looking more and more run down. They were no closer to the solution that they were when they were circling the planet for the first time.

Once, Royal would have come over and rubbed his shoulders. Tavish hadn't explicitly told Royal that he was now in a relationship with Jordan, but then again he didn't have to. Royal just knew.

"So tell me what you want done," Royal said.

Tavish rubbed his face. He would have given anything for Jordan to appear at the door with one of his ridiculous grins and with toys. He was tired of the test results all coming back negative despite the meticulous nature of the data collection. If it wasn't for people dying, he would put the whole sickness off as a hoax.

"I don't know," Tavish said. "I'm going to check the humidifiers one more time. There has to be something added to the air. This can't be accidental."

Royal nodded. "I'll call for a guide," he said. They hadn't gone anywhere in a colony without an official escort.

"No," said Tavish. "I'll go alone this time. If something is going on, they won't have time to stop it."

Royal's fingers stopped dead on the keyboard. He looked up. "Are you sure?"

"There is something going on here," Tavish said. "And I can't shake the feeling it's deliberate. Which probably means someone is making a profit on it."

"It's a pretty far leap in the logic," Royal said, "And right now, patient 112 is sick and patient 119 isn't going to make it

past the night. Couldn't something more be learned by an autopsy?"

Tavish rubbed his face again. "We've learned all we can from the dead. We need to know how to stop it from happening in the first place."

Royal didn't look convinced. He cleared his throat. "Okay," he said. "I'll cover for you if anyone comes looking."

"Thanks, Royal." Tavish gathered his things to go.

Tavish's credits had finally arrived. He'd been notified by instant message the day before. Midnight only had the one bank in the lower part of the city. The official buildings along the side of the road were almost lost behind the kiosks selling bits of electronics, boots and all kinds of slightly suspect food. Government sponsored drug dealers selling page after page of Dose competed with drug dealers of less legal sorts. Tavish had to push his way through the mass of people to the bank. He was approached by a couple of young men, working the day out of desperation, and when they walked towards him, they staggered. They both had Launch sticks in their hands, and the burning smoke made Tavish's eyes water.

"Need a ride?" the first one asked. He had been pretty once, but his dirt brown hair was now just dirty. His eyes were just slits, and he was rubbing his lower belly. "Come on, mister."

"No, thank you," Tavish said, moving away. The second boy stood by the wall, watching through his own narrow, slitted eyes, and Tavish entered the bank and pulled the secure door closed behind him. He had to scan his retina and his fingerprint, and the machine dispensed him loose credits

in the shape of plastic coins. They didn't feel heavy enough to be real.

The two boy-toys had moved on to another mark, who seemed more interested in their wares than Tavish was. Two guardsmen moved past, took in what the boys were smoking, and ignored the infraction.

Tavish shook his head. He made his way through the throng to get to the center lane. From there, he had to wait for a transport for hire to take him to the air filtration unit.

It was outside of the Alpha Site. A pipeline carried the filtered air carved out of the western hills that provided protection against the winds. The clean air was piped at ground level to the air curtain and the air was purified twenty feet above. He and Royal had been out once, on their third day under armed guard, and the population inside the Alpha Site had sweated through the evening as the machinery had been shut down and samples were taken of every surface within the facility. The huge fans driving the conditioner were as tall as Tavish and the filtration unit cleaned the air to the micron level. The residual heat from the cooling system baked Tavish's skin. It had taken them over an hour to collect everything, and then all day yesterday to run the tests, and they'd gotten nothing but negative test results.

The foreman was a short man whose face was perpetually shiny no matter how cool the control room was. When Tavish announced himself at the gate, the foreman himself came out to meet him. "Mr. Sanders," Tavish said, as they shook hands. "If you would be so kind, I'd like to take another look around."

"There is no way we can shut down the system again," Sanders said, his round face honestly apologetic. "People need their fresh air."

"I understand that," Tavish said. "I want to go in and take samples with the machines running."

Sanders looked hesitant, just for a second, then shrugged. "We can let you inside, I suppose, if you stay inside the marked perimeters?"

"I can do that," Tavish said. "Thank you."

Sanders nodded. They came up the stairs together, and Sanders opened the second blue door that led into the machine room. Tavish went in.

The heat, with the machines running full bore, was like an inferno. He kept inside the yellow lines clearly marked between the filtration, the fans and the conditioners.

He took air samples in front of the filtration unit, and then stared down at the huge circular fans nine-feet below the low safety fence. Nothing was out of the ordinary. He moved away from the equipment, and started to take random swabs of the cave walls. He'd just taken a step along the back wall when he felt the barest hint of a cool breeze.

He stopped, dead. They wouldn't have felt anything the day before with the machines still, but the pull of the fans made it obvious. He used his fingers to find the cracks in the wall of a very well concealed passageway and a card reader slit. He turned around, and went back to where Sanders waited at the door for him.

"I'm going to need the small door in the back to be opened," Tavish said.

Sanders shook his head. "I think you need to talk to Mr. Rees," Sanders said, and then refused to answer any more of Tavish's questions. Sanders disappeared into the control room. Tavish went back inside the machine room.

He made his way back to the fan, the coolest part of the room, and waited.

He didn't have to wait very long. Rees cleared his throat right behind him, and Tavish turned. He moved too quickly for how hot the room was, and he was momentarily dizzy. He windmilled his arms, trying to find purchase, but for a terrifying second, he was falling backwards.

But Rees grabbed his shirt before he could fall into the whirling blades. Tavish got his feet under him, exhaling sharply, but Rees didn't let him go. Tavish put his hand over Rees' still knotted in his shirt, but didn't try to pull himself free. He swallowed, not knowing what to say, and Rees smiled at him. "A thank you will be sufficient."

"Thank you," Tavish said, dutifully. This close, there was no mistaking the smell of Dose on Rees' breath.

"Don't mention it." Rees said. He smiled again, wolfishly, and let Tavish go.

"The door back there," Tavish said, feeling as though he were falling again, despite standing on firm ground. The way Rees was staring at him wasn't helping much. "It isn't in the specs."

"No. It isn't." Someone must have called Rees a lot sooner than the foreman. It hadn't been more than a couple minutes. He wore the same lab coat and overalls as the rest of the workmen. The hairnet in his perfect hair looked like silken

threads. "There is nothing in the room that requires your attention."

"I still need testing done," Tavish said.

Rees sucked his teeth, sounding annoyed and disappointed at the same time. "That might compromise some security protocol."

"This door isn't sealed, and it blows directly into the air purifier. I need to get in there and run some tests."

Rees smiled, baring his teeth. "You think you've cracked it, haven't you? You think you've found your solution?"

"Just open the door." Tavish crossed his arms. After it no longer mattered, he added, "Please."

"Well, since you have asked so nicely, I'm just going to have to let you in."

Tavish waited. Rees took out his identification tag, and slid it into the card reader that Tavish had found.

The smell hit Tavish first. It was antiseptic, but old school as though it had been scrubbed down with bleach. The room revealed was in total darkness, but Rees waved his hand in front of a panel and three huge lights came on one at a time.

The cave where the air system was hadn't been modernized at all, but this room, with its polished floors and gleaming metal bars could have been from any office building in the Alpha Site. None of the cells had occupants in them, but the huge fan that made up most of the back wall still moved the air.

"I can assure you, the room is kept in an absolute sterile environment. People can, and have, eaten off the floor."

Tavish stepped back, the horror of what had happened in the room hitting him in a wave of images he didn't want in his brain. Rees had gotten off on it. "You kept Jordan in here," he said, quietly. "For months."

"Were you expecting an underground lair? Chains, perhaps? A rack in the corner? Patrice wanted his son detained for his disloyalty. I only obeyed my master."

"And those cuts on Jordan's back?"

Rees bared his teeth, but he wasn't smiling any more. "Would you believe me if I told you that was a paperwork error?"

"You accidentally cut into your governor's son?" Tavish demanded.

Rees brought a hand over his mouth. "Oh, not me, my dear Doctor. Do you think I would make a mistake like that? There were so many interrogations that day, I couldn't help it if two of the prisoner numbers became transposed. I signed off on them, but it was by mistake."

"Jordan knew who signed off on the order."

"Of course. The entire order is read off before the ... questioning begins. It was too bad that Jordan didn't know anything about the headquarters or the ring-leaders."

"You bastard."

"Ah-ah, Doctor. I just saved your life."

"Doesn't change the facts."

"As you can see, the room is sterile. Go ahead and run your little tests, I'll have Sanders lock up when you are finished."

Tavish said nothing. Rees shut the door behind him, and Tavish couldn't help but test to make sure that he hadn't locked the door behind him. It wasn't, and it cracked open behind Rees. Rees' laughter floated back against the air currents.

Tavish closed the door again and took the samples. The room was spotless; Rees wasn't wrong. Tavish stubbornly collected what he could regardless, and hoped for the best. By the time Sanders called him a transport to bring him back to the city, the sky had darkened to indigo and Romulus was already cresting over the northern horizon a sliver of white. He dropped the samples off at the lab and set them up to be tested overnight. He knew there was a mountain of materials he could have started, but after working all night, he was exhausted. It was strange going home when there was still light in the sky, but he decided he'd earned the early night. And besides, Jordan might be waiting.

The autopsy report of the first miner was on his desk, he picked it up but didn't open it. It could make for some light, night time reading. He sighed and went back to his apartment.

The lights were on in his apartment. That pleased him more than it should have. He let himself in, calling for Jordan, and had a chilling thought that it was actually Rees waiting for him. But of course, it wasn't. Jordan came around the corner.

He looked better. Human again. Color touched his cheeks, his eyes no longer looked bruised, and his curls were clean and loose around his face. He wore one of Tavish's off-world

shirts and his old jeans. Tavish wanted to feel them under his fingers like nothing else in that minute. He was barefoot, which gave him a relaxed, comfortable look in Tavish's apartment.

"Hello," Tavish said, awkwardly. He put the papers down on his desk and turned back to Jordan.

"Tavish," Jordan said.

"Last night..." Tavish said, then hesitated. "Thank you for that."

Jordan sucked in his breath, but then let it out, slowly. "You're welcome. And thanks for your bed. I slept most of the day."

"You look like it did you good."

"It did." Jordan threw himself down on the couch. He looked up, puppy-dog eyes a definite new look for him, but it definitely had its appeal. "Tavish?"

"Yes, Jordan?" Tavish asked, mouth suddenly dry.

Jordan leaned back even farther, splaying his legs and let his hands roam down his stomach. "I think it's high time you gave me a blow job, don't you?"

Since Jordan put it that way, Tavish swallowed. "Yes. Yes, I do."

"Good." Jordan undid his jeans, sliding them down past his hips, down his long thighs, then off entirely. He hesitated, just for a second, then pulled off his shirt as well. Naked, he stood up and Tavish took a hesitant step forward. He was beautiful, and not just because his hips were narrow or his chest broad, the pretty features or the sleepy smile. All of those were just parts.

Tavish put his hands on Jordan's shoulders, lightly, but Jordan took his hands and brought them down to his sides. "Touch doesn't bother me any more," he said.

"Really?" Tavish asked. He ran the tips of his fingers up and over Jordan's chest. Jordan shivered, goose bumps appeared on his upper arms, but there was no pain.

"Interesting."

"Isn't it?" Jordan asked.

Tavish scraped his nails lightly across Jordan's belly, raising up a red line. He stopped, just below the navel, and looked down to the wonderful cock. It was already half-hard, the dark curls almost as soft as the hair on Jordan's head. He felt Jordan quiver under his fingers, the need for Tavish to just do ... anything was so obvious it made it all the more delicious to wait. He looked back up and licked his lips, slowly.

"Tavish?" Jordan asked.

"Yes, Jordan?" Tavish repeated.

"Shouldn't you be on your knees, or something?"

Tavish licked his palm, bringing it down slowly enough that it had already started to dry by the time he wrapped it around Jordan's cock. A drop of pearly precome gathered at the tip, and as much as Tavish wanted to lick it away, he gathered it up to help his hand slide down Jordan's length. It was heavy against his palm and so hot. Jordan jerked his hips, driving his cock forward, but Tavish slacked off the pressure. When he settled down again, Tavish dropped to his knees.

Jordan had just showered, that much was obvious, but as Tavish took Jordan's testicles in the palm of his hand, even

with the overpowering smell of soap, Tavish could still smell his excitement. Jordan was hard now, his testicles were already tight to his body, and Jordan shuddered as Tavish kissed each one, slowly, running his tongue along the skin. He kissed his way up the base of Jordan's cock, following the thick vein with his lips, and lavishly ran his tongue up to the crown.

Jordan balled his hands into fists and put them behind his back. Tavish stopped what he was doing and looked up, rubbing his cheek against the cock while he did so.

"What's wrong?" Jordan asked

"You can put your hands on me," Tavish said. And took Jordan's hands to his head. "Please."

Jordan hesitated, just for a second, then locked his fingers in Tavish's hair. For a second he didn't move, then he pulled him closer. Tavish took the crown inside, and letting his tongue curl around it. Jordan shivered, and slowly pushed his cock deeper into Tavish's mouth.

Tavish smiled around it. Jordan was so hesitant it was almost cute, if getting a blow job could be considering being cute. But he wasn't breakable. He bobbed his head up and down the length, just to show Jordan that he could take it, and Jordan, eventually, got the gist.

Tavish touched his own cock through his slacks. He was tired, but his cock was hard. It felt nice just to stroke it lightly. It was easy, as long as he kept the same pace with the hand over Jordan's cock. He was too tired to handle anything different.

"I like that," Jordan said.

"That angle? My fist?" Tavish asked, pulling free for just a second. Jordan let him pull back.

"Watching you get off."

"Really," Tavish said. He undid his slacks, easing his cock out carefully, and gripped it just how he liked it, with the right amount of firmness. With the salty taste of Jordan's precome on his lips and the rush of pleasure from his own cock, Tavish needed it faster and harder.

"Come on," Jordan said, pulling Tavish up. "Let's go to bed."

"Now?"

"I'll make it worth your while."

Tavish grinned.

The soft bed made it easier. Jordan pushed Tavish down, carefully, then got up beside him. They kissed, Jordan's slick cock sliding against his own, and Jordan kissed him again. He licked Tavish's lips, down his chin and kissed him again. "Do you want to do this?"

Tavish nodded.

Jordan lifted himself up on his elbows. The shifting was awkward, an elbow or two wound up somewhere it shouldn't have been, but Jordan slid over him. Jordan kissed his hip, Tavish licked Jordan's. He'd never done a 69 before, it was awkward, but in a thrilling way. He couldn't concentrate on taking Jordan down his throat while Jordan was going down on him, one or the other took his whole attention span. Jordan shuddered over him, then went down on him. Jordan took him deep down his own throat. Tavish threw his head back, using his fist on Jordan's cock as Jordan brought him off

hard. Tavish gasped, driving his hips off the mattress. Jordan held his cock, letting him come in his open mouth and then licked him clean with short, concise strokes that shook his body with the aftershocks.

Jordan started shuddering with his cock still next to Tavish's ear. Tavish managed to bring his cock to his mouth in time, swallowing hard, and used his hand to bring Jordan off higher as he came. Jordan groaned, his mouth over Tavish's thigh, and then he collapsed beside him.

It was Tavish's turn to awkwardly shift around so that he faced the other way, but it was worth it to curl up next to where Jordan was. Jordan shifted so that his head was on Tavish's chest.

"What time is it?"

"Just past 1800 hours," Tavish said, after craning his neck to see the alarm. "Why, are you hungry?"

Jordan groaned. He stroked Tavish's hair, once, and kissed his forehead. "I've got to get going," he said.

Tavish sat up. The lighting was set to sunset, and the artificial orange light cast strange shadows.

"Formal dinner," Jordan said. "Part of the deal with Daddy. I have to go and make nice with the cameras. But I'll be back tonight."

Tavish lay back. "Can you take me back out to the mine site tomorrow? We're re-running all the tests."

"I can do that. Where will you be?"

"The hospital," Tavish said. He'd been working straight for seven days, and his body was threatening to rebel if he didn't at least make some sort of repayment to the gross sleep debt

he had, but he had been working shorter days than usual with Jordan around. He groaned. "Where else?"

Jordan kissed his forehead.

* * * *

Tavish liked working in the earliest part of the morning. He was studying a piece of lung. Two of the miners had developed coughs over night, and their oxygen levels were down. The lung tissue, however, appeared perfectly normal in every way and the red blood cells he'd just drawn had the right levels of oxygen rich hemoglobin. There was no reason for the miners to be drowning on dry land with dry lungs.

What could he do? Tavish went to the door, ready to leave, but he heard men shuffling in the hall. "Have you come to arrest me?" From the way Rees looked at him the question seemed rhetorical at best. "I haven't done anything. You can't just..."

And Rees smiled, with genuine humor for the first time. "That doesn't mean anything here, Doctor Pan. You should have realized that by now. Your little side trip was in a highly restricted area yesterday, or didn't the pretty little prince tell you the danger you were in? Sanders tried to stop you from sabotaging the machinery, but you killed him and did it anyway."

"I killed him?" Tavish asked, feeling sick all over again. "Is he dead?"

"No, but that doesn't matter."

"Where is Jordan?" Tavish asked, a second away from letting the panic in his voice show.

"Why is that of a concern to me?" Rees asked. "You can come with me, two of Patrice's high ranking underlings going for a drink, or I can take you out in chains. Which would you prefer?"

There were no windows in the room, but Tavish could just imagine how many reporters had been assembled outside. He looked up.

"I think you're starting to understand," Rees said. He gathered up all the files on Tavish's desk and tossed them over his shoulder.

"You're not looking for a cure." Tavish was cold inside. "You need the sick miners. Patrice pays the company huge dollars for fresh bodies and you, what, get money back from the transactions?"

"That would be disloyal," Rees said. He grabbed the back of Tavish's neck, hard enough to hurt. Tavish tried to fight, but for a short, frog-like man, Rees was much stronger than Tavish thought possible.

"So, what, you're going to kill me?" Tavish asked. But he wasn't afraid ... not quite yet.

"Are you going to behave?" Rees asked, voice again like silk.

Tavish put up his hands. "Absolutely."

"Good boy." The hand on the back of his neck tightened, hard enough that bones cracked, and then Rees let him go. "Play nicely, Doctor, and be patient, and you will get out of this, more or less, in one piece."

"I don't believe you," Tavish said.

"You don't have to," Rees said. "You're not important enough."

Tavish was right, there were a dozen reporters milling about. They all wore personal masks around their noses. A moment later, Tavish realized why. The air was much thinner than usual.

Tavish glanced around him. He really did expect Jordan to sweep in and make this all okay, like waking him up from a bad dream. The evening was too warm, the air seemed too thin for this to be real.

There was nothing else for him to do.

Tavish knew that they must have known that even without the hand on his shoulder he was being frog-marched out of the lab. Still, the reporters, rather than pursuing them, disappeared into the darkness.

"What's going on here?"

"You sabotaged the air intake valves, remember? It may take weeks for the proper parts to be shipped in, at an incredible expense. Needless to say Patrice is practically ready to sign your death warrant. I've had to do some pretty step work to keep that from happening. You can thank me later."

"I sabotaged valves?" Tavish asked, numbly.

"Of course you did." Rees stroked the back of Tavish's neck. Tavish batted his hand away, and three of the passersby tensed and moved closer. They didn't look like members of the security force until they tensed their muscles and suspicious lumps under their arms. Whether they were

stunners or pistols, Tavish didn't want to know. He settled down and the three guards melted back into the crowd.

"They're more loyal to you, aren't they?" Tavish asked.

"You're either going to shut your mouth or I am going to wire it shut," Rees said. He smiled at the thought.

All the while, Tavish kept expecting Jordan to show up. But he didn't and the transport that rolled up was huge when compared to Jordan's.

Rees waited until the door had swung shut. The cuffs came out then, once they were safely out of the public's eye.

"If it means anything, you have to know I didn't do anything to the system," Tavish said.

"Oh, I know." Rees snapped his fingers and the transport started. "Believe me."

The ride back to the bunker after that was quiet. The cuffs on Tavish's wrists were cold and hummed with an electrical current. Tavish studied the smooth plastic rather than Rees' flat face.

"I wouldn't fight those," Rees said, but didn't look up from the slim screen he was studying. "But don't let that stop you."

"Did you enjoy cutting into Jordan, too?" Tavish asked.

"Enormously," Rees said, and smiled at the memory. He adjusted himself in his uniform, but only after he was sure Tavish was watching. "He liked to fight the cuffs. I think he got just a little bit off on it. I could have had him eating out of my hand in another month or so."

The thought of Jordan being stuck in the cramped little cell for another month made Tavish weak in the knees. "You must have been broken-hearted he apologized," Tavish said.

"Utterly. Luckily, with you, Patrice hadn't asked you to say you're sorry. I highly doubt that anyone will be running to your rescue."

Tavish didn't answer. He stared out of the darkened window. There was no sign of Jordan, and with everything Tavish had witnessed, he was disappointed that Jordan didn't know what had happened.

Jordan didn't come. They arrived at the mouth of the compound. The gate rolled open, and the transport moved in. When it stopped a second time, Tavish's door opened and all the care the muscle had shown him outside his lab was gone. Two of the men grabbed him by the shirt, and hauled him up. Tavish fought to keep his feet rather than be dragged against the rough ground, but an electric pop came from his cuffs and the racing pain laced up his arms and across his chest. He swore and fell against the transport. The black surface was hot, even to the sudden rush of sweat on his forehead. All he wanted to do was remain against the comfort of the smooth surface until his heart stopped racing, but one of the muscles grabbed him by the back of his neck and he was pulled back up again.

"You're going to be a hard case, aren't you?" Rees asked, straightening his uniform's sleeve.

It still hurt to breathe. Tavish nodded, though he realized after he did that the question required a negative response. Rees didn't seem to notice. He nodded and the first muscle dragged him off. Tavish barely got his feet under him. Rees took out a swipe card similar to the one Jordan had, and the door slid open.

There seemed to be nothing wrong with the huge exchange machines to the right. The air still smelled faintly of the oil but the warmth was gone. "There's nothing wrong with the system, is there?"

No one answered him. Tavish didn't expect them to. Rees went to the left, to the cells. They hadn't changed either, but the walls seemed a bit damper and the ceiling a bit lower. Tavish dug his heels in, which only got the bones in his neck cracked harder. He was starting to get a headache from the pinched nerve.

Tavish fought with himself to keep the fear down. Rees glanced at him, nodded to himself, and pointed to one of the empty cells. "In there."

The synthetic bars were cold. The cell was dark, and it stank of disinfectant. Tavish froze. "What do you want?" He turned to Rees. "We can work this out."

"There is nothing I want from you," Rees said, his lip curled. "Not yet, that is."

Tavish shook his head. His fists opened and closed, and he rubbed them against his slacks despite how nervous it made him look. "Please don't put me in there," he said, his voice low.

"Is that supposed to affect me?" Rees said.

"No," Tavish said. But if it cost him his pride and there was even the slightest chance he wouldn't be locked up in the dark cell, he'd pay it. "Please."

Rees touched his cheek. "You're going in that cell," he said, his voice soft. "But if it makes it easier on you, I

promise that you will not be forgotten, like most of the wraiths in this place. Tell me something, Doctor."

Tavish crossed his arms over his chest. "What?"

"How close are you?"

Tavish blinked. "What? Why?"

"Just answer the question, Tavish."

Tavish shook his head. "Close. The oxygen bond to the hemoglobin doesn't break. The organism, I think, is more prevalent than anyone has thought. The miners are most susceptible, but it's in more than just their blood. I think it's only visible in the blood once it blooms. It's just a matter of time before we find out why and how to stop it from happening."

Rees licked his rat-like incisors. "I was afraid you were going to say that, Doctor."

Tavish didn't understand. "I thought that would be great news."

"It is. Well, it will be. Patrice has it. He needs to die before you can cure the disease, and he's only in the very beginning stages. It may mean you'll be down here for a long, long time."

"You knew it was contagious outside the mines and you did nothing to stop the spread?" Tavish demanded.

"Yes," Rees said. "Now, in the cage you go."

Tavish shook his head. He could either walk into the darkness or be thrown, and he would rather walk. The hand on the back of his neck let go, and he walked in with his head up. Jordan would find him. Jordan would have to.

"I know what you're thinking," Rees said. He kept his face neutral. Rees continued. "But I should tell you that a tragic accident is going to befall the young master Patrice. He'll be riding his transport too fast and too stoned, and it will crash. They'll find his mangled body after the fact, and it might even ensure that a speed law will come to pass outside of the Alpha Site. I think that will give you some solace."

Tavish narrowed his eyes. There were a hundred different things in his travel kit alone that would cause Rees to have a horrible, if untraceable, death. Rees wagged his short finger in Tavish's face again. "Now, that's not very nice. Where's your ethics, Doctor?"

"Putting a rabid dog down is a public service," Tavish said.

"On that, we agree," Rees motioned for his muscle to go, and the door swung shut. "Do try to have a pleasant evening, Doctor Pan. And a pleasant week, month, and possibly year. We will try to keep this little ... detainment to be less than a decade, but it's not entirely in my hands. I'm sure your assistant will soldier on without you, as gamely as he can."

Tavish snorted, thinking that Royal wouldn't be able to continue with the data Tavish had already collected, and Rees laughed.

"I know. That is the point."

Tavish stared at him. He still didn't understand what Rees wanted, but the pieces were there. If he just had time to think, he was sure he could put it all together, but in that second his brain was just too tired and too full. The door slid shut with a metallic clang, and Rees turned. "Pleasant dreams," he said, and was gone.

The entrance to the cave was well hidden, not much more than a crack behind a boulder. The guards, Thomas' guards, would have bludgeoned anyone who wasn't known.

The natural ceiling was low enough that the stumps where the stalactites had been knocked off would have knocked his skull if Jordan hadn't ducked. For some, the tunnels were too much, they couldn't handle the constant pressure of the hills around them. For Jordan, it was like coming home. He liked the way the smooth rock felt under his fingers.

Only his ideal home wouldn't have had a Gibb in it. The big man stood, blocking his path, but for once, Jordan was glad to see him, so Jordan let it be blocked. "Are you planning anything?" Jordan asked.

"Do you really think I am going to answer that?" he demanded.

"There has to be a reason you've blocked my path. I'm guessing you either need my help or you were going to tell me to stay out of your way. Either way, it means you've planned something."

"I need you to stay out of my way."

"If Rees is pulling your strings, don't do it. It's a trap."

"You don't know that."

"Actually, I do," Jordan said, but Gibb just stepped aside and let him pass.

He continued down, past the section where living quarters had been carved out of the soft rock. There was room for a dozen men comfortably and dozen more not so comfortably but they saw no one until he headed down to the underground lake where Thomas had set up his lab fueled by

the thermal energy deep inside the cave. The path he took widened in places so that it was as large as the lobby of the government building, and narrowed so much that Jordan had to all but crawl to get to the narrow sections. There were so many twists and turns and apparent dead ends that even if Patrice had spent years looking, there's no way he would accidentally stumble into Thomas' private research facility.

There were no private residences here; the natural air vents in the sand stone made the rooms and halls light and airy despite the eerie blue light. Down, deep under the hills, where the blue glowing balls were every dozen paces and the pools of black between them were absolute, the air was still and stale. The path only led to a lake as wide and cool as any that had been on the topside of the continent. It was the last of the great lakes, and the water here remembered what it felt to have moonlight touch it. Jordan knelt down beside the water's edge and touched it, remembering last night with Tavish. He heard Thomas exhale, behind him, and Jordan cursed himself for not being more careful with the memories.

"So you're with Tavish now," Thomas said, behind him.

Jordan stood up. "I am."

The blue lights reflected off the black surface dully, and the minnows, as white and blind as the adult fish deeper in the pool, scattered once Jordan approached. He sat down on the edge of the lake, away from the only two balls of light in the cavern.

"How long have you been coughing blood?" Jordan asked. The lair was well ventilated and he'd smuggled in some primo air scrubbers. The lake kept the air moist. It should have

been the perfect place for Thomas when the results came back and showed he had the miners' lung. This was despite the fact that he'd never been to the mines and he'd never been exposed to the dust.

"A week," Thomas said. He swallowed.

Jordan shook his head. Most of the time, once blood was coughed up, survival was measured in days. But Thomas still looked good. He put his hand on the floor of the cave, right next to where the water came. There was a thick white line of sediment where the water had receded. The touch brought with it the clean, cool feel in his lungs the memories had also brought.

"The lake is keeping you alive."

Thomas turned his head to cough, but there was no rich smell of blood with it. "I think so."

He entered the circle of blue lights that Thomas had around his workspace. The worktable had actual beakers and flasks, and small containers of highly flammable gel. Compared to the massive amount of information and technology Tavish had access to, Thomas was working in the Stone Age. But he had a computer, battered, cracked but not broken and he'd had all the time in the world, once. It was here that Thomas had been able to take the Dose Jordan gave him and denature Arochos so that Jordan's body no longer responded to it as though it were a drug.

"Can I take a scraping of this?" Jordan asked.

"I've tested it a million times. It's nothing but hard water residue."

Jordan shrugged. "Then it can't hurt." He scraped some off, put it away, and touched Thomas' shoulder. Thomas was nothing like his brother. Jordan and he had been friends for years, but Thomas still stiffened at the touch. "I'm sorry."

Tommy shrugged. "It is what it is."

Jordan nodded.

Thomas' mouth twitched. A minute of silence passed, and then he sighed.

The computer, powered by thermal energy harvested deep inside the caves whirred to life. It took a long time for the screen to come up, and when it did, it was in simple green monochrome. But it did take the latest memory chip, and Thomas backed policies information onto it. After a moment, he also reached into the drawer of the desk and pulled out a leather notebook with actual paper inside. "Give him this, as well."

Jordan took it. "I'm sure he'll want to see you," he said.

Thomas shook his head. "You should go before it gets too late."

Jordan shook Thomas' hand, hating how formal and final the gesture was and made his way out of the cave. He saw no one besides Thomas, but he certainly heard the others. It was pretty standard for any outsider coming into the caves. You couldn't betray anyone you didn't know.

The bullet took him back to the mining site, and he got back onto the transport with all the other tired miners coming off a weeklong shift. He was dirty enough from hiding in the hills to fit in and though a guard actually boarded the transport to check IDs against faces, Jordan's false papers

Spaces Escapes
by Angela Fiddler, Jason Edding

passed with flying colors. Tavish's apartment was closer, so he went there instead. He dropped his clothes in a neat line from the door to the shower and didn't emerge until his skin was pink. He went straight to bed. He glanced at the clock and realized he'd probably just missed Tavish by a matter of twenty minutes or so.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Nine

Rees found Fox outside again, but this time his Launch stick wasn't lit. He looked pale, and smelled like he'd smoked far too many sticks already. He didn't turn around, even when Rees walked right up behind him.

"If you're trying to frighten me, Mr. Rees, you're about five years too late."

"I need you to get a message out," Rees said.

Fox snorted. "That's not going to happen."

Rees grabbed him by the hair on the back of his neck, tightening his fist enough that he knew it had to hurt. He kept his grip, and didn't let go as long as Fox fought him.

"You're going to relay the message to Jordan, Fox. I am not giving you the option of refusing me."

"No," Fox said. He strained against the grip, pulling it hard enough that the roots began to tear. There was nothing between Fox and the street nine-stories below but for Rees' grip on his hair. Rees swore, pulling Fox away from the edge.

Fox lit the Launch stick as though nothing had happened. A drop of blood dripped down the back of his neck, but he did nothing to stop it. "I have Jordan's instant message number, if you would like to drop him a note, but I'm not going to be a party to it." He took a deep drag, rolling the muscles of his shoulder. "Like I said, you're about five years too late."

"You think you're so above any of this," Rees said. He grabbed Fox by the arm. Fox immediately leaned towards the edge of the balcony again. But this time Rees was waiting for

it. He kept his body between Fox and the railing, and pushed him out toward the door. They were about the same size, but Fox had already doped himself and it was fairly easy to push him through the door. Michaels and Santino, both loyal above and beyond, waited outside. They both took one of Fox's arms. "Put him in one of the cells," Rees said.

"You can't do this," Fox said. "Patrice will kill you."

"Patrice will think you've merely run out of drugs. That happens quite often, I'm told."

Fox fought with Santino, but just enough so that he could bring the burning stick to his lips. He took another drag. "I'm sure you could understand why."

"If he behaves, make sure he remains unharmed," Rees said. "If we can return him in one piece, Patrice would pay."

"And if he doesn't?" Michaels asked.

"Make it look tragically accidental."

Fox exhaled the bitter smoke. "It's not going to be an issue."

"Good," Rees said. He motioned them to take Fox away, and Fox went between them, tiny when compared to either of them, and as long as they let him smoke, he went placidly.

Rees watched them go, and had just made it to the lift himself when he was paged down to the information booth.

"Your package has arrived," was all the message said.

He keyed in instructions for it to be delivered to his apartment. He raided Patrice's larder, took down a dusty bottle of thirty-year-old scotch, and retired to his own quarters.

The wooden box was huge. It took up most of his entrance. He sighed. The delivery person didn't even leave him a crowbar for the crate. He took the time to pour himself a glass of the scotch, add a chunk of ice to bloom the alcohol, then uncrated the box himself.

Gibb tumbled out, then flopped on his belly. It took a long time for him to pull himself up to his feet, still groggy. "You could have used a bigger box," he snarled.

"There was no bigger box," Rees said. He didn't offer a glass to Gibb, and Gibb didn't ask. "You could have just sent me papers."

"Papers have paper trails," Rees said. "You had nothing but a shipping number." He stood up and went to his closet. The guardsman uniform was the largest item of clothing the closet produced, but it fit. As Gibb was getting dressed, Rees unlocked a cabinet deep within the closet. There were several weapons he could have chosen, but he picked an old fashioned gun with a laser sight and an actual clip. "Do you know what to do with this?"

"Of course," Gibb said.

"If you fail, it's not just you, you do realize that."

"Yes. Believe me. You've made that perfectly clear."

Rees smiled. "And if you succeed, I'm making changes. I'll will get you a wife and bring her to Midnight. You'll be able to come out of hiding and start a family."

"I thought that wasn't allowed," Gibb said.

"The whole world is changing, Gibb. And you're going to be its harbinger."

Gibb's smile was almost as calm as Fox's was after his second drag. Rees supposed they all had their drug of choice.

* * * *

Jordan's feet hurt. He shifted back and forth, just once, but Patrice noticed even with Jahanna still talking, and Jordan froze.

Patrice looked back to the CEO.

He was a thin man, almost weedy. Despite the feeling of money he gave off, he wore a brown tailored uniform with the company's meteor logo over his breast. His briefcase was handcuffed to his wrist. Patrice and Jahanna were the only two men who sat at the long, polished wood table in the dark paneled room. Both the men's faces were studiously blank, but words like "embargo" and "compensatory damages" and "firing" kept repeating.

If Jordan could have melted into the wall, he would have, but the dark haired man standing next to him looked on with great interest.

Patrice held out his hand, cutting Jahanna off. If there was any sign that the discussion was not about the topic of succession as Patrice had thought it would, there was no indication on Patrice's face. Jahanna was so startled he actually stopped talking. "I told you. We have the very best minds working on the issue. I am told that we are very close to a solution even as we speak."

Jahanna stood up. "Until there is a solution to your fatal little problem, the mine is shutting down. I can't afford to keep you in the amount of corpses you're going through."

"Mr. Jahanna," Patrice began, but Jahanna shook his head. "We're done here," he said.

Patrice stood up. "I'll have someone show you to your room."

That someone was Jordan. Afterwards, he returned to his own room for a quick nap before the dinner. The bedroom in Jordan's apartment was larger than Tavish's entire apartment, but Jordan hated it. Every time he lay down on the huge bed, his stomach muscles clenched. When Rees had come for him, after Thomas had gotten away, Rees and his men had stormed into the room in the middle of the night, turning an ordinary dream into a nightmare of bright lights in his face, cold metal on his wrists and Rees' constant leering look.

And then after, when Jordan had been released after the "accounting error", an infection had set in on one of the deepest cuts over his kidney. Only Rees had been sent to "take care of him" and he'd refused to ask for help. He'd been under house arrest, with a bracelet too tight on his elbow, sweating out the infection on his own.

Jordan got the message in the inside pocket of his jacket when he stepped out of the shower. There was yet another keypad, and a paper note telling him to go meet Thomas. He went to call Tavish, but Tavish wasn't answering. He shrugged and figured he could be there and back before the dinner.

If he dared.

But Fox needed him to go, he had to at least try.

Going back to change, he called Tavish again, to no answer.

He checked his clock again, and shook his head even though he was alone in the room. Fox would not have put him in that time crunch. He had to know that Jordan was needed at the dinner. He looked down to the note, written in plain block squares that could have been Fox's writing or could not have.

When Jordan had finally been freed, he went to straight real Dose, until Thomas talked him out of it. Detoxing for the first time had been even worse hell. That entire year was composed of bleak, black memories.

He rubbed his face, just like Tavish did. The thought made him happy. He couldn't sleep, so he got up. He thought he could get out at least to the badlands and back before the dinner would even start to sit.

His apartment was one of the only buildings that had private parking in the lowest level. It was why he'd moved in, to house Betty's predecessor. He took the lift down and stepped out onto the bare stone that had been blasted to make the sub-basement parking.

The moment he touched Betty's exterior, he felt it. The stones around him that had remembered being a lake floor also remembered the explosives that ripped them apart. Jordan staggered, falling against the wall. The same kind of explosives that were now inside Betty. Jordan waited for the dizziness to pass, dropped down, and found a plastic box attached to the battery that hadn't been there before.

Jordan shook his head. He tried to call Fox, but there was no answer. He tried messaging Tavish, for the ninth time, but again there was no response. The bad feeling inside him just got worse.

He rested his head against the rock behind him, trying to build his nerve. Desperate times, desperate measures, he kept telling himself. He took two deep breaths, and then went to go see his father.

Patrice was in his rooms, getting dressed. Jordan hadn't realized there was much past putting the suit on that required attention to get ready, but apparently he was wrong. Patrice was still handsome, graying hair perfect despite the fact that he was still in a luminescent white shirt and slacks.

"Dear god, boy. How long have you had that suit on? Did you roll on the ground in it?"

"Yes, I did," Jordan said. "Where's Fox?"

Patrice made a dismissive wave. "Around, I suppose. As long as he's not required, he has his head. You know that."

"Require him."

Patrice stopped examining his jackets and actually looked at him. "What are you on about?"

"I can't get a hold of him."

"Is this more of your delusions, Jordan? Do you honestly believe that Rees is out to get you?"

"I'm not saying who," Jordan said. "All I know is there's a bomb wired to my transport, and Tavish and Fox have been not answering their messaging."

Patrice studied his face. Jordan kept it perfectly blank. The tabs of Dose he'd popped gave him the impression that he'd

finally cracked the wall of absolute trust Patrice had around Rees.

"A bomb."

Jordan nodded.

Patrice snapped his fingers. Two men appeared, black suits, white gloves, and sunglasses inside. "Find Fox," he said. "And get me Rees."

"Yes, sir," they said together, and disappeared out the door. "If you're late to the dinner, Jordan, I will not be pleased."

"I won't be late," Jordan said. He turned to go.

"And put a new suit on."

Jordan stopped. "I don't have a new suit to put on."

"It will be waiting for you."

Jordan hesitated. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

He passed Rees on the way out of the apartment. Rees saw him, but there was no reaction to him whatsoever. He might as well have been one of the huge potted plants from the foyer that had suddenly developed the ability to walk and glare at the same time.

There was such satisfaction coming from him, Jordan recognized it, even without the added sensation. He hired a transport just outside of the parliament buildings, and told the driver to wait.

Sanders, the foreman, tried to stop him. Jordan grabbed his uniform, the added anger of having to be back to the plant giving him the strength to lift Sanders up half a foot and threw him against the blue wall of the control room.

"Mr. Patrice, I can't let you in there," he said. "You need to call Rees."

"The hell I do." Jordan took out his own ID badge. Sanders' face boggled as it slid into the card reader and the light turned green.

"How..." Sanders asked, but didn't stop to answer. He threw open the control door, no doubt to call Rees, but Jordan did not intend to still be at the plant. It took him a minute to find the card reader, not the door itself, and the light came on when he waved.

Tavish pulled himself up from where he was back to back through the bars with Fox. While Tavish only looked slightly annoyed at his captivity, Fox looked like complete hell. He was sweating, which had plastered his hair to his scalp, and even though the room wasn't cold, he shivered like a drowned pup. Jordan sympathized, but knew the withdrawal from Dose was nothing compared to how hard the body came down from Launch.

"I knew you'd come," Tavish said. Fox was a bit slower. Jordan's ID badge didn't work on the first three swipes, the algorithm must have been very advanced. Eventually Tavish's door swung open, and Fox's soon followed. Tavish went in and helped Fox stand and get outside of the cage. He installed him, carefully against one of the cells, and then grabbed Jordan.

Tavish spun him around, and kissed him hard up against the bars. Jordan kissed him back, just as hard, until Fox cleared his throat. "Um, we should get out of here," he said, his voice breaking.

Tavish let him go. "Hold the thought?"

Jordan touched Tavish's hair. "Me up against the wall, your tongue in my mouth. Consider it held."

"You forgot the alignment of the groins."

"Ah, yes," Jordan said, and couldn't stop the smile.

"Gentlemen, jail break, have you forgotten?" Fox asked again.

"Right," they said together. The transport driver probably was breaking laws, transporting prisoners as he was, but since Jordan neglected to tell him of Fox's and Tavish's special status, all was well. "What now?" Tavish asked.

"I need a new suit. So do you."

"What?" Tavish asked.

"We have a dinner engagement."

"Of course."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Ten

Jordan looked ridiculously good in a suit, even the dirty one that he'd rescued them in. Tavish couldn't look away from him. Fox had left them the moment they'd reached the lower city. Tavish didn't judge him. The strain on Fox's body had been so bad he'd been afraid that the muscles or tendons of his jaw would snap from all the tremors his body went through.

"Poor bastard," Jordan had said, and Tavish supposed that was enough said about that.

When they were alone, Jordan told him of the bomb. "Rees wants you dead," Tavish said, quietly.

"But not you," Jordan said. "He wouldn't have locked you up."

"Of course not," Tavish said. "I haven't cured it yet."

Jordan looked at him. "Patrice is sick. Rees wants him to die before Black Lung is officially cured."

"Then ... why is Rees trying to kill Patrice tonight?" Tavish asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Rees isn't trying to kill Patrice during the dinner, not if he thinks Patrice is already dying."

"Then who he is he trying to kill?" Jordan asked.

"Bailey Jahanna," they said, together.

"He doesn't want to kill Patrice," Jordan said, grimly. "He wants to replace him."

* * * *

For probably the first time in his life, Rees looked surprised. He stood next to Patrice, so Jordan's words couldn't have poisoned Patrice too much, but there was no mistaking the double-take he took when he saw Tavish on Jordan's arm. Jahanna ignored Jordan as he had before but shook Tavish's hand. "If you have time after supper, Dr. Pan, I have several questions for you," Jahanna said.

Tavish smiled at Rees. "Absolutely," he said, and joined Jordan inside.

Jordan went up to Patrice before the meal was served. Tavish could only watch the whispered conversation, but Patrice only put a hand on Jordan's shoulder. He said something, shrugging while he was doing it, and even though Jordan grabbed his arm, Patrice peeled it from him, squeezed it gently, and let it go. Jordan came back to him, sitting down. "He said he's on top of it."

The dinner came and went. A meeting room had been turned into a banquet hall, the long tables down both its sides and the head table were only about five settings wide. Patrice and Rees were there, along with Jahanna and two of his men. The room was split down the middle equally with company men and Patrice's puppet advisors. And Jordan and Tavish, of course. Jordan had told him between courses of the conversation Patrice had with Jahanna, which made the continued promises from both sides of a prosperous relationship continual lies.

The speeches that followed were boring enough to kill, but no one died. Rees gripped onto his utensils with white

knuckles, but that was the only sign something was wrong with him. He didn't crack a smile during the lame attempts at humor in the company men's speech, but that was nothing new.

The main course of Cornish hens was cleared, and a new round of speeches began. The dinner finally came to an end, and there was another long procession out.

It was over in a flash. Tavish had only seen Gibb once, but he just appeared from behind one of the Grecian pillars. All Tavish saw in his hand was a flash of metal. The red bead, like Tavish knew it would, skimmed over Patrice's breast and landed squarely on Jahanna's chest. Rees cried out, but Patrice held him back.

The bullet should have followed; none of the guardsmen coming to attention would have dared shoot when Patrice was between them and their target. Instead, Fox must have jumped from the second story mezzanine before he'd seen the gun being drawn.

He hit Gibb hard, and while Gibb was larger than he was, Fox hit just over his center of gravity. The gun clattered to the marble floor, and Fox knelt on Gibb's neck until the guardsmen came and got Gibb up.

When Fox was relieved, he stood up and went to the stairs, sat down on the third one up, and lit a Launch stick. It seemed the safest place to sit, especially since Gibb started immediately blaming Rees, and Patrice, for once, was more than willing to listen to the damning evidence.

Fox took another drag from his stick. He looked better, or at least, cleaner. His pupils were pinpricks, but his hair was neat.

"This is an outrage!" Jahanna shouted. Patrice raised his hand again, and the man silenced, like he'd been trained to the response. Patrice turned to the dark haired man. "Are you satisfied, Mr. Jahanna?"

Jahanna, the real one, apparently, walked over to where the gun had landed, pointed it Patrice's chest, and pulled the trigger. The sound of the gun jamming sounded real from where Tavish was standing. "When you told me that men in both our camps were trying to discredit you, I did not believe it," he said.

"Rees was getting his Launch from somewhere. If you could search your man's belongings?"

"It will be done," Jahanna said, and nodded. His men put his decoy in chains. They left, his men following after their leader, and eventually Patrice released his guards, so that it was just him and the three of them.

Fox stood up. "Real or not, that's three. I'm out of here," he told Patrice.

Patrice tried to grab his hand, but Fox gave him a scathing look and pulled his hand free. "You swore. That's the third attempt. I'm free."

"Please," Patrice said. "I'll give you anything."

"My contract is up. All you can offer me is an exit visa," Fox said. He finished the Launch stick, stomped it out, and kissed Jordan on the cheek. "I'll miss you."

Patrice said nothing as Fox walked out of the building.

Jordan watched him go. "Was he even an engineer?"

For the longest time, Patrice said nothing. When he did, his face actually had pain in it. "No." He took a deep breath, and then glanced at Jordan. "A real addict, of course, unlike you."

"How did you know?" Jordan asked.

"I've known everything," Patrice said. "How close Dr. Pan is to finding a cure, when Rees decided to betray me, and how different Dose is from the literature. It will go back to research, of course, once we can safely mine it again."

"The mines ... are shut down?" Tavish asked.

Patrice rubbed his face. "Please, Doctor, you've been working at the hospital for over a week now. Have you seen any new patients?"

Tavish swallowed. He got pretty focused when he was working. He'd seen the wards and the staff, but patients ... he searched his brain and came up with nothing. Patrice waved his hand. "I'm efficient. I'm not a monster."

Patrice left them, wandering up the marble steps alone, and Jordan took Tavish's hand. "Can you give up the fake Dose now?"

"Maybe," Jordan said. He took Tavish's hand. "There are ... certain advantages, though."

Tavish hesitated, thinking of the way the waves had lapped at him. "I'll see if I can analyze the active ingredient of Thomas' work. It shouldn't take too long, all I would need is a—"

Jordan kissed him, more or less to just shut him up.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Epilogue

Patrice waited until Tavish had identified the residue from the water stain along the lake before bringing Thomas into custody. The situation was given all the press coverage Patrice believed the situation called for, which was to say, quite a lot. Thomas didn't fight the plastic cuffs holding him, and hung his head with suitable contrition. Even with the extended life the pool's water had given him, there was no more hiding how much Black Lung had ravished his lungs.

Tavish hooked the IV of saline into his brother's arm and then adjusted the flow of his air. Thomas looked at him, opening his mouth to say something, but then closed it. His tongue had the characteristic gray color of all the other victims, but he took a deep breath of the air mixture running through the tubing.

"Carbon monoxide," Patrice said. It didn't sound like a question, but Patrice looked at him as though he expected an answer.

"Yes," Tavish said. "But less than one percent. It will break the oxygen that is locked onto the hemoglobin. Then we'll scrub the carbon monoxide out. The scrapings that Jordan brought back kill the organism, but don't reverse the damage already done. This will, hopefully."

"Haven't I given you enough test subjects?" Patrice asked. "Ones that have had the proper testing already done?"

"If this works, I'll be sure to properly document the results." Tavish brushed the hair off Thomas' forehead.

"Thank you for bringing him in. I don't think he had much time left."

Patrice looked at him, his face blank. "I don't know what you are talking about. If he gets better, he'll owe me."

Tavish sat down on the edge of the bed. He'd been in the room when Thomas had made the deal. Five years of protecting Patrice, in exchange for his papers. Considering it could just have easily been his death warrant, it wasn't that bad of a compromise.

Patrice didn't respond. It was as though Tavish hadn't even opened his mouth. He turned and left the room without another word. Tavish waited until he heard the doors to the ward open and close before he sat down on the edge of the bed. Tavish took his hand.

Jordan came in, looking better than Tavish had ever seen him. The last of the Dose had completely left his system. He stood taller, the dark shadows were gone, and his hair was up in floppy spikes. Tavish grinned, not caring that his face was as goofy as Jordan's old smile.

"Hello," Tavish said.

Jordan nodded. He looked down to Thomas. "How is he?"

"It's too soon to tell," Tavish said. "We'll know more in the morning."

Jordan came into the room proper. There wasn't enough room on the bed for all three of them, so he stood behind Tavish. He put his arms around his shoulders and leaned in to kiss the top of his head. "It will work."

Tavish shook his head.

They sat with Thomas until nightfall. Tavish wanted to stay later, but Jordan pulled him up. "There's no point. He's not going to wake up until morning."

Tavish conceded the point. He'd spent the night in the lab, testing and retesting the solution for the atomizer. He'd been given advance warning of the "surprise" raid that was to bring Thomas in, but there were never enough hours in the day to get everything done.

"I just wish I'd had time to test it on more than just rats," he said.

"If you want me to join you in beating yourself up, you'll have to be wearing much less clothing," Jordan said.

"Really?" Tavish asked, and touched Jordan's cheek. Jordan put his hand over Tavish's.

"Really."

Tavish pushed the button for the lift, and leaned against the wall. Now that Patrice had pointed it out, he did realize how empty the hospital was. Thomas was one of the only people in the intensive care ward. The few nurses working the late shift padded to and from their stations on thin-soled shoes, and even the lights were on power-saving mode.

"My apartment?" Tavish asked, once the lift arrived. It was closer.

"Absolutely." Jordan put his arm over Tavish's shoulder.

* * * *

The bed was different. Tavish stared at it. It was twice the size of the old one, creating a narrow pathway around it and

the single dresser. The red duvet cover over it looked like silk. Tavish touched it and confirmed his findings. "Jordan?"

"Yes?" Jordan answered. Tavish needed to take a step so that there was enough room for the both of them to stand in the room.

"I can't help but notice something has changed."

"What, this old thing?" Jordan asked. "Would you believe I found it?"

"This looks off-world." Tavish didn't add it was most definitely black market to boot.

"That would probably be because I bought it off-world," Jordan said. "If you don't want it, we could always hawk it."

Tavish sat down on it and crossed his arms over his chest. The mattress' plush top let him sink right into it. His back, which had never liked the colony standard issue cardboard-thin foam, all but sobbed in gratitude. "We can keep it," he said.

"Good," Jordan said. He imitated Tavish's body language until Tavish realized what Jordan was doing and forced himself to relax his body. "Let's get naked."

"Yes, let's."

The silk on Tavish's naked back was so decadent he couldn't stop a shiver. "If you think that's good, wait until I'm fucking you on it," Jordan whispered, and turned off the lights.

"Why wait?" Tavish asked.

Jordan grinned. He got on the bed and crawled up between Tavish's legs. Jordan looked down to Tavish's cock, and then looked back up, smiling. He licked his lips, slowly, then

dropped down to his elbows. Tavish felt Jordan's breath on his skin and lifted his hips off the bed. Jordan laughed. "Close your eyes."

"I thought the drug was out of your system," Tavish said.

"You talk a lot, Tavish. Please do what I say."

Tavish lay back and closed his eyes.

"Better," Jordan said. Tavish spread his arms. They were so far away from the bedrock, and Jordan wasn't as strong as he was, but the dim horizon lights came back behind his eyes. Jordan breathed on his cock again, and followed it with a long lick from the base all the way up to the crown. He lapped at the head of Tavish's cock with tiny flicks of his tongue. Tavish gripped onto the bedding, wanting to force his cock all the way in Jordan's mouth. The horizon wavered and was gone.

"You're fighting me," Jordan said, pulling away.

"Please," Tavish said.

"Relax. Let me help you."

Tavish relaxed. The glow came back, differentiating between the horizon and the ground again. Tavish stared at it, hard, trying to make it more real, but felt Jordan nip him on his thigh. "Don't try so hard. It's like you're yanking on my arm."

Tavish relaxed his muscles, then his clenched jaw, and Jordan began licking him again, nuzzling his testicles. The horizon came back, stronger than ever, and this time Tavish didn't fight it.

The wind picked up, touching the places Jordan had licked, making him cold for a second. Jordan covered him. The lube spray hissed, and then Jordan gripped his hips, pulling him

back a little. When his palms touched Tavish's hips, Jordan suddenly was with him in the empty plain.

And that was better. Tavish put his hands up to cradle Jordan's face. "I love you," he said.

Jordan hesitated. He tried to pull away, but this time Tavish pulled him closer. "Don't, I'm sorry."

"No," Jordan said. "Don't." He put his hand down on Tavish's belly. "I love you, you know that."

Tavish found he did.

Jordan moved his hand, taking Tavish's cock.

Tavish sighed. "Please. Fuck me."

Jordan nodded. Tavish pushed himself up, so that their cocks were against each other. Jordan grabbed his ass, and they kissed again. Tavish pressed his forehead against Jordan's. He wanted to dig his nails into Jordan's back. He wanted to bite, to mark Jordan as his. Jordan made a sound in the back of his throat, and then kissed him, hard. Tavish sucked on his bottom lip. He rubbed his cock against Jordan, desperately.

"Turn around," Jordan said.

Tavish did. Jordan pressed his chest against him, kissed his shoulder, and then slid his fingers inside, slowly, joint by joint. It was tight, and even with the spray the friction was hot. Jordan found the good spot. He reached around and gripped his cock again. "Ready?" Jordan asked.

Tavish nodded. He could feel Jordan's heartbeat against his shoulder blade. Jordan pushed inside him, a quarter inch at a time. Jordan brought his hand around, pressing against Tavish's chest. Tavish closed his eyes. It was good, letting

Jordan have the control. The first thrust went straight to his prostate, and he groaned. Jordan kissed him behind the ear.

"I want to feel you jerk off while I'm fucking you," Jordan whispered. "I want to feel you lose control."

"You're feeling it now," Tavish said.

Jordan's hand stroked down Tavish's belly. "Do it."

Tavish did. His cock was hard, hot, and already ready. Jordan laughed. They were the only people in the world where they were. The ground under their knees should have been hard, but all Tavish felt was the silk. His hand on his cock was just as good as the silk.

Jordan's grip on his hips tightened. They fit together so well. Jordan leaned away from him, just to get a better angle. Tavish leaned forward, fucking his hand as hard as Jordan was fucking him. In this place they could have fucked forever, and Tavish's muscles would never have tired, but he suddenly needed the peak that only came with orgasm.

Jordan groaned, his nails drawing blood on Tavish's hips. Tavish gave his cock just that little bit more pressure to bring him over the edge, and he was coming, heat flushing his whole body as his cock couldn't take anything else touching it.

He let go, letting his body go into the glow of aftershock. Jordan pulled him back, so they were again back to chest. Tavish felt warmth on his cheek. He opened his eyes, still expecting to see the dim line separating sky from ground, but instead he saw the pale orange just above the horizon line.

Jordan exhaled. "That's new."

Spaces Escapes
by Angela Fiddler, Jason Edding

Tavish leaned back, stretching out his legs. Jordan wrapped his around Tavish's hips. He kissed Tavish's shoulder a final time, and together they watched the sun rise.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

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 working on the second book in 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: jasonedding.books.officelive.com/default.aspx

ANGELA FIDDLER lives with her wife in southern Alberta. Her novel, *PULSE*, is also available through MLR Press. She is best known for her e-book series *Masters of the Line*, published by Loose Id. She likes her stories like she likes her coffee, if it is possible to have a hot, dark, and snarky cup of joe.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

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