

A muscular man, Mark Alders, is shown from the waist up, shirtless and wearing dark pants. He is bound with heavy metal chains on both wrists. He has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the side. The background is a dark, blue, ethereal space with glowing, nebula-like patterns.

MARK
ALDERS

THE INCUBATOR

BORDER WORLDS SAGA

Drake Glauco and Vernon are about to embark on their biggest adventure yet. They must get the information they need to help complete a new super weapon, a Solar Sound Tunnel, and fast. A weapon that will hopefully tip the balance of power to their side, able to destroy the awesome and impenetrable *Citadels of Justice* without risking too many more lives.

Unfortunately, four years have passed, and the war against the Herdsmen isn't going well. What's more, Priaxia has been destroyed...completely and utterly. The once great empire of the spiders now over. Humanity is their only hope. Something the Herdsmen know, stopping at nothing as they cast their gaze toward Earth and galaxy wide victory.

Against the backdrop of a war that seems lost by the alliance of spiders and mammals a new hope will rise, and from an unexpected source, too. Will Drake and Vernon be able to complete their latest mission to get the information they need for the weapon before the Herdsmen catch wind of their plans? Or will the hatchlings, now ready to be born, put things into a spin? It all becomes a race against time as the final chapter of the Borders of Worlds Saga comes to a close. Will humanity and Priaxia endure? Or will the Herdsmen wipe out all in their path?

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The Incubator
Copyright © 2011 Mark Alders
ISBN: 978-1-55487-855-0
Cover art by Angela Waters

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Published by eXtasy Books
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The Incubator
Borders of Worlds Saga Three

By

Mark Alders

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my Family.

The Unending War

Mother got us to Tombworld unscathed. The *Citadel of Justice* didn't pursue the alliance fleet, and in a way I know why. The Herdsmen had revealed themselves and decimated our numbers. We were running scared and no more needed to be done...for now.

Those who survived the attack accessed the damage, contemplated the sheer power of the Herdsmen and speculated on what their next move would be. Some on board *Mother* had said the *Citadel of Justice* hadn't even used its full strength, like a boxer pulling his punches. I had a feeling deep down those who spoke such words were right.

I just hoped I wasn't present when the Herdsmen did unleash all of their might. Being able to rendezvous somewhere may not be an option next time. We must have been lucky to get away from the *Citadel of Justice* when we did.

Those events happened almost four years ago.

For four long years, the alliance of mammals and spiders fought as best we could. Sure, our strength came through because of our adversity, but we were fighting a losing battle. The Priory had gained so much power with the Herdsmen at their side, they turned on the Aurorans who had set up supply lines to help them in *their* war against humanity. A war which never eventuated. A war which would have been—all things now considered—the lesser of two evils. At least if we fought the wasps it would have been on a much fairer playing field. Not so with the Herdsmen. They seemed invincible. For a start we couldn't even get close to one of their ships. Their shielding powered by something not unlike the magnosphere of stars—a force coming from the depths of the star itself. Absolutely impenetrable for ships made of living skin or steel like those we have used so far to fight them. Sometimes, I felt as though our forces were akin to mosquitoes being swatted away by giant hands. In effect, we probably were.

In the end, the Aurorans joined the alliance of mammals and spiders in an uneasy truce, one I cobbled together from their fear. Our fear, too. Their supply lines became ours as the Herdsmen turned their attention to Priaxia.

Priaxia never stood a chance.

Seven *Citadels of Justice* came out of heaven's light in high orbit above the planet. Within a blink of an eye, the surface of the Priaxian homeworld became nothing more than a charred cinder in space. Every living thing wiped out. The planet became a floating, lifeless rock. No more would the nourishers of old whoop their calls through the jungle. No more would the spiders themselves spin their webs between the spires of their great cities, to be carried to their goal by the warm breeze coming off the equatorial desert.

Thank goodness there had been a warning, and most of the colony populations had time to get off the planet. Some have said the energy used to destroy Priaxia by the *Citadels of Justice* was so intense, observers from Earth—some hundreds of light years away—saw an explosion not unlike a supernova. Even during the day, for two weeks, there had been a bright glow in humanities sky, like two suns burned instead of one. When the light faded, so did all hope of ever returning to Priaxia. A place I had come to call home. A place now dead.

Fortunately, the alliance became stronger that day. Humanity extended out its arm to the Priaxians. They

came to us as refugees, but were treated as equals. Technology had been shared, and in exchange, many, many men became nourishers to ensure the future of their great species. I suppose such a thing could be considered good by some. Pity the good of this war always seemed to be dimmed by the sheer scope and depth of the bad.

The Herdsmen grew tired of human meat. The Boldiens who supplied human cattle to them turned their attention to more profitable ventures. The Herdsmen now favoured other species for their dinner table, including Eldon and numerous other exotic animals. Their change in taste meant Earth would soon be on their list of planets to be wiped from the cosmos. There would be no reason to keep us in existence.

To make matters worse, all the Priaxian wave generating ships had been destroyed. All except *Mother*. Thank god. A ship I now called my home—a ship holding the alliance's last hope within its hull.

Vernon and I did the best we could. We had Jankin and Taseem, Braken and Sern and the old soldier Mara, too. All the others had left us. Some had other duties to perform. Some went to fight the war in their own way. I never heard from Ryder again.

Which then brought us to Ranjay.

He was never found. Not once in the four long years we have endured of this great war. We organised a covert mission back into Herdsmen space, smuggling ourselves on one of the human cattle ships and pretended to be the Herdsmen's next meal. We achieved nothing, and only managed to get out of Herdsmen space because one of the servants who served the Priory took a shine to Braken.

Braken paid him in kind. Sern didn't mind. He understood during war, love had to be given out even more freely than in times of peace.

As I said, all these events happened over the last four years. While I stood on the bridge of *Mother*, Vernon, my protector and my lover, stood over me, running one of his hands along my back, as I watched the dark void of space outside. We had sighted a *Citadel of Justice* pass this way no more than two days ago. In its wake, dead worlds. Some were populated, but no more. One planet in particular was home to a species known as the Lartan. A curious race of beings who had only just begun to venture into the great unknown, gaining space flight technology through natural development. Now they had been wiped out, cleaned

from the slate of history by the Herdsmen. All because they had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Their first contact experience met with the wrath of the Herdsmen. I felt for the voices I never heard.

“Drake Glauco, sir! Drake Glauco, sir,” a voice screamed from behind as soon as the lift doors opened onto the bridge’s expanse.

I turned to see a servant caste Priaxian, covered in silver body paint—the colour all faithful servants now painted themselves to let others know they weren’t a part of the Priory—rush up to the vision bubble I had been gazing out of.

“What’s the matter, Noredon?” I asked.

“We are ready to test *Mother’s* latest enhancement.”

Vernon wasted no time. He plucked me up with graceful ease and placed me on his back. I chose to remain naked, mainly because our joining sessions became more frequent, the hatchlings demand for nourishment grew and grew as they came to maturity. They would hatch soon. Perhaps within days. Perhaps within a month.

I also chose to remain naked because it pleased Vernon to see me in my natural state. He liked to fondle me at any given chance. It pleased me, too. To tell the

truth, being naked was my way of keeping things in perspective during these hard times. A reminder I'm human. Something I could never forget, especially with all the horror going on around me on a daily basis. Sure, Taseem painted me, but nevertheless, being naked meant my perspective remained on the important stuff—keeping the alliance strong.

While I was carried toward the lift, I thought about the hatchlings within Vernon. The hatchlings I had fed. Those hatchlings would ensure Priaxia had another generation. Some days Vernon demanded I provide my semen for them three or four times. By the end of such days, and with everything else going on, I was exhausted. I didn't mind. When I had him on the coral atolls of Annaz VI, I was at peace.

We made love all ways. Every way. I loved it. Every time I did it with him, it was a new experience. He made it such. Sure, he knew what I liked and I knew what he liked, but somehow he always managed to do something different. Something would titillate me, make me think of how lucky I am. One time he would play with my nipples. Another time he would nibble on my foreskin, an act which drove me crazy. Once, he licked my rim for so long I orgasmed without the need for me to even

touch myself. He's a true master.

Soon we arrived in a sort of laboratory, surrounded by technology I couldn't even hazard a guess as to its function. The room crammed with stuff, most pipes and tubes and containers filled with strange fluids. Jankin, Taseem, Braken and Sern waited for us.

Jankin smiled. "There you are, you big 'ol naked ape. We've been waiting here for ages."

Vernon plucked me off his back and placed me onto the steel grated floor with careful precision. "You love it now that you can see my dick twenty-four-seven, my dear ex-husband." I came to slap him on his shoulder. He embraced me and I returned his gesture with the same enthusiasm. "Say, why don't you take all your gear off so I can stare at you for a change?"

"Cause if I do, I'll want to roll in the hay with you." He looked up to Vernon. "And having a jealous Priaxian on my conscious isn't my idea of fun."

You can sleep with Drake, if you so choose to, Jankin.

"What'ya say, Drake? For old times' sake, you and me get hot and heavy, hey?"

I smiled. "Jankin, you couldn't handle me anymore. What I do know is called love, not just fucking. But if

you think you can come to such a high level, I'm sure Vernon and I would welcome you."

"I may just take you up on your offer. Haven't had a good cock for ages, and I have to say, yours is one of the best I've seen."

"Or ever had," I added.

Jankin laughed. We verbally sparred with each other like this all the time. Everyone in the room knew it. Seemed such a thing was now our traditional greeting ritual. I think the tension of not having found Ranjay must have been getting to him and he needed this sort of light relief. He looked weary. Eyes weighed down with dark circles, skin pale. He got worse each day. I felt for him. I felt for Taseem.

Taseem rolled her eyes. "I have enough with these two fawning all over each other." She gestured toward Braken and Sern. "Can you blokes give it a rest for a just a minute, please. What is it with men and their fascinations with their cocks...tell me?"

Braken stepped forward. Taseem had painted him silver. "Because we have them."

Sern let out a roar of laughter. "And some have a lot more than others." He was referring to Braken's appendage. One blessed with both size and being

attached to someone who knew how to use it.

Noredon coughed into his hand. "If you would permit, I think it's time I showed you all the latest version of the Solar Sound Generator we've been working on."

I cleared my throat. "Sorry, Noredon. Proceed."

He pointed to a large engine thing, all strange shaped and looking like something an ancient steam ship on Earth would have instead of an energy wave generating starship as sophisticated as *Mother*.

Then again, seeing as Priaxia had fallen, all resources had come from Earth. In effect, the Priaxians tried cannibalising Earth technology and enhancing it to suit their needs. Although, I had to say, nothing I had ever heard of or seen compared to the sight of this contraption and what it looked like to me. Something totally unusable and abstract.

"So...what's it do, again?" Jankin asked, taking my thoughts from my mind and verbalising them.

Noredon smiled, one proud and full. He gestured toward the engine. "As you are aware, a star uses nuclear fusion to generate its luminosity. What you might not know is reactions like that create a hell of a noise. The proof is in the fact the corona of stars is just

as hot as the core, if not hotter. Only the energy from sound could maintain such an even temperature—”

Taseem said, “But stars don’t sound like anything. We’d hear them.” Jankin whispered into her ear. “Oh, I see. Space is a vacuum.”

“The generator creates a tunnel of particles sound can be transmitted down,” Noredon continued, his voice rising an octave. “In effect, when pointed at a star and then at an enemy target, it becomes a sonic weapon, but one more powerful than anything the universe has ever witnessed...except when a star goes supernova, of course. We could wipe out all of the *Citadels of Justice* in one foul swoop. Wouldn’t that be exciting?”

But it’s not tested yet, is it? Vernon asked.

Noredon’s face reflected a touch of annoyance at Vernon’s question. “No. It hasn’t been tested yet. But such a weapon could turn the tide of the war. I know it. And to tell the truth, what else do we have? Metal ships from humans which can’t stand any sort of attack because they are too brittle and living hull skin from Aurora that isn’t even compatible with our technology? No offence, Drake, but desperate times require novel ideas. Ideas which need to go beyond what we currently have, because what we currently have isn’t good

enough.”

And how far away will Mother be when the weapon is activated?

Again Noredon’s expression dropped. “*Mother* will have to be the mediator between the chosen star and the target.”

That will destroy her, won’t it?

“Yes—no. I mean, I don’t know. It hasn’t been tested.”

Vernon shuffled his weight. He reached out to grab me. I came under him and scratched his thorax. Reassure him. *Would we want to sacrifice our most successful active weapon in the vain hope this new one may work?*

I looked up to him. “We may not have a choice.”

Tunnel Vision

“Thank you, Drake. If we don’t try and do something, then what good are we? We may as well fall down in front of the Herdsmen and die just like the Lartan. Do you want such a thing for Priaxia? For humanity and the alliance? Do you, Vernon?”

I came to reassure Noredon in the same way I did Vernon. I rubbed him under his thorax. He cooed. “No, we don’t want such a thing to happen. Proceed. I want to hear what you have to say.”

Noredon sighed. “Vernon is right. Without reinforced shielding, *Mother* would not stand a chance against the sonic weapon. She would have to be so far away, any targeting of the energy tunnel to have any effect would be impossible.”

Sern said, “Why don’t we just get the magnosphere shielding the Herdsmen use? From what I’ve seen it kicks arse, big time if you ask me.”

We all looked at him.

Braken came to embrace him. “You are so clever, my big strong, soldier.”

Sern returned the embrace. “Must be all the love juice you keep filling me with.”

Taseem rolled her eyes again, but diverted the conversation back on track. “Hang on, if we use the Herdsmen shielding, won’t it mean the Citadels themselves will be protected, too? I mean, if the magnoshpere thing protects us, won’t it protect them?”

“And we haven’t even considered the fact we don’t have that sort of technology,” Jankin added.

Noredon stood silent for a long moment. Finally, he added, “You are all correct. The magnosphere which protects the *Citadels of Justice* would prove to be an effective shield against the solar tunnel weapon. We—”

So why are we even having this conversation. I don’t understand.

I could tell we must be close to an extraction for the hatchlings soon. Vernon always got on edge when his babies needed feeding. I felt myself harden at such a thought. Right now, I couldn’t think of anything better than being in his arms on the atoll, gasping for breath as he made sweet love to me.

“If you let me finish, Vernon, I was about to add there are different types of magnospheres. I mean, smaller magnitude suns would have one far less powerful than say larger magnitude one or even a neutron star, such as a pulsar, for that matter.”

I blinked. “So what does this all mean?”

Noredon went over to an instrument panel on the Solar Sound Generator. He flicked a couple of switches. “It means we must discover what frequency the magnospheres’ on the *Citadel of Justice* use and create one more powerful to protect *Mother*.”

Vernon shuffled his weight again. *I don’t think it’s going to be so simple, Noredon. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we don’t have magnosphere technology.*

“I agree,” I said. “How are we going to get our hands on such information...putting aside the fact we don’t have magnosphere technology in the first place as Vernon has said.”

Noredon smiled. “We’ve been cobbling together technology from Earth, Priaxia and Aurora for the best part of two years now. Integrating Herdsmen technology shouldn’t be hard. I have learned to make many compromises. I’ve even harvested some rather neat Boldien systems to help with the guidance of the Solar

Sound Generator. They have extensive and rather impressive tracking technology, you know.”

“Okay, say we can shield *Mother* with a magnosphere.” Jankin came to embrace me around me waist. I didn’t knock him away. As the years passed, and he was no closer to finding his son, he had become more affectionate with all of us. Pity he wasn’t like this while we had been married. “How are we going to find out what frequency the Citadel’s use so we can build a more powerful one? That to me seems to be the sticking point of this whole plan.”

Sern said, “We board a *Citadel of Justice* and steal the information.”

Again, we all looked at him. He was cradling Braken, as his lover lavished kisses upon him.

“I know you love the action side of things, Sern,” I said. “But getting into a Citadel has never been done.”

We are following one right now, aren’t we?

I turned to look at Vernon. “I thought you thought this was a bad idea?”

I changed my mind. Vernon patted me. *Such a thing hasn’t been done before and the Herdsmen wouldn’t be expecting it. Braken and I know of a couple of contacts within the Citadel we are tracking. They could assist us*

if we asked for it.

“You do?” Taseem’s eyes lit up.

I knew of many Priory members who had become disillusioned with the course the Herdsmen had taken. Their promise of power wasn’t as absolute as they had been led to believe. To tell the truth, the Priory *were* the Herdsmen’s pawns. Used in situations where they would be placed into a battle just to weaken defences before a Citadel moved in and mopped up the rest. A few had become agents for us on the inside.

Unfortunately, being a contact wasn’t an easy task. If discovered, they were executed on the spot. No questions asked. We had to be careful. We had to proceed with absolute certainty if we were to infiltrate a *Citadel of Justice*.

I swallowed hard, an action that rang loud in my ears.

Braken had unwound himself from Sern’s arms. “I will begin preparations for our departure. We will have to use a Boldien ship if we are even going to get close to a Citadel without suspicion. Preferably with the crew on our side.”

“That would mean paying them more than what the Herdsmen have offered for their services.” I thought

about my words. The Herdsmen didn't pay with any monetary value. They paid with protection. I sighed. Even a Priaxian jungle rat wouldn't be stupid enough to go against the might of the Herdsmen if they were already under its protection. We didn't have a hope in hell of persuading any crew to do as we wished. No, we would have to take a Boldien ship by force.

Before I could add to my thoughts, Sern said, "The Boldiens are the Herdsmen bitches. They will not go against them. I say we commandeer a ship by force."

Jankin and Taseem nodded their approval. Vernon came over me. I knew he didn't like the sound of such a thing. Then again, what choice did we have? We had to find an advantage in this war, and the Solar Sound Generator was our best hope. Seeing the plan to fruition would be the difficult part, I just knew it.

Again, I swallowed hard. "I suggest we all get some rest. First thing tomorrow, we will take a leaf flyer out to one of the Herdsmen supply lines. When there, we will wait for a Boldien transport."

"Agreed." Sern barked.

This does seem like the best chance we've had in a long while. No more planets will fall if we are successful.

“And if we fail, then the loss will be incalculable,” I added.

The loss has already been incalculable.

I scratched his abdomen, feeling his soft hairs tickle my fingers. “I know. We will make sure the loss of Priaxia wasn’t in vain. No matter how long it takes, we will see to it the empire of mammals and spiders lasts forever and all the future generations of both our species will remember how great we had been in these dark days. Yes, I have made many promises, but I plan to keep them all.”

“Including finding Ranjay,” Taseem said, coming to take Jankin by his hand and lead him toward the exit of the laboratory.

I turned to look her in the eye. Her words weren’t born from venom, far from it. She just wanted her son back, offering a gentle reminder that this war affected people on a personal level as well as on the grand scale. I couldn’t blame her. “I plan to keep such a promise.”

Jankin offered me a smile, but added nothing more. Braken and Sern had already left. I imagined they were now engaged with each other in a deep physical way. Good on them.

You are a good man, Drake. Vernon picked me up. I

took it he had more urgent matters on his mind. I didn't need any guesses to figure it out either. An extraction was due. His thorax bulged with the ever ripening egg within him. His movement over the last few months had been more deliberate, just like a woman at the end of her term, to put it into some kind of perspective. Funny seeing a spider walk gingerly and with a waddle.

When he had placed me where I always sat upon him, I ran my hand along the top of his head. He cooed. *It is time, my love.*

“I know.”

The Starfish and the Jungle

Vernon had carried me to our quarters.

When he had plucked me off his back and manoeuvred me around so our stomach's touched, his extraction tube engulfed my erection. A split second later, our minds, bodies and souls came together as one. Our heartbeats in harmony, our thoughts aligned.

The view of Annaz VI came into coalescence. I gasped. I loved seeing the endless ocean sprinkled with coral atolls where we always consummated our love in this form. Sure, the vision was all in our minds, but to me this was more real than anything I had ever shared with Jankin.

Vernon, in his human form, took my hand as the starfish rained down on us to begin their mating dance. There was a twinkle of want in his eye and a curl of his lips. He was so handsome. So perfect. All hair and muscle and a caring nature. I gasped again as his touch

tightened. A touch which meant he wanted me to lie down and accept his love on an intimate level. His love far deeper than anything any other man had ever given me.

“I want you to see the starfish and the forest, tonight,” he said with a deep growl. A noise which reflected perfectly the need in his expression.

At first I was puzzled. Most times he only took me to Annaz VI during our extractions, dry or not. Since Priaxia had fallen, he had never mentioned it in such a way. Perhaps our meeting with Noredon had sparked some hope within him. “Are you all right?” I said as I lay down, opening my legs for him.

He came to touch me. I shuddered as he ran his hand down the length of my shaft, pulling at me so my foreskin retracted, revealing my bulging head weeping pre-cum for his attention. I looked up. Night had indeed fallen. The stars shone bright against the dark blanket of the sky. The sound of the ocean lapping at the atoll all I could hear besides his warm breath against my skin.

He took me into his mouth.

I gasped again. This time my stomach did that wonderful somersault thing while he expertly rolled his tongue over my sensitive skin. I grabbed my own

nipples, pinching them, stimulating them so much they ached to match the want I felt right now. At the same time Vernon took me in as far as he could manage while he fondled my balls with gentle care. I was in heaven. A place I had come to know as Annaz VI. He sucked and slurped and paid his attention to me for what seemed an eternity. Sweat gathered on my brow as I writhed underneath him. He kept on going, harder and faster. I shuddered over and over, my balls tingling, my body now saturated with the same tingling, which started in my stomach.

Although, I had noticed he hadn't answered my question. Then again, I had to admit, in this instant I didn't care. I became lost in his actions, his warmth, his love. Wave upon wave of pleasure rolled though me just like the great ocean surrounding us. The only difference, the torrent of pleasure building up inside me had gained in intensity.

Seconds later, he licked my balls. Then, before I could get accustomed to such a wonderful action, he separated my legs even more, holding me below my knees. I arched my back so he could get to me with even more ease.

Vernon licked my rim.

I nearly exploded right there and then. But I held back. Actually, the only thing, which stopped me from ejaculating before I wanted to, before Vernon pierced me, was the fact the scenery changed. We arrived on a jungle floor. The jungle grew with fervour underneath the nests of Priaxian incubators, as it had for centuries until that fateful day when the *Citadels of Justice* darkened the sky and unleashed their might.

I gasped again and again as Vernon licked me with ever increasing intensity, lashing his tongue in beautiful solid movements across my arsehole, over the length of my crevice and over my balls and cock. The base of my spine felt like jelly and I lost all sensation in my legs.

“Take me. I fucking beg you, take me!” I screamed out into the thick canopy above me. Whooping noises filled the air. I must have startled some of the native nourishers. I didn’t care. I had only moments before I would soak myself in my own cum. I needed him now.

Vernon stopped.

He came over me. His lips now wet with his efforts. His smile matched the wonder he had given me. “I will take you now.”

I growled. “I wasn’t a request, it’s a fucking order!”

“Patience.”

“I’ll give you—”

But I didn’t get to finish my words. Vernon’s cock pierced my warmth, and I shuddered like someone who had been electrocuted. I don’t know how, but I managed to grapple him, bring him closer, my nails scratching the skin on his back. In an instant I became overwhelmed. He pushed himself in deeper and all I could manage was a muffled “fuuuucking heeellll” before he pressed his warm lips onto mine.

My prostate burned with the sudden stimulation it received. I couldn’t gasp or call out into the heated night to let him know he had hit the spot I needed him to touch. Vernon’s tongue was too busy dancing with my own, our lips sealed. I didn’t care. My rim stretched, my hole filled, and my body soaked in both pleasure and pain.

I came.

Warmth spread all over my stomach. My cock pumped out more and more of my semen, as much as I could give, my whole body working toward such an achievement. While I shuddered with ecstasy, my anal sphincter muscles contracted. He groaned, coming away from our kiss to let out a hiss of sheer joy.

I knew he loved it when I came while he was inside

me. What man wouldn't want to experience such a thing? It blew my mind. "Oh, Drake!"

He collapsed onto me.

Vernon had orgasmed, too. I pulled him in closer, lavished kisses upon him. Within a blink of an eye, we arrived back in our quarters on board *Mother*. He placed my heated body onto a freshly spun silken bed. I sunk into it. A welcome finish to our passion. Like eating cake or ice-cream after a fantastic meal.

When my body had cooled and my breath was no longer taken away by my ecstasy, I said, "You didn't answer my question earlier."

What question was that?

I reached out so I could touch him. Reassure him. "I asked you if you were all right... remember."

He came over me, embracing me with all eight of his hands. *I am always all right when I am with you.*

"I didn't mean that." I ran my hand over his cheek. He pressed his body against mine. The first thing I noticed was my now flaccid cock. His hairs tickled me there. I also knew it would be slicked with my ejaculate and his body fluids. Vernon's extraction tube had directed most of my semen to feed the hatchlings, but there was always a residue. "You haven't shown me

Priaxia since...well, you know.”

All eight of his onyx eyes studied me for the longest time. *For the first time in a long time, I feel there is hope.*

“I know. I feel it, too.”

I just hope our contact comes through.

“What do you mean?”

There will be a price to pay for his services. To go against the Herdsmen is a risky thing.

“We will give him whatever he wants if he helps us. Such a thing wouldn’t even be questioned.”

Would you let him make love to you if that’s what he wanted?

I let out a dismissive chuckle. “Why would he ask for such a thing?”

Vernon shuffled his weight. *Because the contact Braken and I have secured likes humans in such a way, that’s why. He has been known to save many humans from the Herdsmen dinner table in exchange for sexual favours. That is why we approached him in the first place. He has feelings for mammals. Feelings I can understand completely.*

I fell silent for the longest time. Eventually, I said, “We’ll worry about such things when the time comes.

But you're right about one thing."

What's that?

"There is hope then if a member of the Priory can show compassion in such a way."

He has saved hundreds. But he has done so in secret. The ones he has saved the only ones who have passed on what it is he had been doing.

"What's his name?"

Forgen.

"What? But how? I thought he was the leader of the Priory."

He is. But when Ranjay came of age and his ejaculate revealed Mara's secret, Forgen put into place his own agenda. He may not be able to beat the Herdsmen, but he would do all he could to make sure the humans he saved could one day rise up and defeat them.

Then it all clicked into place. Forgen and the Priory knew the truth, the depth of the Herdsmen's treachery, thanks to Ranjay coming of age. But in the end, nothing could be done about it on their part. The information useless. The servants *could* become nourishers, as had been their dream, but they were bound to the Herdsmen forever. To remain servants no matter their masters.

I couldn't help but see the funny side of all this. Alliance friendly servants only wanted soldiers as mates. Braken was proof of such a thing. The Priory, as with all extreme cults, had painted themselves into a corner. Something I believed the Herdsmen knew all along, and as such, they used the information to manipulate them.

“Why didn't you tell me this before?”

I only found out this morning. Braken had come in contact with one of the men Forgen had just rescued. Human meat isn't in favour on a Herdsmen's plate, but they are still being eaten.

“I can see why Forgen wants to keep all this a secret. I can also see now how he could be the only one who could have pulled all this off.”

Indeed.

A dark thought crossed my mind. “So is Ranjay still alive now that he has given up the secret Mara planted within him?”

Vernon looked away for a brief moment. *We don't know. That is why we are fortunate Forgen himself is within the closest Citadel. I believe they are inspecting the supply line that feeds the Herdsmen allies from this sector of space. Perhaps he can tell us.*

“Good timing for sure. Will he be that cooperative,

though?”

I sure hope so. Any information he can give us will be invaluable. Now get some sleep, my love. We will need all our strength tomorrow. A big day.

Vernon wrapped me in his arms tighter. His breath tickled my cheek and soon enough I found my thoughts filled with images of Ranjay, the naked painted boy I had seen four years ago, acting as the voice of the Herdsmen. I sure hoped he was alive. Jankin and Taseem would be devastated if he weren't. Heck, I'd be devastated. Sure, I hadn't seen him other than when I was put before the Herdsmen council, but I still had feelings for him. A connection, if you will. After all, he was my ex-husband's son. How old was Ranjay now? Seventeen? Eighteen?

I turned, not an easy thing to do with a Priaxian holding me tight. My thoughts wandered into darker ground. Perhaps I had to become Forgen's bitch so we could get the assistance we needed. To turn the tide of this war. I swallowed hard. I didn't want anyone but Vernon. Then again, sacrifices may have to be made.

I didn't sleep well.

The Disappearing Gun

The next morning, I woke to the sound of Vernon rummaging around in the cupboards of our quarters. His actions seemed desperate, like he had been looking for something of great importance without success.

“What are you doing?” I said with a sheepish drawl.

I need to locate my weapon.

I sat up. “Your what?”

My gun. My gun. Vernon paused, turned to look at me then returned to his foraging. *Have you seen it, my love? I need to locate it.*

By now my curiosity had taken over all other concerns. “I’ve never seen you with a gun of any sort. I didn’t even know you had one.”

It’s not for me. It’s for you.

“For me?” By now I was really interested. I got up off our silken bed. “Why would I need a gun?”

Because I may not be able to defend you.

I ran my hands across the hairy skin on his abdomen. “You’ve always protected me. Why should things be different now?”

Again, Vernon turned to me. *The hatchlings are due very soon.*

I understood his concern. Over the last few weeks, as he asked to take more and more of my ejaculate to feed the hatchlings, he had, for want of a better word, weakened. A thought then struck my mind. Should he even be going on this mission? Should we?

“We don’t have to go, you know.”

Yes we do. We made a promise to Jankin.

“I made a promise to Jankin, you mean?”

Vernon paused his search, then added when he had retrieved the weapon he had been looking for all along. *We made a promise.*

Again, I understood. We were a symbiotic partnership. He needed me just as much as I needed him. There was no *I* in a situation such as ours. I scratched him harder. He cooed. “Well, we’d better get to the loading bay. The others are probably waiting for us by now. We do have a tendency to sleep in these days.”

Vernon chuckled. *They haven’t got an egg the size of a human adolescent inside them, now have they?*

I grabbed the gun. Where I was going to put it I had no idea, especially being naked. Looking at the weapon, I added, "So, what am I supposed to do with this?"

He chuckled louder into my mind. *Place it between your buttocks. It is an organo-meld weapon.*

"I don't understand."

Priaxians don't wear clothes either, and only soldiers carry weapons so all can see.

With a moment of hesitation, I did as he instructed. The metal felt cold against my skin, but as soon as I had gripped it within my arse cheeks, something strange happened. The gun melded into my flesh, like the object was dissolving to soak into my flesh. I suppose that's why they called it an organo-meld weapon. It melted so it became a part of me now. Ingenious really.

"How do I get it out if I need to use it?" was my instinctive query as the coolness of the weapon's touch dissipated.

The way you put it in. You touch the same spot and it will re-emerge from your body, ready to be used.

Now it was my turn to chuckle. "Just don't ask me to play with myself in that area during our next dry extraction. I don't want to blast you with the gun's load, too."

Vernon wrapped me in his arms. *I like the sound of a dry extraction right now. Unfortunately, the hatchlings need so much. We won't be able to afford such a luxury until after their birth.*

"I can wait. So long as I am with you, I don't care what endurance I have to suffer."

We may have much to endure during this next mission.

"I love you so much, Vernon."

And I love you with all my heart, Drake, my love. Now come. We must go. I want to be onboard the flying leaf soon. We will need to join. The hatchlings are getting hungry.

He placed me onto his back. Soon, I was carried through many corridors toward the loading bay. The hum of *Mother's* engines all there was to keep the silence away. Vernon and I never spoke just before a mission. Then again, we didn't need to. We knew what had to be done.

The sight of the flying leaf brought back so many memories. The spaceship had been configured like our first flying leaf, a vessel I hadn't thought much about for near on four years now. The craft was beautiful, but smaller than anything of Priaxian design I had seen

previously. I'd say the thing was build for stealth more than anything. There didn't seem to be any weapon's ports for a start.

Jankin, Taseem, Braken and Sern had been waiting for us on the bridge. Mara decided his services would be better utilised onboard *Mother*. No one questioned him.

Once on board, and all of us now secure, we received clearance to leave from *Mother*. Seconds later, the vacuum of black, which is known as space, filled the vision bubble. Vernon embraced me like he always did, acting like a huge hairy blanket of flesh and bone. He cooed. I noticed he made such noises more and more these days. I didn't need to be told he was talking to his hatchlings. They were old enough now to recognise his voice...and mine, from what he told me one day. I was their father, after all.

I hadn't tested out that theory, but was comforted in the knowledge my contribution would be recognised if and when the time came to fruition as something more than just providing nourishment for them.

Entering heaven's light on your command, Braken, the ship said. Today it was Braken's turn to pilot. We had all come to an agreement that Sern, Vernon and Braken would share the roles of controlling any flying

leaf we flew during missions. This rotation served two purposes, to give Braken and Sern a feeling they were indeed an important part of the team and to give Vernon a rest. Vernon needed a lot of rest these past few weeks. So did I, to tell the truth. Ejaculating four or five times a day for a month straight began to take its toll on me. I was exhausted, too. No longer did we dream share after an extraction. We both went straight to sleep.

Apparently, I needed to keep up this vigorous nourishment schedule for a little while longer. Then, a few days before the hatchlings are due, all extractions had to stop. Vernon told me how the hatchlings stored my nourishment in preparation for the final part of the pregnancy.

I raised an eyebrow as I thought about all this. I looked forward to the week off. Not because I would no longer be joined with Vernon, because we could share dry extractions, but because such a thing would mean I could make love to him without having to worry about whether or not the hatchlings got enough food.

My thoughts then turned to the matter at hand, as Braken came to the pilot's seat. He gestured over the control panel and within a beat of my heart, the vision bubble was filled with the familiar kaleidoscope of

heaven's light.

We had a journey of two hours before we reached the Boldien supply line, which serviced the Herdsmen for this sector of space. Some had said they had commandeered Auroran vessels for the purpose. Some had seen Earth ships being used. How they were achieving such a thing would soon be seen.

I just hoped there weren't any nasty surprises waiting for us when we came out of heaven's light. I didn't fancy a fire fight right about now with anything, more particularly a *Citadel of Justice*. I shuddered at such a thought, leaning into Vernon even more than usual, listening to his heartbeat, his breathing, the hatchlings scratch the shell of the egg within him.

As I got settled, enjoying the hypnotic view of colour before me and the warmth from my symbiotic lover, he said, *It is time again, my love.*

"Of course." I said.

Jankin came over to us, Taseem in tow. "We won't mind if you extract here. Besides, there aren't any quarters on this ship."

I offered a crooked smile. "It's not enough I'm buck naked all the time, is it? Now you want to watch me fuck."

“I wouldn’t mind, either,” Taseem said, leaning forward to peck me on my forehead with her warm sensuous lips.

Oh, great. We’re surrounded by voyeurs.

Braken said. “If it makes you feel any better, Sern and I will do the nasty in front of you all, too.”

Sern remained silent, but his smile, one which was wanting, revealed how he really felt. That, and the fact he came over Braken and started to fondle him with all eight of his hands in a rotating pattern so he always had two feet on the floor and he never lost balance. Not once.

I had to admit, watching a servant fuck the brains out of a soldier was an sight everyone had to witness just once in their lives. If only to see the full extent of what Braken had been endowed with when he got excited. It was also a marvel to see a big, burly soldier whimper like a little girl lost as the servant pounded away. “Sure, why not turn the ship into an orgy vessel. I’m sure it won’t mind.”

“My name is the *Little Sage Leaf*, the ship chimed in. And you can all do what you like. I’m busy navigating through space at near light speed, making sure we don’t impact with anything. Don’t mind me.”

Jankin came to slap me on my shoulder. “Looks like we get our show then, hey?”

I rolled my eyes, and under any normal circumstance would have dismissed it all as a laugh. But the hatchlings were hungry and Vernon looked tired.

The time was now.

The World of Water

Vernon and I finished our extraction. Once again, he took me to the coral atolls of Annaz VI, and once again, he was magnificent. Yet, as was now common recently, he became exhausted after he brought me back to reality. So much so, he curled up into a ball and stayed like that for the longest time.

I left him to it. Sure, I was drained, too, but only in as far as all men got after they ejaculated. After the heat of our moment had left my skin, I was ready for anything. Good thing, too. I was confronted with the sight of Jankin and Taseem, mouths agape while they watched Braken fuck the living daylights out of Sern.

Sern on his back, screaming in both agony and ecstasy. All eight of his legs quivering, curled up around Braken. He looked like a terrestrial spider that had just been sprayed with insecticide. I couldn't help but watch, too.

I had caught them at the moment of their climax. Braken pulled himself out of Sern, his massive cock, the size of a human's arm, glistened. Veins bulging, barbed head red and ripe, ready to explode.

Braken said something incomprehensible, shouted it out to the air above him, but understanding his words wasn't needed. Sern got up off the floor and came so his mouth took in his lover's cock. With gulping noises and a lot of groaning from both of them, and when Sern had taken in as much as he was ever going to, Braken blew his load. I didn't need to see the result. I knew what had happened.

Braken's body shuddered in the unmistakable way all men did when they released their sperm. Although, to see an alien spider climax was an experience I am thankful I had the pleasure to witness. They wrapped their legs around each other, abdomens touching, mandibles locked. When Braken came, Sern did, too. His cum spurted all over Braken's thorax in thick white ribbons. Then silence as they held their embrace tight and kissed.

I went to Jankin and nudged him, knocking him from his reverie. "Now you've seen it, I think it's safe to say you won't forget it," I said.

Jankin nodded slowly. "Imagine taking in that cock. I've never...I've never seen anything like it in my life."

Taseem cleared her throat. "Is Vernon like... Braken, too?"

"No. Only the servant class are so well endowed. All the other castes are...easier to handle." I couldn't help but feel embarrassed as I spoke those words. My cheeks flushed. Strange. We had just performed an extraction in front of everyone. Then it struck me. An extraction *was* different to making love. When Vernon and I wanted to be together on an intimate physical level, touch each other with our sex and share our bond, then such a thing would be something I wanted done in private. Something only he and I shared. An extraction was a necessity and as such could be done anywhere. Like breastfeeding a baby.

Vernon called such a thing a dry extraction. I called it something else. I called it completion. Something we did when I had nourished the hatchlings, but wanted to be with him on another level. A level I once thought I had with Jankin.

"Just as well." Jankin turned to look me in the eye. "I couldn't see how a nourisher could last for too long if an incubator was hung like a servant."

I shook my head. Jankin's words annoyed me for a split second. "An extraction and physical love are two different things."

His lips curled with a look of smugness he got when he thought he knew something he wasn't supposed to. "Vernon hasn't fucked you, has he?"

"I beg your pardon?" I blurted.

"You've been with him in every way possible...but not once has he pierced you. Am I right?"

Taseem nudged him. "Jankin!"

But he ignored her. He was like that. When he thought he had information he could use against someone, he made sure he used it to his full advantage. "I can change that, Drake 'ol buddy. Lie down, I'll fuck your brains out right here and now. Make you scream like a bitch. I know you want it. You were always an arse man, through and through. I mean, it must be killing you not to have a good hard cock slide in between your legs. I bet—"

Taseem pulled him away. "That's enough, Jankin. We've got to concentrate on the matter at hand and bullying Drake doesn't accomplish that." Her words timed perfectly, too. I wanted to deck him. Show him right there and then he had crossed the line. Then again,

doing such a thing would confirm in his mind what he said was true even if it wasn't. I'm glad Taseem was there.

Before I could utter any word of protest, come-back, profanity, or offer my thanks to Taseem, The Little Sage Leaf, said, "We are approaching the coordinates for the Boldien supply line for this sector of space."

Vernon got up onto his feet, coming over me. *What have you been talking about? You look upset, my love.*

I reached up and rubbed his abdomen. "When we're on a supply ship and heading for the *Citadel of Justice* I want you to *fuck my brains* out." I slid my gaze over to Jankin. His cheeky smile now removed from his lips. It was in that moment he would have realised he had been wrong. Perhaps that would shut him up in the future. I also realised, in that moment, any attraction I once had for him no longer existed. He was no more attractive to me than Taseem. Actually, scratch that thought. I would rather go to bed with Taseem than be physical in any way with my ex-husband.

Of course, anything for you, Drake, my love. But why speak of such things now?

"Just know, I *need* you and leave it at that."

While Vernon ruminated, the Little Sage Leaf added,

“I am detecting a gateway and a structure around it, and many, many vessels in the vicinity. I would advise we come out of heaven’s light far from the enemies sensor range.”

With Jankin trying to rile me up, and succeeding for the most part until I put him back in his place, I hadn’t noticed Braken back at the controls. Sern was no longer on the bridge. “Advisement approved,” the servant said as he gestured over the controls.

The image on the vision bubble swirled from the kaleidoscope of heaven’s light to the deep eternal black of space speckled with uncountable stars. We had come into normal space next to a planet. A planet, which looked like it was covered in water and with a thick atmosphere, too.

“On the planet’s dark side, there is the Boldien supply port. I can confirm there are seven Auroran strike ships, two war vessels, twelve supply carriers, and a gateway. Seems to me this is an important sector in the supply line for the Herdsmen effort. If we could disable it, perhaps we could gain an advantage,” the ship said.

The Little Sage Leaf was right. But being right didn’t mean such a suggestion should shape the course of our actions. “No. We are here to commandeer a supply

vessel bound for the nearest *Citadel of Justice*. We have a plan and we must stick to it. Nothing more,” I said, more harshly than I had intended. I think I was still smarting from Jankin’s attempt to rile me. I tried to shake those thoughts from my mind. Getting upset right now wouldn’t be productive. Besides, Jankin could no longer have me in any way, shape or form. A notion I used to comfort me.

How are we going to do that without being detected? We didn’t anticipate the supply line being so large here.

Braken said, “Since Magellan Prime’s destruction some four years ago, the Herdsmen have set up a line here. It will feed their war effort against humanity, if my calculations are correct.” He had punched up a screen. On it, a diagrammatic representation of this sector of space came up. What he said was true. A gateway here would give them easy access to the artificial gateway the Aurorans had set up near Neptune. I shuddered. They were getting too close for comfort.

“Is the gateway active?” Taseem asked.

“Not yet,” Braken replied. “But it won’t be long from the look of it.”

A gateway here at Waterworld—as I called the planet below—would mean the Herdsmen had stepped

up their efforts. Their cleansing of the galaxy one step closer to reality. We had all been thinking such a strike against Earth would happen one day. Seemed that day was nearer than we had hoped. I swallowed hard. “Fuuuckiiing heeeellll,” I moaned under my breath. To everyone, I added, “We had better get a move on then, hadn’t we?”

Sern came onto the bridge. He looked rather pleased with himself. Like a man who had just been fucked until he saw Nirvana, I’d say. Lucky bastard. “I say we use the path of least resistance.”

“What did you have in mind, my big, strong man?” Braken cooed, rushing over to his soldier and embracing him, running his hands all along his chitin covered skin and then onto his softer underside. Sern’s cock slid out from its sheath while he cooed with delight in response. His barbed dick wet with pre cum, dripping with his desire. Seemed one session of servant love wasn’t enough for him.

“If I tell you, will you take me again?”

“Yes,” Braken breathed with a voice filled with not only his love, but sheer and absolute lust as well.

Sern kissed him on his forehead. “We come at them from underneath.”

I don't understand, Vernon said.

"I think I do," Jankin said. He winked at me, then added, "We go down to the planet, skim the ocean until the supply base is above us, then we make a bee-line from there."

"Oh, that is genius," Taseem said. "They would have scanned the planet before setting up the base. If Sern is right, we could be right on their doorstep before they even knew it. Brilliant, Sern."

Sern smiled. "Being in the arms of my beautiful Braken gives me a new found clarity."

Jankin mumbled something under his breath. I didn't need to hear the words to know they would be derogatory. I understood his mentality. If he couldn't get what he wanted, he resorted to childish name calling and bullying. I sighed. I'm surprised our marriage lasted, to be honest. Yes, he was a good man. Still, didn't hide the fact he was also selfish when it came to the relationship side of things. I felt sorry for Taseem even though I couldn't help but get the feeling she knew how to handle him. Something I had never mastered.

I brought my arm up so I could embrace one of Vernon's legs. "I think you are right, Sern. They would be complacent about anything coming from the surface

of the planet, especially seeing as the place is being run by Boldiens and they are busy in the final stages of construction. All they care about is getting the job done so they get paid.”

The Little Sage Leaf said, “Descending to planet’s surface.”

Taseem said, “Jankin and I will part company with you all once we are docked with the gateway. I see no better time to disable the Herdsmen supply line to Earth than to strike right now while they are vulnerable. We’ll try and blow it up from within if we can. And before you protest, Drake, we’ve all got to do our part. I believe Jankin and I can achieve more if we succeed.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, saddened by the turn of events. I didn’t want them to go. I thought of us all as a team.

Jankin came to hold my hand, his touch warm. “We not only have Ranjay to think about. Too many of us running about a Citadel could be more detrimental than good. Besides, I know you will rescue him. You promised.”

Under my breath, I said, “I love you and hate you, you know that?”

He leaned forward, planting a kiss square on my lips.

In that instant, I was overwhelmed with the taste of him, especially when he squeezed his tongue between my pursed lips. He was salty, sweet and very manly. When parted, and in his usual annoying, frustrating way, said, “Keep your arse nice and tight for me.”

Taseem giggled. “You know he’s only teasing, don’t you, Drake?”

I nodded, but didn’t offer any words in reply. Vernon plucked me up and cuddled me. I felt loved in that moment, forgetting for a moment how Jankin always seemed to get the better of me no matter the situation. I was glad I had Vernon. He understood me on a level Jankin could only dream about.

“We have broken atmosphere,” Braken said.

The Boldien Manoeuvre

The Little Sage Leaf skimmed the surface of Waterworld's oceans with ease. White spray kicked up by the engines of the ship, a fleeting reminder we were even there at all.

Jankin and Taseem had retired to another room. To prepare for their mission, no doubt. Braken had taken his seat back at the controls. Sern stood guard over him. Watching. Admiring.

Vernon and I sat left of the main control station in each other's arms. His warmth saturating my body, his heartbeat loud and soothing in my ears. When wrapped in his body I could only describe the sensation as being inside a womb, dark, warm and safe. I was at ease with the world, not a worry passing my thoughts. I had even forgiven Jankin. He couldn't help what he was.

"We are underneath the gateway," the ship said. "Shall I begin our ascent?"

“Affirmative,” Braken replied. “Try and remain as slippery as you can to any sensors. We don’t want any surprises. Not now.”

Soon the cool blue of the ocean and the sky above gave way to the dark of the universe. In that moment I understood the scale of the Herdsmen’s activity in this sector of space. The gateway was massive. Unlike any I had seen or any human would construct. It was reminiscent of a Citadel, full of spires and crystal like structures, which seemed to glow. I imagined they would be building a gateway, which could defend itself. Again, something a human wouldn’t have thought the need to construct. Not before the Herdsmen invasion, anyway.

“Are the weapon systems active on that thing?” Sern asked, taking my thoughts and realising them.

“Not that I can tell,” the ship replied. “But it is of Herdsmen design. Such systems I am not one-hundred percent sure about.”

It looks more powered up than I thought, Vernon said, his voice shrill with nerves.

I swallowed hard. I imagined the next few moments would determine whether or not the Little Sage Leaf’s hunch was right. I sure hoped the gateway wasn’t active

in any defensive sort of way. As in weapons which could fire upon us. Such a thing would finish the mission before it even started. We would all be dead as soon as the first shot struck. The Little Sage Leaf wasn't designed for anything other than speed and stealth. I yearned for *Mother*.

As we approached the mega-structure, the frightening new Herdsmen gateway, Jankin and Taseem emerged. I could see the reason for their sudden departure from the bridge. Taseem had painted Jankin.

My breath was taken away. He, I had to admit, was a beautiful example of a man. All tall, muscular, well proportioned, and a cock, which could stretch even the most fucked hole in the galaxy.

She had painted him gold. Everywhere. Just like how she painted me. Every inch of skin covered except for the palms of his hands and the soles of his feet. I noticed his golden painted foreskin had a dribble of fluid to complete the wet look all men got after they had been aroused. The *after sex* stretch to his foreskin confirming without doubt what they had been doing. That and his knowing smile. He winked at me.

"One of the commandeered Auroran vessels is moving," the ship said.

I turned my full attention to the vision bubble. What the Little Sage Leaf had announced was true. One of the Auroran strike ships was coming toward us. Had we been detected?

“Evasive manoeuvres,” Braken screamed, his movements frantic over the control panel.

I was flung deeper into Vernon’s embrace. The ship turned, almost at a right angle to its previous path toward the Herdsmen gateway. The vision bubble view spun with the manoeuvre and my stomach wanted to occupy the same space as my head. Because of the size of the Little Sage Leaf, inertial dampeners capable of softening such an action weren’t a priority.

Still. The ship got us away. But not before turning three more times like the first, accelerating hard—almost to the point of reaching heaven’s light approach speed—and coming to attach itself onto the gateway. We were right under their noses. A good place to be unless someone looked out a window and raised the alarm.

“Initialising camouflage,” the ship chimed with a certain amount of pride.

“We must be quiet,” Braken added, keeping his eye and his efforts on the control panel. “Shielding is not available on this vessel and I am afraid any noises could

be detected if they scanned for such things.”

The Auroran strike ship, now under Boldien control because the Aurorans themselves had cowered back to their own sector of space to lick their wounds, came into view once more. The thing now right above us. I had to admire the Aurorans for one thing. They knew how to construct spaceships. The vessel both graceful and imposing. It was also well armed to back up its deadly looks. Pity the Aurorans themselves were cowards. Only the Auroran resistance offered any sort of help to the alliance over the past couple of years and such support was only to maintain supply lines we had already established.

I held my breath, my stare fixed upon the strike ship. Afraid to even breathe for fear of giving away our position. Vernon held me tighter. *I'm scared*, he said into my mind so the others wouldn't hear.

Many more ships began to disembark from the gateway's ports. Seemed something had drawn their attention. My heart now in my throat for the air space above us was soon swarming with the enemy. I gasped for air, unable to hold onto my breath any longer.

Jankin and Taseem had come close to us. Vernon held us all.

To all of them he said, *If we go, at least we will be together.*

Sern had embraced Braken. He whispered. "I do not want to go, but if I must, just know, my beautiful one, you have given my life meaning."

"Detecting a *Citadel of Justice* emerging from heaven's light," the Little Sage Leaf stated, too matter-of-factly for my liking.

I whispered, "At least we now know the reason for all the sudden activity."

Sure enough, at the top left of the vision bubbles view, a crack of light stained the eternal black of space. Seconds later, the Herdsmen's Citadel came into normal space. The thing was like a colossal crown of thorns starfish, menacing and able to destroy anything in its path just like the terrestrial creature it emulated did to the reefs of the Earth's oceans. I swallowed hard again, taking comfort in Vernon's strength around me.

The other ships, which had been present, now escorted the Citadel toward the gateway. I had never been so close to a Herdsmen vessel before, and to tell the truth I was scared out of my mind.

"We must act now while they are all distracted," Taseem said.

She was right. Nothing like a huge motherfucking Herdsmen spaceship lurking nearby to divert attention. I'd say we only had a few moments to seize the opportunity we had been presented with. I was ready...as ready as I'd ever be, anyway.

How are we going to get on board a ship while we are stuck on the gateway's hull?

"I have attached myself above a hatchway," the ship said. "You should all be able to access the gateway interior from here."

And what about you, Little Sage Leaf?

"I will stay here to await your return."

With the ship's words, Vernon got up, plucking me off the floor and placing me onto his back. I scratched him to let him know I was thankful. He grabbed Taseem and Jankin, too. Although, he did place Taseem so she squeezed between us. Smart move. Last think I needed right now was the sensation of my ex-husband's cock pressing against my skin. The bastard would probably get an erection just to spite me.

To say there was a hatchway into the gateway had been an overstatement—the thing more like a porthole, but slightly bigger. The first thought which popped into my mind when I saw the air-locked hatch, was how I

was going to fit through it so I wouldn't get stuck. The second thought was how the hell Vernon and Sern were going to manage such a thing. Could they squeeze through the gap? I know spiders are experts at getting in and out of small spaces relative to their size, but even this was an ask.

The next words out of Sern's mouth confirmed my fears. "We're going to have to cut a bigger hole."

"Won't that alert them to our presence?" Taseem questioned, looking about as unimpressed as the rest of us.

Sern let out a sigh. "I suppose you're right."

Braken came to cuddle him. "Don't worry. We'll find a way." He kissed his soldier on his furry face many times. "Besides, without your wonderful ideas we'd all be stuck on the other side of the planet with other things to worry about."

"So you still love me?"

Braken cooed. "Of course I do, my big, strong soldier."

"Enough to get my asshole filled again?"

Braken grinned. Sern had no worries about being filled by Braken. His cock would certainly rise to meet such a challenge, no problem at all. I couldn't help it, I

chuckled to myself. Jankin glared at me. He would be jealous just because he hadn't made a quip.

I think Sern could squeeze through the hole given time, Vernon said. But I won't be able to seeing as the egg I carry is so much larger than before.

"Then we find another way," I said.

Taseem grabbed my arm. "Wait. Why don't we use this to our advantage. Jankin, come with me. We're going to initiate our little plan. The rest of you, stay here. We won't be long."

Before anyone could utter a word of protest or otherwise, Taseem and Jankin disappeared down the hatch. Braken secured it behind them.

"I guess we wait," Sern said.

* * * *

What seemed an eternity later, the hatchway's securing bolts slid across, releasing the air-locked seal. Sern stood alert, waving his huge front arms, complete with menacing scimitars at the ready. The hatch lid opened and Taseem popped her head up. We all relaxed, until she spoke. "Jankin's been hurt," she gasped, the look of horror now clear on her face.

What do you mean? Jankin? What happened?

Jankin appeared after his wife was safely aboard the Little Sage Leaf. He was in a bad way, collapsing onto the floor of the ship as soon as he pulled himself clear of the hatchway. He was sweating, had dirt all over him, and much to my horror, many cuts, some nasty, across his golden painted skin. He was covered in blood, the truth be told.

“We got to the gateways restriction field controls and did a bit of adjusting,” Taseem added, soothing her husband’s forehead, whispering encouragement to him while she cradled him in her arms.

I didn’t care about what they did. My concern now for Jankin. “Vernon’s right, what happened?”

Jankin’s mouth opened. With a breath of air which hardly carried his words and while he staggered to his feet, he said, “Let’s just say...if you think killing an Earth spider is difficult, even with a whole can of insecticide...go one on one with a Priaxian. That’ll fuck you up for sure.”

You defended yourself against a Priaxian and survived?

Jankin nodded, his movement laboured. “Thank fuck...he was only a servant. If he had been a soldier I

wouldn't have stood a chance." His voice became a slur. At that moment, Jankin's eyes rolled in their sockets and he fell into unconsciousness, Taseem unable to hold the full force of his weight. I yelped and Sern rushed to his aid, collecting him up and cradling him secure to his abdomen before he fell. Thank God, soldiers were quick to react to anything, otherwise Jankin could have hurt himself when he hit the floor.

Taseem went to him again. "The restriction field generator was guarded, as we knew it would be. What we didn't expect was a Priaxian, or more to the point, a member of the Priory to be doing the guarding."

The Priory are the Herdsmen minions now. Vernon's voice shrill, even though what he said seemed to be matter of fact.

"Well, we were only expecting Boldiens," she said, helping Sern carry Jankin into the hallway which led to the bridge.

I came to run my hand across Jankin's forehead. He was clammy. In that moment, all my feelings for him flooded my emotions, coming to fruition. My vision misted as I studied his limp body. He was beautiful. He was brave. I knew why my attraction for him had been so complete. He was irresistible. Taseem was lucky she

now had him. He needed someone like her to ground him.

“What happened?” Braken asked, reiterating all of our concerns again.

Sern carried Jankin back into the Little Sage Leaf proper. We all followed him while Taseem told her tale, her words filled with pain. “Our plan all along was to disrupt the restriction field. Unfortunately, just as we adjusted the wormholes diameter parameters, a Priory bastard sprung us. Jankin did his best to fend him off and defend me so I could complete the work, but he had been stung many times with one of those stinger weapons we all hate.” She paused, taking a moment to catch her breath. A tear rolled down her cheek. “Thank the stars above he managed to wrestle the weapon from the Priaxian’s grip, otherwise I don’t think we would be here right now. Anyway, I acted by picking up the stinger and without thought, I skewered the Priaxian through his abdomen with it. He was dead in seconds.”

You are very brave.

She nodded. “I don’t feel so brave. I...I hope my Jankin’s going to be all right.”

I came to embrace her. “I’m sure he will be.”

“He loves you, you know,” she said. “He talks about

you all the time.”

“He had a funny way of showing it.”

She tutted. “That’s just him showing his insecurity.”

I stopped dead in my tracks. “So what you are saying is that you wouldn’t mind if Jankin and I got physical with each other, is that it?”

She looked at me. Then at Vernon. “I’m not saying such a thing at all, but now that you’ve mentioned it—no, I wouldn’t at all. You *are* his husband, after all. And Vernon has already told you how he feels about it. You can’t wipe away your past no matter how hard you try.”

Her words stunned me. So much so, everything became cloudy in my mind. I felt nauseous. Were Jankin’s jibs all a cover for his true feelings?

“...Leave now,” Braken said.

I shook my head. “What did you say?” I had missed all of the conversation while in my reverie.

All looked upon me. “We must get out of here. If what Taseem says is true, with the field parameters adjusted, the wormhole will expand.”

Again my confusion clouded. Emulating Vernon, I added, “I don’t understand.”

It means this whole structure will soon be swallowed up by the wormhole it is surrounding. If we remain, we

will become lost for an eternity within the sub-space, which exists between the nowhere place of here and Earth.

“Ten minutes to field expansion,” the Little Sage Leaf chimed.

We came to be on the bridge in no time. Sern had placed Jankin onto a roll out cot. I felt compelled to sit with him. Taseem joined us, so did Vernon. Seconds later, the ship disengaged from the gateway’s hull with a foundation shuddering thud. We were soon out in the open, and as a result, vulnerable to attack from the *Citadel of Justice* that approached the gateway with menacing speed.

“Head back toward the planet,” Sern suggested.

“Affirmative,” Braken said, gesturing frantically over the control panel. “We should get quite a show as the wormhole engulfs the gateway.”

The Little Sage Leaf said, “I’m sure we will. But I must warn you, one of the Auroran strike ships has detected us and is heading our way. I believe it may have alerted the others, too. If Taseem and Jankin’s actions didn’t already do that.”

“Fuck!” I said. “How are we going to commandeer a Boldien supply vessel now?”

In that moment, Jankin opened his eyes. He grabbed me by my hand. “We don’t. We get on board the Citadel that’s right here. Why...spoil an...opportunity?”

“How?” I questioned, not annoyed, but feeling somewhat deflated by the turn of events. Sure we will destroy a gateway, but our real goal was obtaining the shield frequency so we could perfect our Solar Sound Generator weapon. Such a device would be more useful to our cause then the destruction of one supply line. For all we knew, the Herdsmen could have hundreds of supply lines for their war effort. Having a weapon to combat the *Citadels of Justice* would be a lot more productive for the overall effort. Then again, this small victory would be a morale booster.

Jankin said, “We surrender.”

Separation and Joining

“He’s delirious,” I said.

“He’s also making perfect sense.” Taseem came to embrace her husband, brushing her sensuous lips across his. “We’ve been doing things the hard way. Why not make it easier on ourselves for a change?”

“What do you mean? If we surrender we’ll be locked away. Then, when they’ve tortured us enough for shits and giggles, we’ll be sent to the processing plants to be prepared for consumption. I don’t see anything easy about that?”

Taseem rolled her eyes. “You are a bit dumb sometimes for someone so intelligent, you know that? As far as they are concerned, there are only two of us. Jankin and I will allow ourselves to be captured. Meanwhile, the rest of you get what we came for then come and get us.”

I opened my mouth, but no words eventuated. Was

she right? Was I missing the most obvious, even when it was right in front of me? I had been wrong about Jankin, thinking he had been teasing me when all along his feelings for me had never left him. Perhaps I was wrong about this, too.

“I like that plan,” Sern said, before I could answer.

I do, too, Vernon added. *But I do have one reservation.*

“What’s that?” Taseem asked.

This is a Priaxian vessel, so they would be expecting a Priaxian pilot. Sure, they only saw you and Jankin, but they would know there would be at least one other on board.

Braken turned his attention away from the controls. “Then I will go with you. I will also make sure Taseem and Jankin remain safe...for as long as you need to come and rescue us, that is.”

Jankin opened his eyelids, a smile on his bloodied lips. “I think it would work. But I want one more thing before we go.”

“What’s that, baby?” Taseem questioned.

“When you come and rescue us, I want you to make love to me, Drake...for old time’s sake.”

I snorted the air. “Are you saying you have feelings

for me?" I kissed him on his forehead. He didn't need to answer. I now understood. Even though our marriage had been arranged, our being together meant something to him. I saw him in a different light, like I did when I was in his arms each night and didn't know about Ranjay and his wife.

"You know...I do," he muttered, his smile fixed upon his lips.

I looked at Taseem and then at Vernon. "Then you'd better get yourself all cleaned up and those wounds treated. We've got a lot to do and I'm not sure how we're going to do it."

His wounds could be easily healed with Auroran jelly, Vernon said. But you are right, Drake, my love, we do have a lot to do. The first being, how we are going to get Jankin, Taseem and Braken on board the Auroran strike ship without them suspecting our presence.

"I hadn't thought of that." Taseem sat up. "This ship doesn't have an escape pod or anything, does it?"

The Little Sage Leaf said, "You could all hide in the engine compartment where I can shield you from sensors. It will be a tight squeeze, but worth it if you are to get onto the Citadel of Justice undetected."

I imagined what it would be like in a confined space

with Vernon and Sern. Vernon, I had no problem with. I was always close to him in every way imaginable. Sern on the other hand, how would he react, especially as his Braken was not with him? I know I would be fretting if Vernon left me for any amount of time. Then again, such a thing could be attributed to the symbiotic link we have. Did Braken and Sern have the same connection?

Braken said, "Taseem, I will need you to paint me gold. We'll use the ruse that you are both my human prisoners and we'll go from there."

Taseem nodded. "Then I'd better get a move on. I would imagine there isn't much time before the strike ship catches up with us. I will have to remove the paint on Jankin, too."

"Auroran strike ship will be in docking range in fifteen minutes."

"You'd better work fast then, Taseem," I said. "Vernon, give me a hand with Jankin. We'll smother him with the jelly and get him cleaned up as best we can."

The Little Sage Leaf added, "Full sensor range in ten minutes."

I swallowed hard. Guess we had ten minutes before we had to hide in the cupboard, so to speak, making sure

Braken was ready to look like a member of the Priory and Jankin as patched up as best we could manage given the circumstances. I glanced at the vision bubble. “Sage Leaf, start transmitting the intention we want to be brought on board and Braken has captured some humans insurgents for the Herdsmen’s pleasure. I don’t want them opening fire on us.”

“Sure thing,” the ship said. “Wormhole expansion in five minutes.”

Everything happened at once. My mind spun, and not for the first time this past hour, either. I gathered my thoughts. “Also add the humans captured are the same ones who sabotaged the gateway and that they should remain a safe distance from the gateway. Make up some cock and bull story about how Braken followed them to their escape vessel and overpowered them or something like that.”

“Affirmative.”

Vernon went to one of the supply cabinets scattered about the bridge. He retrieved a jar of Auroran jelly. I will apply the jelly. Can you, Drake, my love, get a cloth and clean his skin.

“Sure thing.”

“Wormhole expansion in three minutes. Auroran

strike vessel in sensor range in eight minutes. I have informed them of what you wish, Drake Glauco. They are in agreement the humans should be taken into custody.”

“That’s one thing, I suppose.” I wiped Jankin’s dirty skin, creating clean patches.

Sern came over to us. Taseem had removed Braken’s silver paint with an ultraviolet light and was now applying the gold to his smooth, hairless skin. He cooed. I took such a thing as a sign he liked the sensation of the brush over his flesh. I had to admit, I did, too.

“Well, that’s something.” I had finished cleaning Jankin’s face. Vernon had covered all of his wounds. The less gruesome ones healed in an instant. The others sealed over, but still looked nasty. He was wide awake now, unconsciousness no longer pulling at him. In fact, since we had given him our full attention, he looked a lot better. His smile remained. I couldn’t decide whether or not it was a smug, *I’ve got you*, smile or something else.

“Wormhole expansion in one minute. Auroran vessel in full sensor range in six minutes.”

“This is going to be close,” Sern said.

I turned to look at Taseem’s progress. She had

covered more than half of Braken in gold paint, working on his underside, making sure his genitals had been covered, too. He continued to coo. His cock as hard as I had ever seen it. Taseem had her work cut out. Pity Sern couldn't go with them to relieve the sexual tension which was probably building up inside Braken right now as she brushed his cock in gold paint.

Sern growled. I knew what he was thinking. Seeing Braken's hardness, all glistening with the wet, gold paint and pre-cum, would have turned him on no question. Before any of us could say another word, Jankin sat up on the cot, ready for anything now he had been healed, and the Little Sage Leaf said, "Wormhole expansion has been halted."

"What?" I yelled. "How?"

The ship continued, "The sabotage Jankin and Taseem performed has been repaired. The stabilising field has been returned to its normal state. The Auroran strike vessel approaching our position has also informed me that we are to proceed directly toward the *Citadel of Justice* now in orbit of the gateway. They will escort us."

"Do it," I said.

"Full sensor range will be achieved in three minutes.

I suggest Drake, Vernon and Sern retreat to the engine compartment.”

Vernon plucked me up without so much as word on my part or a goodbye from the others. They had been busy anyway, both now trying to get Braken ready for our arrival into the heart of the enemy’s iron fist. I was taken from the bridge, Sern in the lead, the rear of the ship our goal.

To say the engine compartment was small had been an understatement. It was tiny—well, especially seeing as I needed to share it with two Priaxians who were both huge and well over four metres in height, all legs and hairy bodies. We turned into a tangle of limbs in no time. In actuality, I didn’t take up that much room. Vernon saw to it I was snug under his abdomen.

I could hear his heartbeat. It raced. He was concerned and so was I. “It’ll be all right.” I whispered.

“Shhh,” Sern scorned. “If we make a noise the sensors will be able to pick us up, shielded or not.”

For the longest time we remained quiet, pressed up against the engine panel on one side and the door to the compartment on the other, a mess of chitin, skin, hair and worry. I could hear strange noises as the Little Sage Leaf became caught in a docking field. Then landing

noises. Then some other kind of sounds I couldn't place.

Had Jankin, Taseem and Braken succeeded in their goal? Had they been captured, waiting for us to rescue them? Or had they been executed on the spot? I swallowed hard, wrapping my arms tighter around Vernon. His hairs tickled, the only welcome I found about this whole situation.

In that moment, Vernon said, *I believe we have to leave the compartment now.*

I whispered, "How do you know if it's safe?"

I don't. But the hatchlings need to feed and I am sure Sern here doesn't want a close encounter with such a thing.

Sern said, "Do what you must, but do not jeopardise our mission. We must stay in here until the Little Sage Leaf says it is safe to leave. I will not risk my beautiful Braken for anything. You hear me?"

Vernon sighed. *Fine. We will perform the extraction here.*

I sucked in the air, air which was now stuffy from our closeness. "Easy for you to say, I don't even know if you can access me. I can't feel anything below my waist it's so cramped in here."

Sern said. "Your genitals are pressed against my

thorax. I can assist you, if that is your desire.”

I couldn't help but see the funny side to all this. I chuckled. “Sure. I've never had anyone help me get it in before, but go for it. Vernon, is your extraction tube ready?”

It is. But like you, I am not sure if my tube can reach you.

“Oh, a fine mess we're in, aren't we?” Again, I let out a chuckle, trying my hardest not to make too much noise.

“I will help you, too, Vernon,” Sern said, moving about, and causing me pain as something hard and soldier like struck me in my back. I imagined one of his scimitars digging into my flesh.

I winced. “Easy!”

There was a hard, strong grasp around my cock. I let out a yelp. I know I'm no Braken, but what I had I wanted to keep. Sern sure was rough.

Vernon's next words reinforced my feelings to perfection. *Sern, we are not servants to be pulled and pushed. Please, be careful with my extraction tube, it's very delicate. Be careful with Drake, too. I need him.*

Sern snarled, but seemed to get the message. Soon enough, I felt the familiar touch of Vernon's tube, the

moist, warm tunnel of skin designed over the millennia to accommodate mammalian genitalia within it, engulf my cock. Seconds later, and as I was overwhelmed with erotic thoughts, getting harder and harder at the same time, my heartbeat matched his. Our thoughts became one. Our bodies became one.

I arrived in my mind's eye on Annaz VI. A far better place than a cramped engine compartment filled with the sweaty flesh of two species.

More Than an Extraction

I welcomed the view, the open ocean, the breeze and the endless sky above, like it was the breath of my life. The little starfish had begun to rain down on us, copulating when they found each other, our signal it was our time to make love now, too. I turned to look at my Vernon, my beautiful man, all muscles and a smile, which made me weak at the knees whenever I saw it.

Something was different this time.

Sure, Vernon was ready, his cock as erect as always, the main vein along his shaft bulged as his head was exposed by his retracted foreskin, his balls red and tight. At first, I couldn't put my finger on it. Then, as Vernon came close, drew me in with his strong grip, I was able to quantify in my mind what the difference was I had sensed.

We weren't alone.

Sern came into our extraction, too. I blinked, making

sure what I saw wasn't a mirage of my mind, a remnant of my thoughts from being so close together in the engine compartment. He was dark skinned, well-toned and one of the most muscular men I had ever seen in my life. He'd be a perfect Mr. Universe and then some. He wasn't as endowed as Vernon, but as he was in real form as a Priaxian Soldier, he didn't need to be. He had the most adorable black curly hair, too. Curls that cascaded down to his shoulders. I gasped.

"How could this happen?" I asked, muffled by Vernon's lips pressed against mine.

He didn't seem to care. Or, more to the point, had other things to worry about, like feeding the hatchlings. Having Sern there with us, in our mindscape, added to the experience, like the starfish raining down upon us.

I felt hands at my back.

Those hands, large and strong, belonged to Sern. I could also feel his breath on the back of my neck. What was he doing? I pulled away from Vernon, a look of hurt and confusion in his eyes. "What's the matter, Drake, my love?"

"I didn't think it was possible to have another in an extraction with us?"

Vernon smiled, his lips wet from my saliva. "I can

manifest anything you desire.”

I was taken aback. “So you mean to tell me I wanted this?”

Sern kissed the back of my neck, warm and tender. “Yes. And next time, Vernon has promised Braken can join in, too.”

Braken? My thoughts went elsewhere for a split second, imagining what he would look like in human form, all hung and smooth-skinned and blond and...oh my. Did I really want this? Was Vernon right? Did I want to share my love to solidify all of our relationships in our darkest hour? I knew Jankin wanted me again. I knew I wanted him now that I had found out how he really felt. Sure, Taseem completed him, but so did I. Yes, I was with Vernon, but he himself had said many times that my love—our love, can be shared, especially in a time of war. In that moment, I came to realise a profound notion. I completed all of them. “What about Jankin?”

Vernon grabbed my hands. “He can join us, too. Whatever you desire, my love. Whatever you desire.”

Sern rubbed my shoulders, massaging me. My spine tingled from his touch. I gasped, and Vernon took my delight as an indication to proceed. He was at my lips

again with his own. I opened my mouth, our tongues touched, beginning their erotic dance. Again I groaned, deeper and more guttural, overwhelmed by Vernon's and Sern's touch over my nakedness as they explored me.

When Vernon parted his sweet kiss, I said, "Fuuckinnng Heeeellll." Those were the last words spoken between us. Sern and Vernon got down on their knees, taking turns to lick and suck my erection. Vernon massaged my balls. Sern kept his hand at the root of my dick, making sure I remained retracted, my engorged head theirs for the taking. Their eyes looking up at me, sexy, sensual eyes begged me to give them all they desired.

I placed one hand on Vernon's head, the other on Sern. Soon they had gained a pattern to their actions. First, Vernon would take me, pushing himself as far as he could go, making beautiful sucking noises, little gulps as his nose became engulfed in my pubes. Then, when he was satisfied, and my cock was as slick as I had ever seen it, Sern took me into his mouth. His suction more forceful, more deliberate. An experience, I had to admit, was both enjoyable and interesting.

In fact, I was amazed at the difference in technique

between them. Vernon was delicate, rolling his tongue around my shaft, tickling my frenulum at ever chance with his actions. Sern, more into the actual motion of making sure my skin tingled with his touch, even using his teeth to grate over my erect flesh. Both caused me to shudder, to quiver inside.

“I’m going to fucking cum soon,” I blurted.

Sern let go of my cock, it dripped with their attention and my own pre-cum, but he kept his touch upon my skin. Fondling my balls, running his fingers to touch my rim. I opened my legs, letting him explore me to his heart’s content. Sern couldn’t have my cum, he knew, just as I did, that Vernon needed to have my ejaculate.

As soon as Vernon’s lips touched my engorged head and he began his method of licking, I blew my load. The largest load I had given Vernon in a long time, I think. One which would certainly help the hatchlings along, that’s for sure. Perhaps having Sern present had been a good thing. The more the hatchlings got the better. That, and the thought of being with Jankin on a footing of love instead of because he had to be with me, was a good thing, too. Oh, and seeing Braken in human form. A notion which would almost be worth anything.

Vernon kept his lips around my cock, milking me for

every last drop. I shuddered and Sern came to embrace me. I accepted his gesture. Took in his scent, his musk which seemed to overpower my senses.

Then, something struck me again.

Our extraction wasn't over. Usually when I have climaxed, the mind connection is dissolved and I wake up on a freshly spun silken bed. Not now. How was this possible? I always believed once Vernon's extraction tube had taken my ejaculate and it retracted back into his body, the extraction would cease.

Sern nudged his nose into my neck. I groaned, but managed, "Why isn't it over?" I didn't mean it in a bad way, with any impatience, far from it. Being on Annaz VI and having two beautiful guys, one I loved with all my heart, fawning all over me, was a dream.

Vernon came away, a string of saliva the only connection to my cock. He smiled. "Because the hatchlings are very hungry and need to begin storing your semen for the final phase of my pregnancy."

Sern let out a chuckle. "You don't have to make it sound so clinical, Vernon, old buddy. Just admit you want to keep having some fun and be done with it."

Vernon's cheeks flushed. "You are right, Sern. I do want to keep having my Drake. I am thankful the

hatchlings are hungry, it means I can experience more pleasure in such dark times.”

Now it was my turn to smile. “So what next?”

Sern let out a growl. An actual, real growl. “I want you and Vernon to fuck the living daylights out of me.”

I don’t think anything more needed to be said. The starfish had ceased to fall on us like rain, the sun setting to create a pallet of orange and red hues in the serene sky. Sern came to lie down on the atoll, opening his legs and offering a smile that would have turned a straight man gay. He even lifted up his balls, exposing his arsehole, all pink and succulent and ready for fucking.

Vernon acted first. He grabbed my hand, and together we came onto Sern. Before I knew it, my man was at him, licking and slurping at his arse in large, lashing rolls of his tongue. This spurred me on. I had to admit, seeing my Vernon lavishing his love all over Sern, and he himself squirming with sheer joy, turned me on. Again.

I kissed Sern. His lips harsher than Vernon’s softness, his taste more bitter but no less exciting. His tongue more demanding, seeking out my own, pinning it, conquering it. I didn’t mind. To have this difference actually made things more interesting.

I came away from Sern's lips. He whined like a baby pulled off a teat, wanting more of my kisses. But I had other ideas, and so did Vernon. In fact, if I didn't know any better, I'd say Vernon wanted to penetrate him at the same time I did.

His next words confirmed my thoughts. My man had finished rimming the soldier, his lips and chin wet with saliva. His smile as large and luscious as ever. "He is ready for us, my love."

The logistics of performing a double penetration more than interesting to say the least. Suffice it to say, Sern ended up on his back and on top of Vernon, his legs pulled open by Vernon's strong and sensitive hands, gripping him behind his knees.

With a bit of manoeuvring, and with me feeding Vernon's cock into the soldier's arsehole, and a hell of a lot of groaning, I came so I was in position, too. I knelt down on the coral atoll, shuffling closer so my now hard cock pushed against the top of his rim. A rim already filled.

"You ready?" I whispered.

Sern growled again. "Just get in me. I need more."

Of course, Sern was right. He usually had Braken inside him. No mean feat. Then again, he was used to

being split by a large endowment. Vernon and I together would have come close to that for him, satisfying him beyond measure.

I retracted my foreskin, pulling at the root of my cock, letting the skin slide down along my shaft as far as it could go so I was still comfortable. My head glistened in the evening light of Annaz VI, pre-cum dribbling like spider silk from my piss slit. I touched his arsehole and pushed, using my finger at the top of his rim to aid my movement, to tease him open, to make him relax even more before my penetration. Soon I was a part of him.

Sern let out a cry of sheer joy and pain, just like he did when Braken made love to him. At first I was concerned, but, thinking back to when I had seen him being fucked, I knew his reaction was normal. He was having the time of his life.

My rhythm came to me quick. The sensation of Vernon's cock beneath mine, moving in time to my thrusts, helped to stimulate me even more, making the experience one to remember. Sweat soon covered my brow, my thrusting gaining more and more force with Sern's cries of encouragement.

Vernon let out a cry, one I recognised as him having reached climax. A short moment after his ejaculation,

his cum acted like lubricant, letting me push myself into Sern with more ease than before, so much so I could no longer see my cock, only my pubes against his skin. From there it didn't take me long to reach the point of no return. To achieve the familiar pang of ecstasy rising up to consume every fibre of my body. I let out a gasp. "Vernon!"

The next moments spent in what I can only describe as a mad panic. Vernon needed to get to me so I could ejaculate into him, so his extraction tube could feed the hatchlings. That I understood. Unfortunately, my cock was now root deep in Sern's arsehole. The other sticking point, Vernon was underneath the muscular bulk of the soldier.

The sensation of climax crept all over me, like fingers across my skin. I gasped again, and in that moment I knew it wouldn't be long before I blew my load.

"Pull out!" Sern roared.

The Citadel of Justice

When a soldier tells me to pull out, I don't waste any time. No questions asked. My cock was slick with Vernon's cum, a beautiful sight. I shuffled over, offering myself to Vernon, seeing as he couldn't move because of Sern's weight upon him.

Vernon took me into his mouth with enthusiasm, and not a moment too soon. I blew my second load with a few heartbeats of his lips sealing over my cock. My balls ached, two orgasms in a matter of minutes always did such a thing to me. All I cared about was making sure I had given Vernon all I could give.

Sern came off my man. He was hard, his head, bright red and at bursting point, glistened in the fading light. I don't know what compelled me, but I leaned over and took him into my mouth. Actually, I do know what compelled me. I wanted to taste him, to satisfy him after he had been such a sport, welcoming us both into his

arms.

The soldier didn't hesitate. My mouth full of his throbbing cock, seconds later. He tasted bitter, his pre-cum oozing out from his piss slit to enhance the flavour. He groaned, and while Vernon milked me for every last drop, I was soon overwhelmed with the unmistakable sensation of having hot ejaculate shot down my throat. If his pre-cum was bitter, his cum even more so. But I loved it. Relished it, and like Vernon, kept him within my mouth until he went flaccid.

As soon as I became soft myself, my foreskin rolling back over my head while Vernon worked my now limp length, my eyes were forced closed. The extraction I will never forget was over.

How did you like that? Vernon said in a husky voice, one he always had after we had been intimate.

I was quickly reminded of our current predicament. I couldn't move my arms or legs and yearned to be placed upon Vernon's silken bed. Instead, I was in close quarters, very close quarters with two huge mother fucking Priaxians in a space that would have been uncomfortable for two humans. "Let me just say it was different," I replied, not meaning for it to sound negative in any way. Far from it. What I had experienced with

Vernon and Sern was intimate and beautiful.

“It was good for me,” Sern chirped. I couldn’t help but think if he smoked, he’d be chuffing away right now.

I agree. I believe we have extended our love to another and as far as I can see. A good thing in my opinion. I think Braken and Jankin should join us next time. They need our love just as much as anyone else.

In that moment I realised what Vernon was doing. He knew, as the only incubator within a million light years, he was responsible for the wellbeing of all of his friends. The best way to achieve such a thing, in his mind, was to accept them into what I considered to be the most intimate experience any two beings could have in the whole universe. As I thought about it, I came to conclude he was right. Why not share such a thing? Especially, between dear friends, one who had been with us through thick and thin. Besides, everyone knew my ejaculate had to be delivered to Vernon while in the extraction. How I got to such a point was almost moot.

“I think Braken and Jankin would like that,” I added. “But if we ever do a dry extraction, it’s just you and me, okay?”

Vernon giggled. *Of course. What we do together*

when there is no connection from the extraction tube is something between us and only us. That is our own private sharing.

I couldn't help but let out a chuckle, too. Here was Vernon saying that being physical with each other in the real world was the most intimate he could experience, while I thought being in the extraction was the same. I supposed his words highlighted the difference between our species. Humans considered mind sex to be an intimate, exposing experience, while Priaxians thought getting in bed and slapping bodies together was the same.

Before I could consider this rather interesting turn in attitudes, the Little Sage Leaf, without warning, blurted, *It is safe to leave the engine compartment. We are clear of any scanning fields, but do please remain quiet.*

The door couldn't be opened quick enough. Sern was the first to get out of our broom cupboard—well, that's how it felt to me, anyway, complete with dirty liaison, too.

"I hope Braken, Taseem and Jankin are all right," I said, Vernon placing me onto his back, coming out onto the corridor. The sweet smell of fresh air being the first thing I noticed. I hadn't realised how musky things got

inside the engine compartment. Then again, it was filled with virile Priaxian flesh.

“Braken better be safe,” Sern barked. I understood the depth of his love for his man. I feared for the Herdsmen if they had even harmed a single hair on his body. I’m sure Sern would hunt every last one of them down to the end of his days. I swallowed hard. Our queen’s words rang in my mind, a queen who was no longer with us, choosing to stay as Priaxia fell. *Priaxians don’t fight wars in rooms pushing buttons. We go out there and kill, strike at the enemy with all of our might.*

I shuddered. The size and sheer bulk of Sern would have made sure Priaxia could win any war on muscle alone. Trouble was, the Herdsmen did fight wars from rooms pushing buttons, their technology unlike anything any sentient species has ever seen before. Perhaps it was time we took the fight right to them, and getting inside a *Citadel of Justice*, stealing its secrets was perhaps the very thing we needed. I sure hoped so, otherwise four years of war, of planets lost, of lives wiped out of existence, all would be for nothing.

Where are we, Little Sage Leaf?

We are in a hangar bay of the *Citadel of Justice*.

There are many Priory about, but I couldn't see any Herdsmen. Was such a thing normal? *Do not draw attention to yourself. I have a plan which might cause a distraction so you can disembark and begin your rescue of the others.*

"Do you know where the others have been taken?" Sern asked.

No, was the ship's short, sharp reply.

Sern looked at Vernon and I. "I believe we should split up. You two can undertake the espionage part of this mission. I will seek out Braken and the others."

I hated the idea of being parted from our bodyguard, but the soldier was right. Our goal was to get in and get out as quick as we could with the information needed to complete the Solar Sound Generator. If we stayed together our mission could take too long, which translated to more time being spent inside enemy lines. Not a good thing.

So what are you planning to do for a diversion?

We had arrived at the bridge. The vision bubble displayed the view of the hangar bay of the *Citadel of Justice*. A place I didn't want to get too acquainted with, to be honest. The size of the hangar was massive, as I would have expected for a machine that could destroy

planets. As on the outside, all spires and light and strange structures, so was the inside. We seemed to be nestled amongst an outcropping of spires, secured by tendrils of light. These tendrils covered the Little Sage Leaf. How she was going to get away without causing alarm, was the first thought that struck me?

I am going to scream, the ship said.

“What will that do?” Sern questioned, taking the words from my thoughts before I could speak them.

The Herdsmen have used organic and mineral technology to perfection. They have combined the best of both worlds, something the alliance of spiders and mammals can learn from if we are to survive this war, the ship explained, her voice filled with admiration. *The tendrils around me monitor my wellbeing. If I show concern, fear, anger, surprise, those who keep an eye on what the tendrils transmit, will know. If a ship is in fear, I have learned that it will be isolated before being approached.*

“How do you know this?” I asked.

The tendrils also transmit the thoughts of the Citadel of Justice into me. The ship is magnificent, the ultimate pinnacle of the Herdsmen’s achievements. I am in awe of how beautiful it is. I am almost sorry our intention is

to destroy it.

I snorted the air. “Beautiful or not, it’s deadly.”

Agreed, Vernon added. We had better get to the hatch. As soon as the Little Sage Leaf is isolated, we will make our exit.

Sern then said something, which completely surprised me. “Why don’t we capture the Citadel? Then we can have us some deadly beauty, too. Might even things up a bit without having to wait for Noredon to come up with a final version of the Solar thing he’s been working on for four years.”

His words had been the most I had ever heard him speak in one go, profound, too. But he was right. Perfecting the Solar Sound Generator would take more time, even with the proper shield harmonics in place to protect *Mother* from its blast. Stealing the Citadel would be an advantage. Then again, how does one go about taking one?

Are you all ready? the Little Sage Leaf asked. *I will give you the all clear when I have been isolated.*

I looked at Vernon and Sern in turn. They nodded. “We’re ready. Let’s do it.”

The ship screamed.

Escaping the Isolation

For what seemed an eternity, nothing happened. I heard the piercing shrill from the Little Sage Leaf. From that moment on though, only silence. Disturbing, worrying, silence. Even Sern got a bit jittery, while we waited at the hatch for the all clear from the ship.

Soon, there was a clunking sound, like grappling hooks had secured themselves to the hull. A brief moment of movement, then again, the silence. My mind began to wonder. Had we succeeded? My thoughts turned dark as the silence persisted. Had we been found out? Were we being taken somewhere else other than isolation? Would there be a legion of Priory members waiting outside the hatch for us? Are they trying to get at us this very moment?

The coast is clear, the Little Sage Leaf said, just as my nerves were about to fray completely and I didn't know how much longer I could have taken the silence.

Before anyone else could add a thought, the hatch opened. To say the ship had been put into isolation had been an understatement. We came into a bare room, nothing visible in sight other than a hatch at the far end of the room. I had a sneaking suspicion the door was locked, all part of the isolation process.

I was right.

“What do we do now?” I asked.

More to the point, how will the Little Sage Leaf get out of the isolation room once we have completed our mission?

Sern snorted. “He won’t need to go anywhere. When we commandeer the ship, we will have all the control we need to do whatever we wish.

I swallowed hard. Sure, Sern’s plan sounded good in theory, but how the hell were we supposed to implement it? A heavily pregnant Priaxian incubator and a naked human nourisher weren’t exactly a force to be reckoned with, a soldier as their bodyguard or not.

“We do what we came here to do.” Sern, being the mother fucking huge bulk of soldier I had come to love, managed to pry open the door after many chosen words in Priaxian I didn’t need to translate to gather their meaning.

Unfortunately, the opening of the hatch set off an alarm. A klaxon sounded loud in my ears, more so seeing as I was on top of Vernon and closer to the source of the shrill echo bouncing through the isolation room.

“Oh, great, now we’ll have all the Herdsmen on the ship and their Priory bitches here any second. We’re fucked before we start.”

Vernon turned, facing the ship. *Little Sage Leaf, can you fire your weapons, please?*

Sure thing Vernon.

“What will such a thing do?” I questioned, certain firing a weapon in any enclosed space wasn’t a great idea.

Again, before I could ask another stupid question, the ship let her forward batteries rip. The noise deafened while she blasted away at the walls of the isolation room. Vernon and Sern took the opportunity to scurry out through the hatch the soldier had just pulled from its hinges. The energy from the ship’s fire seemed to absorb into the walls of the room. We scurried down a number of corridors. Many Priory members headed toward the isolation room. I couldn’t help get the feeling they were going there to try and calm the Little Sage Leaf, like zoo

keepers try and calm a distressed animal.

“Good plan, Vernon,” Sern said, patting Vernon on his back just below where I sat. “Now we split up. I will meet you here in one hour.”

An hour is a good time to rendezvous. In just over an hour or so, the hatchlings will need to be fed again.

Sern smiled. “Then we don’t have much time to waste.” With that, he scurried away, his eight legs speeding him away down the corridor with lightning speed.

I rubbed Vernon on the back of his head, where he loved it. He cooed. “We’d better get going, too—say, how did you know firing in the room would work?”

Simple, really. The plan was to get the ship into isolation because she was distressed, or so they believed. It would be a natural progression for her to feel uncomfortable when isolated, and the masters of the Citadel would have expected a frightened ship to react in such a way. Vernon led me down more corridors, but instead of scurrying across walls and ceilings in an effort to remain unseen like he usually did, he could only manage a sort of spider-like amble across the floor. His pregnancy was taking its toll on not only his movement, but his abilities, too. I rubbed him harder, there was

nothing more I could do. I felt helpless, like all fathers when it came to their partner being pregnant, anyway. I realised we had been walking down toward the centre of the ship, through strange rooms filled with technology I couldn't imagine, hopefully coming to the belly of the beast we had been trapped within real soon.

Vernon continued when he caught some of his breath back, *I merely gave the ship a command to act like a ship would who had been captured, giving us the perfect opportunity to escape at the same time. Who's to say the door didn't get damaged during the ships defensive firing?*

"So their attention would have been focused on the Little Sage Leaf and not us?"

Exactly. They do not know we are here, so they won't be going out of their way to look for us.

"You are brilliant, you know."

I know. But we must remain unseen and be as quiet as possible. Our ploy will only work if we remain in the shadows.

For a long while, we needed no other words between us. Vernon ambled on, his gait slowing the farther we went into the recesses of the Citadel. I hoped we were going in the right direction. I hoped we could defend

ourselves if we came across any of the Priory, or worse, the Herdsmen themselves.

My fears didn't take long to be realised. As Vernon and I came around a corner, from a room, which looked like it controlled the water flow of the ship to all the private quarters, two members of the Priory came into view. They stood on guard, and thankfully weren't facing us.

I believe this is the room we need to get into, Vernon said.

I didn't reply, but rubbed him to let him know I understood. How we would get past them without causing a fuss was anyone's guess. Fuuuucking heeeell, this is all we needed. So close to our goal, and yet, so far. Then again, how did Vernon know for sure this was the room we needed to get into?

He must have read my mind, because the next words from his thoughts addressed my concern. *Look, those conduits on the ceiling, they have been leading here. I believe they are coolant pipes for the engine.*

Sure enough, he was right. The ceiling did have pipes all along it. Pipes filled with what I would imagine had been some sort of coolant, although unlike any coolant I could fathom. Normal coolant, coolant for

human engines, was all fluorescent and liquid. This was like a gaseous crystalline substance, all cloud-like and sparkling. The pipes were massive, too. I could easily fit inside one. I studied them in greater detail. Vernon right again. One pipe seemed to enter the room, and one pipe exited. A definite exchange happening.

I whispered, “But will magnosphere controls be in the engine room?”

Can you think of a better place to start?

No, I couldn’t. We seemed to be right in the heart of what powered the Citadel. I was surprised there weren’t any more guards, especially for a room so important. Then again, why would they need them in large quantities? They had good reason to have such confidence. No ship from the alliance ever got close to a *Citadel of Justice* and lived to tell the tale. It was by sheer luck alone we had Forgen as a contact and Braken to help complete the subterfuge we planned.

“How do we get past the guards?”

This time Vernon didn’t have an answer. Not straight away, anyway. I rubbed him some more. I knew from his hesitation, he didn’t want a confrontation. I couldn’t blame him. To carry his egg for more than four years to have it come to no good right at the last moment, would

be heart breaking to say the least.

You will have to use your gun.

I had totally forgotten about the weapon I was concealing. I leaned forward, touching the place where the gun had melted onto my flesh. Seconds later, my hand was filled with the cold, hard metal of the weapon. I realised I would have to fire upon another living being, two in fact, if we were to achieve our goal. I understood that the lives of the two Priory guards became insignificant when compared to the millions lost already. Still, such a thought didn't make the action any less gut wrenching. I felt sick to the stomach as I raised the weapon, and a cold sweat broke out all over my skin. I licked my lips, aiming for the nearest guard.

Hurry, Drake, my love.

I closed one eye, my vision, my thoughts, my feelings, all focused on the task at hand. I squeezed the trigger. A bolt of light, like a needle, shot out from the gun and stuck the first guard true. He fell to the floor.

The second guard had something the other didn't. He knew about our presence now, our surprise lost, and he raised his stinger, running toward us. Vernon yelled for me to fire, panic in his voice. With trembling hands, I fired again.

The second slither of light struck the Priory servant, but this time, the energy didn't strike as true. I hit him on one of his legs. And, as I knew all too well, Priaxians had eight of those. One being injured wasn't a problem. In fact, it pissed him off more than anything.

Before I could react, and the guard was upon us, Vernon raised himself up, his front legs in the all too familiar, and scary as fuck, defensive pose. The guard's stinger struck Vernon, and he screamed loud in my mind. I grabbed hold of him, at the same time, trying to re-aim the weapon so I could get another clear shot at the servant.

Vernon stumbled from the attack and I was almost knocked from his back because of the sudden shift in his balance. Normally, he wouldn't have been bothered by a stun-sting on one of his legs. This time, he became affected by the hatchlings and their ever-increasing need for nourishment, their ever-increasing demand on his body as they came to maturity.

I fired off a couple more shots. One hit the guard.

Our efforts so far only fuelled our attacker's anger, and he was soon jabbing his stinger up toward the soft skin on the underside of Vernon's abdomen. Now it was my turn to scream.

Vernon must have found some strength, probably from the thought of anything happening to me, more than the actual energy he could draw on if he didn't have such an incentive. That and the fact he was defending his egg. He lashed his front legs at the guard. Awkward, and in desperation, but he achieved something I never thought he would. He dispensed with the guard, the poor Priaxian cleaved in two by claws fuelled by Vernon's instincts of protection.

In a blink of an eye, Vernon scurried into the room we thought was a part of engine controls. When inside, he plucked me from his back and said, *Seal the door. We must have privacy.*

After he spoke, he collapsed.

The Symbiosis of The Priory

Of course, everything happened at once.

As soon as I locked the hatch, I could hear someone, more than likely a Priory member, trying to get in. I panicked, because Vernon was clearly exhausted from the energy he expended defending both me and the egg, and because I had no clue as to how I was going to seal the door. Sure, I had locked it, so I believed, but I'm sure it wouldn't take long for them to figure out how to bypass such a thing. Most ships had safety backups built-in so doors couldn't be locked permanently unless they opened out into space.

Sweat beaded on my forehead. I rushed over to Vernon, which served two purposes. To ask him how he was—and to make sure he told the truth—and to try to find out how we could lock the door. Then again, looking around, we had come into a sort of engine control room, but smaller than what I would have

thought.

The reason why soon struck me. The far wall, beyond a bank of computers and stuff I didn't recognise, was made of Perspex. The view it offered breathtaking—the heart of the *Citadel of Justice* itself. A huge ball of energy, surrounded by many crystalline structures, which held it in place, dominated the view. Around the energy ball, the source of all power on the ship I would imagine, was other Perspex windows dotted around, creating a circle around the engine core. This room must be one of the many that controlled the energy engine of the ship.

Drake, my love, you need to search for the shield harmonics station, Vernon said, his voice in my mind a tired drawl.

I ran my hand across his legs and up to his body. He was colder than normal, sweating, too. His hairs sticky. “Are you all right, beautiful?”

I am fine. The hatchlings are in need of much from me and I should really be resting, that is all.

“Then rest. You just tell me what to do and I will do it.”

Vernon chuckled, then coughed. *You are such a wonderful spirit. I am glad you are my hatchlings,*

father.

I leaned over and kissed him on his forehead, right above his eight, beautiful black eyes. “But how do I lock this door so it’s a more permanent arrangement?”

Vernon glanced at the door. *You can’t. We must do what we have to in the short time allotted to us. We will worry about the rest when we come to it.* He blinked slow and deliberate. I could tell all he wanted to do was spin a silken bed and sleep within its comfort for the rest of the night. I wished I could join him, to be close to him, to feel his heartbeat, have his legs around me.

I got up, heading for the bank of computers, which took up most of the small control room. What was before me made absolutely no sense to my human brain whatsoever. There were symbols and equations scrolling on three-dimensional panels, which made my eyes glaze over. Not because I wasn’t interested, far from it, but because it was like being in a foreign country and being stupid enough to not even learn where the toilets were.

“What do I do, Vernon?” I blurted. I had touched one of the panels. The scrolling stopped. Again, I got nervous. Had I done anything at all or had I just set the Citadel on a collision course with the nearest star? There was no way of telling.

The symbol that looks like an upside down *R* and on its side joined by another one. Find it.

I had no idea how Vernon knew what to look for. I decided to ask him, if only to create something more than the eerie silence this control room seemed to exude in great volumes.

“So, can you understand Herdsmen?”

They use the universal language, was his cryptic reply.

“Oh.” I touched the symbol, finding it easily amongst the others. As soon as I did so, another three-dimensional panel rose up to fill my sight.

You have access to the shield harmonics controls.

“That was easier than I thought it would be,” I said, being honest. I expected to hunt through hundreds of files to find what we wanted.

Why hide something if it doesn't need to be hidden?

“I suppose you are right. Now, what do I do?”

Tell me, what symbols are under the double *T*'s and the crossed out circle?

I scanned the screen. I could see five symbols, in a bright fluorescent green underneath where he had directed me. To me they looked like the header to a sub-menu of something to do with the shields strength. Well,

that's what I hoped anyway. I could hear tinkering and goings on behind the hatch door.

"Got it." I tried to put into cohesive words what I saw. I decided to explain it in the same way Vernon did, with human English alphabet representations. "There's a backward S. A number five thing. A letter that looks like a fancy W, another one of those. And yeah, there's a squiggle I can't make out, but looks like an old British pound sign from before the Hyperion wars."

Good. Press the pound sign symbol. That will bring up the shields energy drain on the main core.

I pressed it. The screen went blank for a moment, and I had to admit, I got my familiar yet unwelcome panicky feeling again. Then, just as I was about to lose faith in my ability to convey symbols, the screen became filled with more gibberish. "Now what?"

How many symbols are in the amber band?

I glanced at the screen. Seven symbols had been coloured orange. The rest blue. "Seven."

Relay them to me.

I did so. Trying, as I had done before, to put them into terms I could understand. To me they all looked like symbols used by the ancient Egyptians or something. Perhaps that's what they were. Hieroglyphics. Did the

Egyptians use the universal language, too?

Excellent. From what you have told me, the Citadel's magnosphere has a flux density of one-hundred million Telsa.

"I understand that even less than I do the symbols I have just pressed on these screens."

Vernon managed a sort of a wheeze-like chuckle. *Just know, we have a benchmark to work from for the Solar Sound Generator. Although, I have to admit, I didn't think the magnetic field would be so strong. Seems to me, a Citadel uses the same density of flux as a Neutron star.*

I whistled. It was all I could do. I would imagine, from what Vernon had told me, the Citadel's magnetic field was a monster. No wonder our ships couldn't get near it. A magnetic field so strong would fry organic ships and create havoc with the controls of metal ones. "Now we have what we want, let's get the fuck out of here."

I couldn't have said it any better myself. There's just one problem with what you are saying.

"What?"

Vernon looked at me in a way I had never seen before. To me it was a combination of tiredness and

something else. I soon found out what that something else was. The hatch door opened. He gestured toward the door. Heading for us were no less than seven Priory, all armed with stingers set so they would knock us out cold if we came in contact with them.

One of the Priory servants stepped forward, his skin painted gold. “You two, come with us.” But the order didn’t seem to be too much of a demand. I suspected his weak tone something to do with the fact they were servants and giving orders something new to them. Still. It was a curious thing, being *asked* to surrender.

I didn’t hesitate. I went to Vernon. Not because I expected him to defend me against them, but because I wanted to make sure nothing happened to him. “What are you going to do with us?” I asked, coming so I was in front of my man.

The Priory servant, the one who seemed to be in command, said, “You will see, Drake Glauco. Just know, Forgen requests an audience.”

In that moment, I think I let out my breath. I also realised my heart was beating—no, thumping loud in my chest. I had been scared out of my fucking mind. I now knew why they didn’t seem so menacing. They were on our side.

“Please, help me with Vernon. He is weak.”

The Priory servants nodded. All of them went to Vernon’s aid. “He is due. Why is he not in his nest preparing for birth?”

I turned to look at my wonderful Priaxian. “Because he is a stubborn son-of-a-bitch, that’s why?”

The servant was taken aback. “I do not understand the reference.”

Vernon said, *He means to say that he loves me very much and he’s concerned about me.*

“Ah, I see. Humans have a funny language, don’t they?” the servant questioned. “I am Bipar, by the way. I am your...aide, while you are within the Citadels walls.”

“Tell me, Bipar, how many of you are on the side of the alliance?”

He smiled. “On the side of Forgen, you mean?”

I nodded. I could play his game. “Sure. Whatever floats your boat?”

“Most of us. There is a small group who are loyal to the Herdsmen, but they have been given duties which do not interfere with the grand design.”

And what is the grand design?

“To have humans as our nourishers.”

Now it was my turn to be taken aback. “I beg your

fucking pardon.”

Vernon came to comfort me. Now, now, Drake, my love. Let him explain. I am sure what we will learn will be quite enlightening.

Bipar nodded. “We know we cannot become the nourishers ourselves, our sperm has the same strength as human sperm. There is no point to such a thing. We see such a thing now. But, as Forgen has proven, we can have a symbiotic relationship. We can bond with a mammal. We can be complete and be greater than our servant upbringing.”

I swallowed hard. How the hell could Forgen prove such a thing? I blurted, more out of instinct than anything else, “Take us to Forgen.” This was going to be interesting.

The servant bowed. “Our intention all along.”

Vernon patted me again. *Now, now, relax. All will be known soon. Just don't get yourself worked up. I will need you very soon, in more ways than you can imagine.*

I reciprocated Vernon's touch. This time he didn't place me on his back as we were escorted out of the shield control room. From such a simple omission, I knew Vernon was in a lot worse condition than I would have first thought. The hatchlings and being so close to

birthing them, must be taking its toll on his body. Consuming his thoughts.

We were led down many corridors and rooms, the servants of the Herdsmen—or should I say, of Forgen—now on our side—flanking us on all sides. Our pace slower than I would have liked, but only because of Vernon. He could do nothing more than an awkward amble, a far cry from the scurry across any surface he usually managed.

When Bipar gestured for his company to stop, we had come to a large, ornate door. Seconds later, the doors opened, and Bipar gestured for us to enter. What I saw took my breath away, but not because of the view the room offered over the whole of the Citadel and the majesty of space beyond, the opulence was mind boggling—no, what affected me the most, on the deepest level, was the fact Forgen had with him a human. A human who sat upon his back like I did atop Vernon.

The human was Ranjay.

Revolution of the Servants

The sight of Ranjay was something both unexpected and welcome. It meant, in no uncertain terms, he was alive and Jankin and Taseem would soon have their son back after all these years. It also meant a lot more was going on here than I would have believed. Finding out how humans could be used as nourishers to a caste who didn't carry an egg, one of them.

Forgen came forward, offering a slight bow. "The great and noble, Drake Gluaco and his incubator, Vernon. We meet again."

Hopefully under better circumstances than the last time, Vernon said, coming over me. His instinct to protect me, even though he was in no condition to do so, strong within him.

I rubbed him on his underside. "I think there's a bit of explaining to do, don't you, Forgen?"

Forgen gestured for us to sit upon silken chairs. We

did so. I think Vernon was relieved for the rest, to get his many feet off the cold, hard floors of the Citadel. At the same time, he plucked Ranjay from his back. I could plainly see how Ranjay had filled out, placed with gentle care in front of me. He had become a man, no doubt about that. I could also see where he got his looks. Ranjay looked the spitting image of Jankin. He was also naked, and I tried not to stare at his endowment...again, his family jewels quite the resemblance of the man I had been married to.

This time, Ranjay wasn't painted. His natural tone, a wonderful olive, with his hair as dark as the mystery of space. I could see why Forgen had fallen for him—heck, if I was fifteen years younger and single, I'd be all over him like a rash.

Vernon must have noticed me ogling the young man. *His genitals won't walk away, you know. You can take your eyes off him for more than two seconds, my love.*

I had been brought back to the moment with my lover's smart arse comment. He was so going to get it when we joined and I had him on the coral atolls of Annaz VI. "Sorry. It's just—I'm so glad to see you, Ranjay." I sat. Vernon came over me to continue his guarding. I held him.

Forgen cleared his throat. “After Ranjay here came of age, and the secret planted within him was available, the extent of the Herdsmen’s treachery became clear to all those within the Priory who had doubts about the course of action we should be taking. The information also made it clear that being a nourisher to our own fertilised egg wouldn’t gain us any advantage. We desired a quicker process, one which would help us cement our place as something more than just the servant class. Alas, it was not to be so.”

“Yeah, human sperm has just as much protein as yours, doesn’t it?” I questioned.

“Exactly, my dear friend. Why would an incubator choose a servant to be his nourisher, when humans did the job just as well?”

And are more anatomically compatible, Vernon added.

Forgen nodded. “Ranjay had been scheduled for slaughter as soon as his usefulness had expired. To be the next meal on a Herdsmen’s table.” Forgen came to run his hand across Ranjay’s back, cooing as he did so. “I saw much potential in what Ranjay could accomplish, his destruction premature as far as I was concerned.”

“Oh, why’s that?”

Forgen returned his attention back to Vernon and I. “To put it simply, Ranjay gave me an idea. An idea which will ensure the future of the Priory, and set the servants free if they so wished.”

You mean devise a way so you can become compatible with them. Vernon shuffled his weight. I could tell he was anxious. I had to admit, I was, too. What had Forgen done? Or, more to the point, what was he going to do?

Forgen continued, “You are correct, my incubator friend. Ranjay has become the first true symbiotic partner to a Priaxian not a member of the incubator caste. A miracle and our salvation.”

Vernon stood, almost knocking me off the silken chair I had become comfortable on. *What is it you're saying, Forgen?*

“I am saying, through the help of Herdsmen crystalline technology, that it is possible for a mammal and a Priaxian not of the incubator caste, to have a symbiotic relationship. I am saying the servant class will not need the Herdsmen very soon. We will become powerful with the help of humanity.”

Such a thing is impossible!

Ranjay came to run his hand over Forgen's front leg.

With a beautiful smile, he said, “Forgen and I have been mates...lovers, for nearly four years. We share everything, our minds, our bodies, our souls, just like you do with Drake, Vernon. How is such a thing impossible? Can a man not feel love for a spider?”

Silence filled the chamber.

I swallowed hard. I understood how Ranjay felt. I loved Vernon with all my heart. Finally, I said, “So where to from here?”

Before Forgen could answer my question, Vernon blurted, “How is it you achieve symbiosis without joining arms or an extraction tube?”

Forgen smiled. “A crystal is grown, right here in the heart of the Citadel. From there it is divided. One part is implanted into the human, the other into the Priaxian who wishes to bond with him. The process is slow, the mind’s of both need to be trained to accommodate the idea of symbiosis. As you have said, Vernon, the servant caste do not have *joining* arms.”

Ranjay said, “But the result is the same as what you and Drake experience.” He looked up to Forgen. “We share each other on the coral atolls of Annaz VI, the lovers’ planet and the most romantic place in the universe.” With the words the young man spoke, his

voice became more and more elevated, more excited. His cheeks flushed, too. I didn't need to hear any more to know Ranjay was in love with Forgen.

Vernon seemed to understand, too. *So what will you do with this discovery? I have always known you have taken a liking to humans, but I didn't realise the extent you would go to achieve that goal. You must truly feel for humanity if you are willing to change the very structure of Priaxian society to ensure you are joined with one.*

"Would you rather see them on the tables of the arrogant Herdsmen?"

Vernon shook his head. *No.*

"The Priory have already separated themselves from the Priaxian caste system," Forgen spat, his passion, his feeling for the words he spoke, clear. "We are already outcastes, no longer able to return to the once great Priaxian empire—an empire no more, I might add." He paused, becoming sombre. "We do not accept the fate of becoming the bitches of the females or comfort for the Soldiers. We want more than what we had before. We want to be free, and if we can prove our worth, by joining with the humans to help protect them, then that is what we will do."

I thought about Forgen's words. Whatever his goal was, he seemed to have humanities best interest at heart—well, enough of an interest to go against the might of the Herdsmen, anyway, which brought me to another thought. How was the Priory going to separate from the Herdsmen's grip? Sure, they now knew they had been deceived. But really, having a nourisher or not didn't change anything. The Priory were still servants, they just had different masters.

Before I could address my concerns, Bipar scurried up to Forgen. "Sir, we have an issue in the forward section near the main loading bay. It's the *loyals*, sir. They have Braken, Sern and the two humans cornered."

The word *loyals* was said with so much venom, I'm sure Bipar had difficulty annunciating it, the truth be told. Forgen rose up to full height, plucking Ranjay off the floor and placing him on his back with care. "Those loyal to the Herdsmen are giving your friends some grief."

What can we do?

"The time has come to ensure humanity will be around for a very long time," Forgen said, gesturing for us to follow. To Bipar, he added, "Gather all those who are ready for a new dawn. We will assist Vernon and

Drake in getting their friends to safety. We will also commandeer the Citadel in the process. Make sure all sub-space and heaven's light communication channels are closed. I don't want any surprises while we do what should have been done long ago."

Why have you waited so long to do this, Forgen? Vernon asked, again, speaking the words of my thoughts perfectly.

"Because we have never had anyone come aboard a Citadel before, let alone get close to one. Such a thing takes time, especially if the Citadel is taken, and it will be. We must make it look like a casualty of war. The Herdsmen must never suspect such a thing came from within. You and your friends provided such an opportunity. Do you think it would have been so easy to get the shield harmonics information if this wasn't planned?"

The Solar Sound Generator doesn't work, does it?

Forgen smiled, leading us through more winding corridors and rooms filled with technological wonders. "It will work, but your research is in its infancy. We could not wait for you to complete it, so we accelerated the process."

"We wouldn't have stood a chance if you weren't

expecting us, would we?" I asked, realising the full impact of what Forgen was saying.

"Every Servant and Herdsmen this side of Priaxia knows what Braken looks like, no matter how much gold paint you cover him in. We are not stupid, my nourisher friend. We had to wait for the timing to be right, and you needing the information of our shields opened up such an opportunity for us a little quicker than we had anticipated. We prepared, and soon, we will be victorious, ridding the Herdsmen menace from the backs of the Priory."

"You had to wait for a Citadel to be by itself, you mean?" I questioned.

"That and many things. Beyond making sure Ranjay and I could sustain our relationship, to make sure the hope I offered was solid, I had spent years getting Priory members on board this one Citadel who are loyal to me. Such a thing takes time. Orders are always questioned, and those chosen to serve in a Citadel put under extreme screening. A lot were murdered, failing their mind probe."

I swallowed hard. "I had no idea."

"The Herdsmen are thorough, I'll give them that." Forgen gestured for us to halt. No other word needed to

be spoken. We all halted. We came to be inside a large room, one which reminded me of a weigh station back on some of the spaceship carriers we deployed during the earlier years of the war. They had been destroyed, now being re-built with Priaxian enhancements if they could be salvaged. “Your ship, *Mother*, as you call it, will not be able to handle the extremes the weapon you hope to create will generate.”

But we now know your magnosphere strength. We will just have to make sure Mother’s shields are greater.

Forgen turned to look upon Vernon. “You do not know much about magnetic fields, do you?”

Vernon shook his head. I ran my hand over his beautiful hairy skin. I could tell Forgen’s words had rattled him, even though I didn’t believe the words were meant to be cutting. *No, I do not.*

Forgen seemed to relax. “Just know, for you to have a shield stronger than a Citadel, you would need to generate one which can only be created by a type of neutron star known as a Magnetar. The energy needed impossible to create. You have seen the engine of the Citadel, have you not?”

“You mean that huge ball of energy?”

Forgen nodded. “That *ball of energy* is a star itself.

One compressed by the sheer might of the Herdsmen's technology, but no less powerful. The reason a Citadel has such a magnetic field is because, in essence, it is a star itself."

I was stunned. "I am beginning to understand now," I said.

Forgen nodded. "We must be quick if we are to eliminate the loyals and take over the Citadel. Being out of communication for any length of time will be questioned. I fear we may already be too late."

What happens if they suspect the Citadel has been compromised?

"We will soon have company. Numbers even a Citadel's defences cannot withstand."

Bipar said, "We move! Now!" And with that, every Priory member around us surged forward, stingers at the ready. It was like a wave of golden bodies, limbs and anger. The doors of the room forced open, the attack begun. Waiting on the other side, the loyals—as Forgen called them. I caught a glimpse of Sern and Braken on the far side of the next room, secured in what looked like a holding cell. I couldn't see where Taseem of Jankin had got to. I wished to be on top of Vernon right then. I felt so vulnerable.

Screams from touches of stingers soon filled the air—blood curdling screams. The weapons set on kill. The scene soon became one of horror as the fight began in earnest, many servants slain in the first few moments.

The Rasck Await

I touched my backside, my gun soon in my hot hand. I came so I was close to Vernon, protecting him as best I could.

He came over me. Lead on, Drake, my love. I am here right above you.

“Sure thing.” I stepped gingerly forward, making sure the path I chose toward Sern and Braken the clearest I could find. Not an easy task considering there were bodies everywhere, most of them dead.

But take it slow. I am starting to get cramps, he hissed.

I turned to look up at him. “What do you mean?” Was Vernon about to give birth right now? I panicked and a cold sweat broke out on my brow. In fact, the whole situation was surreal. Here I was, surrounded by golden painted spiders, no idea who was an enemy and who wasn’t, and my lover was experiencing

contractions.

Nothing serious, never fear. Just my body getting ready for the delivery. I believe you humans would call them Braxton Hicks contractions.

I fired my gun, one of the Priory loyalists coming too close to Vernon for my liking. The needle of light pierced him between his many eyes. He was on the floor, a pile of legs and flesh, seconds later. "I hope you're right. I don't think now is the time or the place to be delivering the future of Priaxia."

Indeed not. But the time will be soon...sooner than I had thought, to be honest. I suspect the next extraction will probably be the last I shall need from you, Drake, my beautiful, my love.

Those last words he spoke affected me more than the carnage, the screams and the blood all around me. Some Priory had disarmed each other, now resorted to biting and ripping flesh with mandibles, soaked red from the frenzy. I know Vernon would still want me, even after he gave birth, but still, to hear the words and knowing the time would be soon, brought it all to the forefront of my thoughts.

I stepped over the dead. Careful to lead Vernon through the battle as best I could without us being in the

thick of the action. Forgen and his Priory had been doing an awesome job dispensing with the Loyals. Their savagery, their taste for victory more than evident by the way they fought for their leader without question, without fear. I could see Queen Astra's words in action. Priaxians don't fight wars from a room pushing buttons. They fight with their own muscle, never surrendering until the last of the enemy has been wiped out. I shuddered. The ones commandeering the Citadel weren't even Soldiers either. I dreaded to imagine what an army of Priaxian Soldiers could accomplish if this is the carnage Servants could create in a few short minutes.

Which, in effect, was all the time it took—a few short minutes. The Loyals had been killed, every last one of them. I was at the cell Sern and Braken had been housed, moments after the final cry from the enemy rang out. I only had to fire my gun three times. When released I embraced them. They reciprocated.

Sern, looking rather upset, twitching his front legs, said, "Typical. Finally some action an I'm locked away like a punished female.

I soothed him the hardest. "Never mind, you can have your share next time."

He nodded. My words weren't an attempt to make

light of the situation. I had a terrible feeling that commandeering the Citadel was the easy part.

Forgen's next words confirmed my fears. "Quick, my brothers. We must take the Citadel into heaven's light away from here. Set a course for the Rasck system. We will find refuge there. Also, Bipar, can you secure the Herdsmen pilot. We do not want him revealing our situation when we arrive in safe space."

"The Rasck?" I asked.

Forgen turned to me. "Yes. The once great allies of the Priaxian race. They will offer us shelter, as they have remained hidden. They will also give us enough time so we can rendezvous with your *Mother* and get this weapon of yours online. I hope."

I thought you said Mother couldn't generate the sort of power needed to sustain the weapon's fire?

Forgen smiled, patting Vernon on his back. "My dear, incubator friend, I never said anything about turning *this* Citadel into the weapon you desire with the help of what you have done on board *Mother*."

Why was Forgen being so forthcoming? Before I could ask such a thing, Ranjay said, "Where is my mother and father?"

Braken said, "We hid them in a storage compartment

for their own safety.”

“Show me.” Ranjay patted Forgen on his head, the signal for him to be lifted down. “Oh, and, Drake, I know you don’t believe my Forgen. I can see it in your eyes. But know this, our symbiosis has broadened both of our minds. He now knows the search for power is a futile one and the Herdsmen will be destroyed because of it. What is important is the strength of love. Only such a thing as powerful can be the salvation of those who oppose the iron fist of the enemy.”

I almost choked. Ranjay certainly had come a long way since I saw him four years ago. An arrogant child, made more so by the promise of power. Although, Ranjay did answer my question, in an indirect way. He had given Forgen a new perspective and a new purpose. Which, I suppose is exactly what Vernon had done for me. Before I was lost, fumbling through my life with no real love. Now I had him, I was complete. I understood how Forgen felt. I admired Vernon on an even deeper level.

I breathed in the air, the copper tang from all the blood spilled tickling my nostrils. “I suppose the realisation that a servant and a human could become symbiotic partners was a good thing. It has made you an

honourable man, Forgen.”

Forgen bowed. “That it has. Why would I deny my brothers of such a thing if they so wish it? Sure, there will always be the servants who will want to bond with the soldiers, but for those who don’t they can now have a wonderful purpose, too.”

But for such a thing to happen we must ensure humanities survival, right Forgen?

“Absolutely. Which is why I have planned this for so long. We must take the Citadel into Rasck space. There, with the help of your research, Drake, we can re-fit this vessel to become the shining light for good. Humanity will be saved.”

I couldn’t help but be carried away by Forgen’s words. He knew how to speak to incite emotion, that’s for sure. I watched as Braken led Ranjay away. Sern remained. I ran my hand along Vernon’s front leg, adding, “I think Vernon and I would like to be taken to a quiet place to rest. He has had a bit of an adventure, and in his condition, such a thing has exhausted him. I feel a bit drained myself, too.”

Forgen nodded for one of his brothers to come forward. When one was present, the golden paint covered in blood all I could see, he said, “Take Drake

and his incubator to my quarters. They can have anything they request—Sern, I will need you. You will have your action real soon. We need to get rid of the Herdsmen vermin who still remain, namely the pilot.”

“Now you’re talking,” Sern said with an excited warble.

When at Forgen’s quarters, a lavish room filled with all sorts of art and sculptures from both Priaxia and the Herdsmen, Vernon spun a silken bed. We both held each other, taking in each other’s breaths as we settled into the silk. We did our extraction before the starfish of Annaz VI returned to the ocean. Soon after our connection, we joined in our dream share, cementing our bond. We shared a sleep, which happened to be the most welcome indeed.

* * * *

When I woke, again Vernon wasn’t anywhere to be seen. I sat up, catching rummaging sounds coming from the other side of the quarters. I got up. “What’s the matter, my beautiful?”

I am hungry. I need some food. He had found the food dispenser, but from his expression hadn’t found

anything edible. The food all over the floor by his feet cementing the fact of my observation.

“Looks like plenty in there from what I can tell.”

There isn't anything from Priaxia in here. Do they not eat Priaxian fruits on this ship? What sort of society doesn't like Priaxian fruit? Why isn't there any gooards? No lamatans? Nothing. How can I be expected to keep myself fit and ready for the birth if I have to eat...eat this rubbish? He threw down a red, shiny apple like fruit, one the size of a basketball. His expression going from concern to panic in a matter of seconds.

I ran my hand over his skin. “Easy. I’ll go get Forgen. He will be able to tell us where there is some Priaxian fruit, I’m sure.”

I hope so, Drake, my love. I am at my wits ends. I need sustenance and I need it now. There will only be one more extraction...that's all. I must be at my best. I must.

“I understand.” I really could understand how he felt. He wanted to be ready for the hatching of this egg. An egg he had been incubating for near on four years. He wanted the comforts of his home. He wanted everything to be perfect. Pity we were on an alien ship, everything was foreign here.

I turned, ready to head for the door. I didn't have to summon anyone. Soon Forgen's quarters were filled with familiar and welcome faces. There was Sern, Braken, Ranjay, Taseem, Jankin, and Forgen. "Vernon needs food," I blurted.

Forgen came to us. "What does he require?" But my mind was no longer on the thought of food. I could see Ranjay was holding Taseem's hand. The look on her face universal. She had her son back. Jankin looked content, too. So much so, I had never seen him so at peace. I could really make love to him right now. He would be perfect. An idea struck me.

"Vernon, when is the next extraction due?"

Soon. But I must get some Priaxian food before I begin. The extraction will be the most demanding. I will need your sperm many times. Many, many times.

I smiled. "Then I think it's time we showed our dear friends just how much we have appreciated everything they have done."

"And give us the encouragement we need for the events which are about to unfold," Sern said.

Braken looked at him.

Forgen had pressed some buttons on the food dispenser. Seconds later, in his clawed hands sat the

familiar aubergine-coloured fruits with the pleasant orange taste I had enjoyed when Vernon and I first consummated our symbiotic relationship. Vernon took them up and devoured them, the sweet smelling juice dripping from his mandibles a short time after that.

I agree, he said. Get them all ready, those who want to join.

“Jankin, Braken, Vernon and I would like to share something special with you. You, too, Sern.”

Braken looked at me. “I don’t understand.”

I smiled. “For the final extraction, Vernon and I would like to share it with all of you, too. All at once. If it’s all right with all of you, of course.”

Jankin winked. “You just can’t keep away from my cock, can you, Drake?”

I slapped him on his back. “Nope. But just know, this will be the last time I will ever be with you, my dear husband. From here on in, Vernon and I are only for each other.”

Braken said, “I would like to experience an extraction. I think it will be fun.”

Sern growled. “Oh, it is.”

“You’ve already experienced it, my big strong soldier?” Braken came underneath his lover, cooing as

they rubbed their skin against each other.

“Yes. And it will be something I would want you to know, too. Before our paths part and I am only for you, my beautiful.”

In a way, Sern was right. This did feel like a parting. I also agreed this had to be the biggest and best extraction ever. I wanted the hatchlings to be drowned in our love, so when they emerged into the brave new world we were about to create with the help of Forgen, they would be safe.

It is time, Vernon said.

Ranjay bowed. “I think it’s time we left. Mother, Forgen and I will show you around the Citadel while the others do what they must to give Vernon’s hatchlings their final nourishment.”

A Matter for the Ages

On the coral atoll, my Vernon stood. Next to him was Sern, holding him. I went to them and they both embraced me. I felt someone else touch me. Turning around, I saw Braken, the pure white skinned, blond-haired twink I imagined he would be in an extraction.

Jankin came into view, too.

I parted my hold on Vernon. "Take me, Jankin. Let's share a love we never had."

He smiled. "Yes," he breathed, coming to hold me.

Before I knew it, I was on my back, Jankin inside me. But instead of him pumping away, hammering me for his own satisfaction, he kissed me long and deep, with so much intent my mind spun. I opened my legs wider for him and he continued.

From the corner of my eye I could see Braken and Sern enjoying one another, watching them as humans even more erotic than seeing them as hulking great

Priaxians giving each other what for. Braken was well hung, even as a mammal. Sern would be sore. Then again, I think he liked it liked that.

Where was my Vernon? I began to panic, pulling myself away from Jankin's warm tender kiss, my tongue tingling.

"What is it, Drake?"

I was about to answer, when a shadow came over me. My beautiful Vernon was indeed here. He kneeled down, his erection within easy reach. I reached out and began masturbating him. He smiled like he always did, one full of lust and love in equal measure. "Let Jankin take you," he said.

I didn't need any more encouragement. I let Jankin finish what he started. As I was carried away by his rhythm, lost in his scent, his intent, his fever, I came to realise Vernon was at my own erection. He was sucking me, taking as much of me as he could into his mouth. Suffice it to say, I didn't last long. Not with Jankin inside me, massaging my prostate with his ample appendage, and with Vernon's expert tongue lavishing all of its attention on my cock. I blew my load.

Again, the extraction didn't last long.

Jankin came away. Where he went I didn't know, but

had no time to contemplate such matters. Sern was soon at my arsehole with his tongue and then, much to my delight, his cock. He fucked me, his actions more staccato than Jankin's but no less appreciated. Once more Vernon was at my cock, sucking and slurping and doing his best to get a rise out of me. Of course, what he did worked. I came again.

Then it was Braken's turn.

I yelped when he entered me. His massive cock, all throbbing veins and bulging head, pierced me unlike any I had experienced before. He was huge, but again, so welcome. Sern was gone now. His part in the extraction over. All who remained was Braken, getting sweaty and out of breath as I kept my legs open for him.

I could see what Vernon was doing. He offered me to all of our friends, giving them one of the most beautiful experiences any species of any description can have together.

Soon, Braken had done his thing.

Vernon had milked me again. I was sore and exhausted, but there was one more man I needed to give my all for. My main man. My big, beautiful Vernon.

He came over me. Touching me tenderly, caressing my skin, kissing me all over, I became aroused again.

“Now it is just you and me.” He smiled, melting my heart. Fuck he was a beautiful son-of-a-bitch.

“Then what are you waiting for?”

He didn’t hesitate.

Vernon pierced my warmth and I gasped, screaming out into the evening, warning the starfish that what they had didn’t even come close to how I felt at the moment. I was the most loved man in the universe. I fucking loved it.

For what seemed an eternity, we made love. Yes, love. There was no grunting and groaning. No, wham bam, thank you, sir. It was all sensual movements, touches of skin, gentle laughs, and deep and meaningful kisses, as we became one. I held him tight and he held me, like I had become his lifeline and he was mine. We continued to writhe on the atoll, as hours and hours went by. I didn’t care. I had him. In my mind that’s all I cared about.

Soon the sky painted black and the stars illuminated our passion. Our sweat, our breath, our bodies, our everything, all continued to be one. I was his, as deep as the eternity of the universe and as wondrous. I never wanted this moment to end. It was perfect.

Vernon shuddered.

He had cum. I let myself go, too. I had given him all I could give, many, many times during this extraction and even though I knew the hatchlings needed this final feeding, I didn't get the feeling it was all for them. What I had done had helped me realise Vernon was to be mine, forever and ever. It also made me realise that my friends had been important, too. I had shared myself with them all and as a result, only good could come from it.

"I love you, Vernon."

"I love you, too, my love, my Drake." He kissed me again. When parted, he added, "With all of my heart, too."

I opened my eyelids, taking a moment to calm. My body still heated from an extraction I would never forget for as long as I lived. Jankin was nowhere to be seen. Braken and Sern now cuddled each together, cooing to each other in the corner of the room.

"Vernon?" I whispered. I was flat on my back on the silken bed he had spun before we slept. A shadow came over me. I reached up, more out of instinct.

I am here. He picked me up so I could be close to him once more, our bodies touching. His hairs tickled my nakedness. I ran my hands across his body. He was

warmer than usual. Was his high temperature an effect of being so close to giving birth?

“How soon?” I asked.

Soon, was his short, sharp reply. But not a word said with any ill intent. From his uneasy words, I knew he didn’t know. The egg would hatch when the egg hatches. *But I would like to be away from all this. I would like to be in our nest, eating fruits and with you next to me. Not this.*

“I know. I’m sorry.”

Don’t apologise, my love. It’s not your fault. For the future of both of our species, we must ensure the taking over of this Citadel will not be in vain. I fear such a thing won’t be as easy as Forgen has made us all believe.

As if to reinforce Vernon’s warning, Jankin burst into the chamber. The look on his face was universal. He was concerned—actually, he was more than that. He was scared. His eyes wide, his mouth a quiver as he said, “There are two *Citadels of Justice* in pursuit. Forgen wants us all on the bridge, pronto.”

Sern came to his feet, Braken safe and secure underneath him. “How far away are the enemy?”

“Two days,” Jankin replied.

I ran my hand along Vernon's underside, toward his head, a signal I wanted to be put down. When I came next to him, I came to look straight into his big beautiful, black eyes. I said, "Seems like we have two days to get the Solar Sound Generator operational then."

Jankin came to hold my hand. "There's something else."

What? Vernon came over me, sheltering me like he always did, as all Priaxians did to the ones they cared about. I knew he couldn't pick me up, and place me onto his back. He was too weak. I took it upon myself to come so I could protect him, ready to tread the ground before he walked it.

"I think you should all see for yourself."

Now curiosity burned within me. I wanted to know. "Then what are we waiting for? Let's get to the bridge. Perhaps it's good news." I swallowed hard. I had to stay positive, for Vernon's sake. For my own sake, too.

Changes

To say we needed to see what was happening on the bridge had been an understatement. At first, I couldn't get my head around the sheer scope of what I witnessed as soon as the doors to the bridge opened.

The vision bubble, the most massive I have ever seen, filled a room which looked, for all intents and purposes, like a war room from some of those old holovids I used to like. The place was massive, and Forgen and Ranjay sat together on a throne-like chair, commanding all they surveyed.

Vernon gasped. He must have been feeling the same as me. I blinked, my mind still clouded by the sight before me. Seemed to me we had entered Rasck space, or at least the solar system their home-world is located within. The scene was beautiful, and terrifying at the same time. Beautiful because of the majesty of a nebula galaxy creating a wonderful backdrop to what I now

believed would be the alliance's last stand. To me, nothing short of terrifying.

"You like our little arrangement, Drake Glauco?" Forgen asked with a smug and proud tone of voice.

The space all around us now filled with spaceships. I recognised a lot of them, they had the configuration and flag of Aurora. The Cult of Starfall's to be more exact. In fact, besides seeing Auroran ships and frigates from Earth enhanced by Priaxian technology, there were a huge number of unrecognisable ships, too. I assumed they belonged to the Rasck.

Vernon's words confirmed my suspicions. *How did you get the Rasck to join in the alliances cause, Forgen?*

Forgen came off his throne. "The same way the Herdsmen got the Priory to their cause."

"You promised them power?" I asked.

"More than that," Forgen came so he towered above me. Vernon came to shelter me, a reminder to the leader of the Priory of who he was talking to. Well, I assumed that's what would have been conveyed. Forgen backed away. I could understand his enthusiasm, his passion and in a way, I admired him for such a thing. "I promised them a universe without the Herdsmen threat."

I paused a moment for thought. What if, even with a

Citadel of Justice on our side, a ship powered by the energy of a white dwarf star, we weren't able to accomplish this promise made by Forgen to our allies. What if this battle turned out to be the final victory of the Herdsmen? To me it looked like all of the ships of the alliance and many, many more had come to our final battle. I could even see *Mother*. Finally, I managed, "So what about the two Citadels which will be here soon? What do we do about them?"

Forgen turned to look upon the scene the vision bubble presented. "We have two days to prepare. I suggest you do what you must to make sure everything is ready, including getting your solar weapon online. You will have all the facilities of the Citadel at your disposal."

What if we can't get it ready?

"Then the Herdsmen have won."

Vernon touched me on my shoulder. I think it's time we went over to *Mother*. We can discuss whether or not Forgen is right in what he did later. For the here and now, we must do the best we can to ensure the whole of the alliance isn't wiped out in a blink of an eye.

"I agree." My only words. Vernon was right and there would be no use harping on such a fact. Forgen

had taken a gamble by not only commandeering a Citadel, but gathering all the alliance forces in the one place. The only reason we had so many ships left to us was because we divided our forces, spread them to all corners of the galaxy. I hoped we could get the Solar Sound Generator up and running in time, I really did.

Sern and Braken came into view. The soldiers expression said it all, his gaze intent, wide eyed, too. “Holy mother of the Earth, how many ships are out there?”

Braken replied, “All of them, I think.”

“Are you serious?”

I came to Sern. “C’mon, let’s get back to *Mother*. We have work to do before the other Citadels arrive and decide to unleash their wrath.”

Sern nodded. “That they will, Drake. I know it.”

Before too long, Sern, Braken, Vernon and I headed for the loading bay. Again, I had to walk. Vernon’s gait even more awkward than before. He was close to giving birth. Very close.

Naturally, Jankin and Taseem chose to stay with Ranjay. I could understand their reasoning. Even though it would probably take some time to get used to the idea he had been partnered with Forgen for four years. Used

as a sort of experiment to see if the servants could be a symbiotic partner to humans, their bond enhanced by Herdsmen technology, the young man used for his own gain, I could see they also knew he was happy. Well, he looked happy to me. I supposed he was. Unless of course Forgen had used his tongue to convince Ranjay, and his emotional state was all a masquerade, like my marriage to Jankin.

I didn't have much time to ponder such thoughts. We came to the loading bay before I could register in my mind we'd travelled through many corridors. The Little Sage Leaf had been waiting for us. Noredon, too.

I escorted Vernon to the hatchway of our ship when he stopped dead in his tracks. At first, I didn't notice. Not until I realised his shadow, his presence was no longer above me, like a protective and caring umbrella. I turned.

His face gaunt, and if I had to say it, which is quite difficult to describe considering he was all spider-like and hairy with eight eyes, he was in shock, too. Not shock as in he'd seen a ghost. Rather, shock every creature in the universe got when they were about to deliver their young. That and the fact he was clutching his thorax with his hind legs.

It is time, Drake, my love! Vernon then curled up into a ball, the pain he was going through clear, his legs quivering, his body convulsing. He also screamed into my mind. In that moment I understood how all men of Earth felt when they stood helpless next to their partner as they gave birth. All I needed was a wet, warm towel to dab his forehead and the picture of my uselessness would have been complete.

Sern barked. “All of you, help me get him into the Little Sage Leaf. Now!”

I went numb, unable to control putting one foot in front of another. How was I supposed to help get my Vernon anywhere when panic affected me just as much as it affected him?

Vernon screamed louder. I don’t know what it was, but all of a sudden my body jolted into action. What was once a frozen with fear frame, was now right at his side, comforting him, letting him know I was there even though I couldn’t do a thing other than watch the miracle about to happen.

Over an intercom, a voice, stern and with a hint of panic, boomed just as we huddled Vernon into the hatch of the Little Sage Leaf. “Attention all personnel. Attention all personnel. This is not a drill. I repeat, this

is not a drill. Enemy *Citadel of Justice* bearing down on our positron from the new Herdsmen controlled Magellan Prime Spaceport. Estimated time of arrival, one hour. Again, to repeat, Enemy Citadel bearing...”

I didn't need to hear the rest. If I had panicked before, I was livid with fear now. All sorts of emotions ran through me. How could Vernon deliver when doom threatened? How could we keep him safe? How could we defend ourselves against an oncoming Citadel we hadn't detected before because it came at us from a different direction? Even Forgen wouldn't have been privy to all Herdsmen intelligence no matter how trusted he had become. That was the thing with war, no one person knew everything. Best kept that way, too.

Inside the Little Sage Leaf, we directed Vernon to a spun silken cushion. Sern and Braken added more padding straight away. Again, all I could do was watch. I couldn't even give him more comfort like they lavished upon him. I was about to go see if I could find a towel or something, when Vernon grabbed my arm.

Stay.

With one single word, all my doubts and fears, all my self-doubt about my usefulness especially, all disappeared. I stayed with him. He tried to coo, to let

me know my presence was all he needed, but all he could manage was a sort of pained warble. I ran my hands across his skin, feeling his hairs. His body now hotter than ever.

“Little Sage Leaf, get us to *Mother*, pronto. We don’t have much time and we have a very pregnant incubator, too.” Sern waved his hands over the controls. On the vision bubble, the wonderful view of the alliance armada filled the view. I couldn’t help but feel pride. I couldn’t help but feel concern, too, both for Vernon and for the fate of all who would stand with us in the final battle for our freedom against the enemy who now bore down on us. In a way, the egg Vernon was about to give birth to was symbolic of the new hope we all shared. If only we could get the weapon online in time.

We had an hour...at most.

Noredon boarded the ship, two assistants with him. He brought the engine contraption thing, too. The one which reminded me of an old Earth stream engine. I realised all our hopes had become pinned on this device’s effectiveness.

I sighed deep and long. *What is the matter, Drake, my love?*

“I just want all of us to be all right, you especially.”

I will be fine. The egg will hatch and with the new weapon online and our own Citadel, we will be victorious. It was far too impractical to move Vernon, so I had no choice but to agree with him. Besides, Sern and Braken had spun more silk around him, most threads touched the ceiling of the ship, making sure he was well cushioned and as comfortable as possible, to try and replicate a nest. To try and make him feel secure and at home in a harness of Priaxian silk. Braken had retrieved what looked like forceps or something similar. He had brought water, too, and a variety of fruits.

I stayed with him. Always at his side, no matter how much Sern gestured at the controls or how Braken and Noredon ran around, preparing his equipment for integration into the Citadel's systems or coming over to see if Vernon was all right.

The armada moved into position behind Forgen's *Citadel of Justice*. I couldn't blame them. From how I understood it, once a Citadel unleashed its power, nothing Priaxian or human or Auroran made could withstand it.

As I looked at the vision bubble, I couldn't help get a feeling of dread, deep down, and right in the pit of my stomach. I squeezed Vernon's claw-like hand in my

own. He must have understood my concern, because he offered another rattled warble.

A split second later, he yelled out and his whole body shuddered. The noise was intense in my mind and my stomach turned. The base of his thorax opened wider, just like a woman's vagina would, and the whitest of eggs I had ever seen began to emerge, breaking the mucosal barrier with a wet, slurping sound. A barrier that had helped hold the egg in place for near on four years.

I began to cry.

The Herdsmen's Wrath

The vision bubble displayed Forgen's stern and imposing features. "I need the equipment for the solar weapon in place immediately. We don't have much time and I fear it may be too late already."

Noredon and his aides gathered up what they could carry and left the Little Sage Leaf. Braken and Sern remained. Again Vernon shuddered, another inch of the egg emerging from his holding pouch within his thorax.

Through misted eyes, made worse by the many emotions running through me, I noticed Braken and Sern had become Vernon's mid-wives. They had been tending to his every whim, making sure he was comfortable above all else. I stood there, next to him, supporting him as best I could, offering words of encouragement. I kept running my hand across his back. He was sweating, his hairs slicked with the efforts of his labour. Would it help to rub him in such a way? Did

Priaxian incubators even get sore backs during the birthing process? I think my movement soothed him...or at least helped in some way. He didn't complain. He was magnificent.

The vision bubble changed view. Near the planet the armada was orbiting, a flash of light could be seen against the eternal darkness of space. I gasped. Seemed the hour was up already and the Citadel had arrived in the Rasck solar system.

Sern dashed to the controls of the Little Sage Leaf. "I think the games have begun."

Braken came to be underneath his lover. I moved closer to Vernon. At least we were in a small ship, able to get off the Forgen's Citadel and slip away undetected if we had to. I don't know why, but I blurted, "Sern, see if we can get permission to leave." Well, I did know why. I wanted to make sure Vernon was as safe as possible. I don't know how a Citadel would fare against another in a one on one situation, but instinct told me I'd better not be in the thick of it when they did.

Sern relayed my request. Ranjay came onto the vision bubble. "I suggest you stay where you are for now. The weapon is nearly online and the enemy Citadel has ceased its advance. For now I'd say it is accessing

the situation.”

I supposed Ranjay was right. Being confronted by an armada and a Citadel may cause a moment of pause. At least that bought us some more time. My train of thought was soon interrupted by Vernon shuddering, and releasing more screams.

The egg was now about a quarter of the way out of his pouch.

His scream this time different than before and concern rose up to consume me. I leaned over, lavishing kisses on his brow. “What’s wrong, my big, beautiful baby?”

I don’t know...

I looked once more at his thorax. Blood was trickling onto the silken bed. Again, panic and concern stabbed at me. Was such a thing normal? Heck, I’d never been at a Priaxian birth before. How was I supposed to know what to expect? To me, Vernon looked to be in a bit of trouble. I stood up straight, “Braken, I need you.”

Braken didn’t hesitate. “What is it, Drake?” I think he had gathered something was wrong by the look on my face and the tight and emotional tone of my voice. He came to place his hand upon my shoulder. Again Vernon shuddered.

I think something is wrong, Vernon wheezed.

“The egg is stuck. I will have to use the forceps,” Braken said, all too calm for my liking, but thankful he was, otherwise I would have really panicked. “I may also have to cut the pouch opening so it is wider.”

“Is that normal?” I asked. Sure, some women needed such assistance when they gave birth, but we were talking about a four-meter high alien spider here. Then again, the egg looked to be massive. The whole, shitting out a watermelon analogy sprang to mind. I felt for Vernon.

Before Braken could answer, a massive jolt shook the Little Sage Leaf. So much so I fell backward, having to grab one of the railings. The vision bubble changed view again. The view made me sick. The enemy Citadel now fired upon the planet, its energy bolts searing the ground, levelling the Rasck cities and boiling their lakes and oceans.

Forgen came on screen. “We move. Everyone, prepare for attack.” The announcement was a general alert, similar to general quarters on Earth ships. Aside from keeping hold of Vernon’s hand there wasn’t really anything else I could do about the events unfolding. I swallowed hard. Seemed this was going to be one big,

bumpy ride.

I was right, of course. Seconds later, the screen showed the whole armada swooping down on the attacking *Citadel of Justice*. The blackness of space ignited by energy weapons and missile explosions. Sure, the shield of the Citadel withstood everything our pathetic technology could throw at it, but at least the attack on the planet had ceased.

Then it happened. The enemy Citadel unleashed its wrath onto the alliance fleet. Great spikes of energy pierced our ships, rendering them useless seconds later. The wreckage nothing more than space junk soon to be caught in the planet's gravity we orbited.

Vernon screamed, one that reverberated his pain, sheer and absolute. I turned to see why. I didn't need to play any guessing games. Braken had begun inserting the forceps, at the same time, nicking the sphincter muscle with a sort of surgical scalpel thing. I hoped the egg would be able to pass from him now. Up to this point, his body was proving too effective at keeping the egg inside his pouch.

I glanced back up at the vision bubble. Forgen's Citadel joined the strike. A massive sheet of energy, like lightning, surged out and struck the enemy, a side of it

plunged into darkness but quickly recovering. Seemed when Citadel's went one on one, their magnetic shields proved too effective as well. The only hope we had was to get the Solar Sound Generator online.

Sern growled. "Why the delay at getting the generator working?" He was talking to Jankin.

From what I could see, Jankin, Taseem and Noredon had been in the engine room, working frantically to integrate Priaxian/human technology with the Herdsmen's. No easy task I would imagine.

Vernon screamed again.

My attention became diverted once more. The egg now about halfway exposed, Braken's mid-wife skills proving to be quite effective, if a little messy. I couldn't help but feel a spark of hope ignite within me. I came to embrace Vernon. He groaned.

A long way to go yet, my love, he said, his voice drained and reflecting the pain he must be feeling as the egg emerged.

"You're doing brilliantly, beautiful."

Another massive jolt shook the Little Sage Leaf. This time the vibration was different. A klaxon sounded and everything went dark for a moment. I took it from the jolting movement we had experienced, we had been

struck by the enemy. One by one, systems came back online. The vision bubble's blackness soon filled with the extent of what the enemy Citadel had accomplished in such a short time. Hundreds of our ships lay in ruins.

Vernon screamed again.

Braken now used both the forceps and his hands to grapple the egg easing it out of him as best he could. To me it looked like Vernon would faint at any moment, his body swaying, like he was drunk or something. “

I embraced him tight. “Not long to go now,” I said, having no idea what I was talking about.

Yes. Soon.

Again and again the ship shuddered. If I had said we were in for a bumpy ride I would have to reassess my thoughts. We were in for hell. The enemy Citadel kept up its onslaught by sending wave after wave of its power to all who surrounded it, concentrating on us.

I felt a bit giddy myself. “Fuuucking heeelll,” I said with a groan just as we became plunged into darkness.

Braken yelled out something incomprehensible, and Sern swore like the trooper he was. Vernon was now oddly quiet. I couldn't see a thing, but knew, deep down, he had calmed. I was comforted by such a thing in a way.

Emergency lighting activated, the Little Sage Leaf said.

Sure enough, we became bathed in a green glow moments later. As soon as my eyes adjusted to this new onslaught, I caught a glimpse of why my lover, my big and beautiful lover had calmed.

Beside him, the egg—an egg, which was cracking open, the hatchlings within trying to break free. Did we have to help them? Or was it best to leave them to it, let them emerge in their own time? I couldn't help myself. I cried some more.

Braken came to embrace us both.

I whispered into his ear. "You did it. You are so magnificent. So beautiful. I love you so much."

Vernon let out a pained chuckle. *I couldn't have done it without you, Drake, my love.*

"I didn't do anything."

You were here for me. That is all that matters.

The ship jolted again. This time, I was thrown off my feet, landing close to Sern at the controls. My head spun. "What the fuck was that?"

"I don't know," the Soldier replied. "I will hail the bridge and find out."

Birth of Hope

The vision bubble sparkled back to life. Emergency power diverted to communications. “What’s going on up there?” Sern asked with a stern bark only he could manage.

Forgen came on screen. “The weapon is online. I have advised the fleet to disperse while we draw the Citadel away from the planet. Be prepared.”

Another spark of hope grew, fired by the news Vernon had delivered the egg. I looked down. The egg now cracked, and in the green-lit gloom, I could see claw-like hands poke through the shell where the cracks had become the widest. The hatchlings must be all right. Thank fuck.

Braken dashed off to the food dispenser. He was ordering Priaxian fruits. I would imagine the hatchlings would be hungry when they emerged. Heck, I bet Vernon was hungry. I knew I was starving.

Soon, power had been restored, the Little Sage Leaf able to show us the events which now unfolded outside. We approached the sun of the Rasck system. I took it from our position, the time to deploy the weapon had come.

My guess was right.

A short moment later, Forgen announced for all personnel to prepare for attack. A short time after that, a sort of tunnel-like force field spiralled out from our Citadel. At the same time, another energy tunnel headed toward the enemy Citadel.

All that needed to happen was for the two to connect and the weapon could be activated. The wait terrible. Vernon touched me. I jumped, realising I had become lost in the view, concentrating so hard on what was being played out.

I would say we will soon find out if the last four years have been worth the fight.

I turned to him, running my hand over his heated body once more. He looked a lot better than a few moments ago. Having given birth to his egg a great relief, I'd say. "It will be. Even if it doesn't work, we will have gained enough knowledge to come back better and stronger."

Vernon smiled. *I hope you are right.*

Then it happened. The tunnels connected, Forgen's Citadel the connection between the two force fields the generator had created. It was like watching something in slow motion. As the weapon activated, the Citadel of the enemy disintegrated, pulled apart bit by bit, the pieces joining the flotsam of our alliance ships all around it.

The sight now so beautiful. The generator worked. It actually fucking worked. Trouble was, I thought too soon. Seemed the sound from the star also damaged us. The ship vibrated, more violent than before. So much so it set my teeth on edge.

Vernon grabbed me. Braken nursed the now fully emerged hatchlings, the cutest little Priaxian spiders you'd ever want to see, all awkward legs and big beautiful eyes.

Forgen came to view. "The shields have been knocked out. Structural integrity is fine, but it looks like we've been burned out. It's going to take a while to fix, so for the here and now, we're defenceless."

I ran to the communication panel and stabbed the button. "What about the other two Citadels are approaching our position?"

There was a moment of pause.

Forgen activated a more direct link instead of a general band transmission. "It will take a moment to gather any intelligence as to what they are doing. The news of the destroyed Citadel will reach them soon. Let's just hope it scares them, and they break off their pursuit. They don't know we're damaged. Perhaps that will be to our advantage."

And I hope they go running back into Herdsmen space with their tails tucked between their legs, Vernon added. *I have other matters to attend to.* He reached out to gather the two hatchlings who had emerged from the egg. For the first time in a long time, Vernon cooed. I smiled.

I couldn't agree more with what he said. Again, we had to endure a waiting game. Something I didn't want to live through, but had no choice. I moved closer to my new family.

Vernon looked up at me with his loving eyes. *This is your daddy and the love of my life.*

I couldn't help it. I got misty eyed again. Damn my emotions. Damn them to hell. Still, I kneeled down and embraced all three of them as best I could. The hatchlings were already my size, so no easy task. Vernon cooed some more.

The bridge was silent for well over two hours. Vernon, Sern, Braken and the hatchlings and I all shared a meal. During the silence, Braken had stitched up the incision he had made on Vernon's thorax. Even though my lover couldn't move off the silken bed just yet, he was quickly returning to his old self.

Then, just as I was about to go over to the communicator and ask if there was any word, Ranjay appeared on the vision bubble. He was smiling. "The enemy Citadels are heading back into Herdsmen space. We won." The screen turned off before I could respond. His last words rang in my mind. We won...we won. I couldn't believe it. Sure, we had a victory, but was this really the end of the war? Had the Herdsmen turned tail, as Vernon has suggested they do?

I re-opened the channel. This time Forgen appeared, Ranjay underneath him. "Can we really celebrate?"

Forgen nodded his head. "It will take the Herdsmen a while to contemplate what has happened. Perhaps it will be years before they move. I know one thing for sure, they will not risk another Citadel. They only had seven."

"So it's a hollow victory?" I asked.

Forgen smiled. "Not hollow at all. We have given them something to think about, and trust me, a

Herdsmen does not act without giving thought to all of the possibilities.”

“Permission to leave the Citadel, Forgen?”

“Permission granted.”

I turned to Vernon and the others. “Anyone who wants to stay, leave now. I want to get away from here.”

Braken said, “I think I speak for all of us when I say, I want to stay. Besides, we can’t have your babies growing up without their uncles, now can we?”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed. “Damn, we have the weirdest family in the universe, don’t we?”

Vernon said, *I wouldn’t have it any other way. Now, Sern, my dear friend, guide us back to Earth. I think it’s time this family found a proper home, one high above the ground and one that’s warm and inviting.*

Sern went to the controls. The vision bubble filled with the kaleidoscope of heaven’s light seconds later. “Course set...for our new home.”

Braken said, “And Jankin and Taseem have their family now, too.”

I nodded. Braken was right. I came to kiss and embrace Vernon and all the others. “I am so pleased we found each other.”

I am, too. Now, let us all get some rest. Tomorrow

will be a big day.

“Oh, why’s that?”

You will make love to me over and over and over and over and without the need for an extraction, too. It will be days before we get to Earth and I want to make the most of it.

“You know, I have a feeling everything is going to be all right.”

Of course it will. We have each other.

About the Author

I'm Mark and I live in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. By day I am a public servant, but by night, when I get in front of my computer, I can be anyone. I let my imagination go. I can go anywhere, from the farthest reaches of space, to the dilapidated house at the end of the street, and anywhere in between. I write about people from all walks of life, from teenagers finding out what's it's like to be an adult or to adults that discover what it's like to become a child once more. Characters move my stories just as much as they move me.