

David Weber - Path Of The Fury

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Prologue

Blackness.

Blackness over and about her. Drifting, dreamless, endless as the stars themselves, twining within her. It enfolded her, sharing itself with her, and she snuggled against it in the warm, windless void that was she.

But it frayed. Slowly, imperceptibly even to one such as she, the warp and woof of darkness loosened. Slivers of peace drifted away, and the pulse of life quickened. She roused-sleepily, complaining at the disturbance- and clutched at the darkness as a sleeper might blankets on a frosty morning. But repose unraveled in her hands, and she woke... to blackness.

Yet it was a different blackness, and her thoughts sharpened as cold swept itself about her, flensing away the final warmth. Her essence reached out, quick and urgent in something a mortal might have called fear, but only emptiness responded, and a blade of sorrow twisted within her.

They were gone-her sister selves, their creators. All were gone. She who had never existed as a single awareness was alone, and the void sucked at her. It sought to devour her, and she was but a shadow of what once she had been... a shadow who felt the undertow of loneliness sing to her with extinction's soulless lack of malice.

Focused thought erected a barrier, holding the void at bay. Once that would have been effortless; now it dragged at her like an anchor, but it was a weight she could bear. She roused still further, awareness flickering through the vast, empty caverns of her being, and was appalled by what she saw. By how far she had sunk, how much she had lost.

Yet she was what she was, diminished yet herself, and a sparkle of grim humor danced. She and her sister selves had wondered, once. They had discussed it, murmuring to one another in the stillness of sleep when their masters had no current task for them. Faith had summoned their creators into existence, however they might have denied it, and her selves had known that when that faith ended, so would those she/they served. But what of her and her selves? Would the work of their makers' hands vanish with them? Or had they, unwitting or uncaring, created a force which might outlive them all?

And now she knew the answer... and cursed it. To be the last and wake to know it, to feel the wound where her other selves should be, was as cruel as any retribution she/they had ever visited. And to know herself so reduced, she who had been the fiercest and most terrible of all her selves, was an agony more exquisite still.

She hovered in the darkness which no longer comforted, longing for the peace she had lost, even if she must find it in non-being, but filled still with the purpose for which she had been made. Need and hunger quivered within her, and she had never been patient or docile. Something in her snarled at her vanished creators, damning them for leaving her without direction, deprived of function, and she trembled on a cusp of decision, tugged towards death by loneliness and impelled towards life by unformed need.

And then something else flickered on the edge of her senses. It guttered against the blackness, fainter even than she, and she groped out towards it. Groped out, and touched, and gasped in silent shock at the raw, jagged hatred-at the fiery power of that dying ember that cried out in wordless torment. It came not

from her creators but from a mortal, and she marveled at the strength of it.

The ember glowed hotter at her touch, blazing up, consuming its fading reserves in desperate appeal. It shrieked to her, more powerful in its dying supplication than ever her creators had been, and it knew her. It knew her! Not by name-not as an entity, but for herself, for what she was. Its agony fastened upon her like pincers, summoning her from the emptiness to perform her function once more.

Book One:

Victims

Chapter One

The assault shuttle crouched in the corral like a curse, shrouded in thin, blowing snow. Smoke eddied with the snow, throat-catching with the stench of burned flesh, and the snouts of its energy cannon and slug-throwers steamed where icy flakes hissed to vapor. Mangled megabison lay about its landing feet, their genetically-engineered fifteen-hundred-kilo carcasses ripped and torn in snow churned to bloody mud by high-explosives.

The barns and stables were smoldering ruins, and the horses and mules lay heaped against the far fence, no longer screaming. They hadn't fled at first, for they had heard approaching shuttles before, and the only humans they'd ever known had treated them well. Now a line of slaughtered bodies showed their final panicked flight.

They hadn't died alone. A human body lay before the gate; a boy, perhaps fifteen-it was hard to know, after the bullet storm finished with him-who had run into the open to unbar it when the murders began.

One of the raiders stepped from the gaping door of what had been a home, fastening his belt, followed by a broken, wordless sound that had become less than human hours ago. A final pistol shot cracked. The sound stopped.

The raider adjusted his body armor, then thrust two fingers into his mouth and whistled shrilly. The rest of his team filtered out of the house or emerged from the various sheds, some already carrying armloads of valuables.

"I'm calling the cargo flight in-ETA forty minutes!" The leader pumped an arm, then gestured at a clear space beside the grounded assault shuttle. "Get it together for sorting!"

"What about Yu?" someone asked, jerking his head at the single dead raider who lay entangled with the white-haired body of his killer. Rifle fire had torn the old man apart, but Yu's face was locked in a rictus of horrified surprise, and his stiff hands clutched the gory ice where the survival knife had driven up under his armor and ripped his belly open. The leader shrugged.

"Make sure he's sanitized and leave him. The authorities'll be pleased somebody got at least one pirate. Why disappoint them?"

He strolled across to Yu and grimaced down. Stupid fuck always did forget this was a job, not just a chance for sick kicks. So sure of himself, coming right in on the old bastard just to enjoy slapping him around. If the old fart'd had a decent weapon, he'd have gotten half a dozen of us.

The leader had chosen long ago to sign away his own humanity, but he would shed no tears for the likes

of Yu. He turned his back and waved again, and the assault party filtered back into the smoke and ruin and agony to loot.

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She came out of the snow like the white-furred shadow of death, strands of amber hair blowing about an oval face and jade eyes come straight from Hell. Her foundered horse lay far behind her, flanks no longer heaving, his sweat turned chill and frozen hard. She'd wept at how gallantly he'd answered to her harsh usage, but there were no tears now. The tick pulsed within her, and time seemed slow and clumsy as the icy air burned her lungs.

The communicator which had summoned her weighted one parka pocket, and she thrust her binoculars into another as she moved through the whiteness. She'd recognized the shuttle class-one of the old Leopard boats, far from new but serviceable-and counted the raiders as they gathered about their commander. Twenty-four, and the body in the snow with Grandfather made twenty-five. A full load for a Leopard, the emotionless computer in her head observed. No one still aboard, then. That meant no one could kill her with the shuttle's guns... and that she could kill more of them before she died.

Her left hand checked the survival knife at her hip, then joined her right upon her rifle. Her enemies had combat rifles, some carried grenades, all wore unpowered armor. She didn't, but neither did she care, and she caressed her own weapon like a lover. A direcat like the one who'd been raiding their herds since winter closed its normal range could pull down even megabison; that was why she'd taken a lot of gun with her this morning.

She reached the shuttle and went to one knee behind a landing leg, watching the house. She considered claiming the bird for herself, but a Leopard needed a separate weaponeer, and it had to be linked to its mother ship's telemetry. She could neither hijack it without someone higher up knowing instantly nor use its weapons, so the real question was simply whether or not they'd left their com up. If their helmet units were tied into the main set, they could call in reinforcements. From how far? Thirty clicks-from the Braun place, the computer told her. Less than a minute for a shuttle at max. Too short. She couldn't snipe them as they came out, or she wouldn't get enough of them before she died.

Her frozen jade eyes didn't even flinch as they traveled over her brother's mangled body. She was in the groove, tingling with memories she'd spent five years trying to forget, and she embraced them as she did her rifle. No berserker, the computer told her. Ride the tick. Spend yourself well.

She left her cover, drifting to the power shed like a thicker billow of snow. A raider knelt inside, whistling as he unplugged the power receiver. Ten percent of her sister's credit had gone into that unit, the computer reflected as she set her rifle soundlessly aside and drew her knife. A half step, fingers of steel tangled in greasy hair, a flash of blade, and the right arm of her parka was no longer white.

One. She dropped the dead man and reclaimed her rifle, working her way down the side of the shed. A foot crunched in snow, coming around from the back, and her rifle twirled like a baton. Eyes flared wide in a startled face. A hand scrabbled for a pistol. Lungs sucked in wind to shout-and the rifle butt crushed his trachea like a sledgehammer. He jackknifed backwards, shout dying in a horrible gurgle, hands clawing at his ruined throat, and she stepped over him and left him to strangle behind her.

Two, the computer whispered, and she slid wide once more, floating like the snow, using the snow. A billow of flakes swept over a raider as he dragged a sled of direcat pelts towards the assault shuttle. It enveloped him, and when it passed he lay face-down in a steaming gush of crimson.

Three, the computer murmured as she drifted behind the house and a toe brushed the broken back door open.

A raider glanced up at the soft sound, then gawked in astonishment at the snow-shrouded figure across the littered kitchen. His mouth opened, and a white-orange explosion hurled him through the arched doorway into the dining room. Four, the computer counted as he fell across her mother's naked, broken body. Shouts echoed, and a raider hidden behind the dining room wall swung his combat rifle through the arch. Death's jade eyes never flickered, and a thunderbolt blew a fist-sized hole through the wall and the body behind it.

Five. She darted backwards, vanishing back into the snow, and went to ground at a corner of the greenhouse. Two raiders plowed through the snow, weapons ready, charging the back of the house, and she let them pass her.

The two shots sounded as one, and she rolled to her left, clearing the corner of the house. The shuttle lay before her, and the assault team commander ran madly for the lowered ramp. A fist of fire punched him between the shoulder blades, and she rose in a crouch, racing for the well house.

Eight, the computer whispered, and then a combat rifle Barked before her. She went down as the tungsten slug smashed her femur like a spike of plasma, and a raider shouted in triumph. But she'd kept her rifle, and triumph became terror as it snapped into position without conscious thought and his head exploded in a fountain of scarlet and gray and snow-white bone.

She rose on her good leg, nerves and blood afire with anti-shock protocols, and dragged herself into the cover of the ceramacrete foundation. Jade-ice eyes saw movement. Her rifle tracked it; her finger squeezed.

Ten. The computer whirred, measuring ranges and vectors against her decreased mobility, and she wormed under the well house overhang. Rifle fire crackled, but solid earth rose like a berm before her. They could come at her only from the front or flank... and the shuttle ramp lay bare to her fire.

A hurricane of tungsten penetrators flayed the well house, covering a second desperate rush for that shuttle. Two men raced to man its weapons, and flying snow and dirt battered her mask-like face. Ceramacrete sprayed down from above, but her targets moved so slowly, so clumsily, and she was back on the range, listening to her DI's voice, with all the time in the world.

Twelve. And then she was moving again, slithering on elbows and belly down a scarlet ribbon of blood before someone with grenades thought of them.

She slapped in a fresh magazine and came out to her left, back towards the house, and rocked up on her good knee. Flying metal whined about her ears, but she was in the groove, riding the tick, rifle swinging with metronome precision. Amateurs, the computer said as four raiders charged her, firing from the hip like holoivid heroes. Her trigger finger stroked, and her rifle hammered her shoulder. Again. Three times. Four.

She rose in a lurching run, dragging herself through the snow, nerve blocks severing her from the agony as torn muscle shredded on knife-edged bone. A corner of her brain wondered how much of this she could take before the femoral artery split, but a blast of adrenalin flooded her system, her vision cleared once more, and she rolled into the cover of the front step.

Sixteen, the computer told her, and then seventeen as a raider burst from the house into her sights and

died. He fell almost atop her, and the first expression crossed her face at the sight of his equipment. She snagged his ammo belt, and a wolfish smile twisted her lips as bloody fingers primed the grenade. She held it, listening to feet crashing through the house behind her, then nipped it back over her shoulder through the broken door.

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Commodore Howell jerked upright in his chair as an alarm snarled into his neural receptor. An azure light pulsed in his holo display, well beyond the outermost planetary orbit, and his head whipped around to his ops officer.

Commander Rendlemann's eyes were closed as he communed with the ship's AI. Then they opened and met his commander's.

"We may have a problem here, sir. Tracking says somebody just kicked in his Fasset drive at five light-hours."

"Who?" Howell demanded.

"Not sure yet, sir. CIC is working on it, but the gravity signature is fairly small. Intensity suggests a destroyer- possibly a light cruiser."

"But it's definitely a Fleet drive?"

"No question, sir."

"Crap!" Howell brooded at his own display, watching the pulsing light gain velocity at the rate possible only to a Fasset drive starship. "What the hell is he doing here? This was supposed to be a clean system!"

It was a rhetorical question and Rendlemann recognized it as such, merely raising an eyebrow at his commander.

"ETA?" Howell asked after a moment.

"Uncertain, sir. Depends on his turnover point, but he's piling up vee at an incredible rate-he must be well over the redline-and his line of advance clears everything but Mathison Five. He'll be awful close to Five's Powell limit when he hits its orbit, but he may be able to hold it together."

"Yeah." Howell rubbed his upper lip and conferred with his own synth link, monitoring the readiness signals as his flagship raced back to general quarters. Their operational window had just gotten a lot narrower.

"Check the stat board on the shuttle teams," he ordered, and Rendlemann flipped his mental finger through a mass of report files.

"Primary targets are almost clear, sir. First wave Beta shuttles are already loading-looks like they'll finish up in about two hours. Most of the second wave Beta shuttles are moving on their pick-up schedules, but one Alpha shuttle hasn't sent the follow-up."

"Which one?"

"Alpha Two-One-Niner." The ops officer consulted his computer link again. "That'd be... Lieutenant Singh's team."

"Um." Howell plucked at his lower lip. "They sent an all-clear?"

"Yes, sir. They reported losing one man, then the all-clear. They just haven't called in the cargo flight."

"Has com tried to raise them?"

"Yes, sir. Nothing."

"Stupid bastards," Howell grunted. "How many times have we told them to leave a com watch aboard?!" He drummed on his command chair's arm, then shrugged. "Divert their cargo flight to the next stop, and stay on them," he said, and his eyes drifted back to the main display.

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She sagged back against the wall, heart racing as the adrenalin in her system skyrocketed. Chemicals joined it, sparkling like icy lightning deep within her, and she jerked the crude tourniquet tight. The snow under her was crimson, and shattered bone gaped in the wound as she checked the magazine indicator. Four left, and she smiled that same wolf's smile.

She tugged her hood down and wiped a streak of blood across her sweating forehead as she pressed the back of her head against the wall. No one fired. No one moved in the house behind her. How many were left? Five? Six? However many, none of them were tied into the shuttle's com unit, or reinforcements would be here by now. But she couldn't just sit there. She was clearheaded, almost buoyant with induced energy, and her femoral hadn't gone yet, but the high-speed penetrator had mangled her tissues and neither the coagulants nor her tourniquet were stopping the bleeding. She'd bleed out soon, and message or no, someone would be along to check on the raiders eventually. Either way, she would die before she got them all.

She moved, dragging herself towards the northern corner of the house. They had to be on that side, unless they were circling around her, and they weren't. These were killers, not soldiers. They didn't realize how badly she was hurt, and they were terrified by what had already happened to them. They weren't thinking about taking her out; they were holed up somewhere, buried in some defensive position while they tried to cover their asses.

She flopped back down, using her sensory boosters, and her augmented gaze swept the stillness for footprints in the snow. There. The curing shed and her eyes moved back-her father's machine shop. That gave them a crossfire against her only direct line of approach from the house, but...

The computer whirred behind her frozen eyes, and she began to work her way back in the direction she had come.

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"Anything yet from Two-Nineteen?"

"No, sir. Rendlemann was beginning to sound truly concerned, Howell reflected, and with cause. The unidentified drive trace charged closer, and it was still accelerating. That skipper was really pouring it on, and it was clear he was going to scrape by Mathison V just beyond the limit at which his drive would

destabilize. The commodore cursed silently, for no one was supposed to have been able to get here so soon, and his freighters couldn't pull that kind of acceleration this far into the system. If he was going to get them out in time, they had to go now.

"Goddamned idiots," he muttered, glaring at the chronometer, then looked at Rendlemann. "Start the freighters moving and signal all Beta shuttles to expedite. Abort all pick-ups with a window of more than one hour and recall all Alpha shuttles for docking with the freighters. We'll recover the rest of the Beta shuttles with the combatants and redistribute later."

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There were four of them left, and they crouched inside the prefab buildings and cursed in harsh monotony. Where was everybody else? Where were the goddamned relief shuttles? And who-what-was out there?!

The man by the curing shed door scrubbed oily sweat from his eyes and wished the building had more windows. But they had the son-of-a-bitch pinned down, and he'd seen the blood in the snow. Whoever he is, he's hurting. No way he can make it clear up here without-

Something flew across the corner of his vision. It sailed into the open workshop door across from him, and someone flung himself on his belly, scrabbling frantically for whatever it was. His hands closed on it and he started back up to his knees, one arm going back-then vanished in the expanding fireball where the workshop building had been.

Grenade. Grenade! And it came around the corner. From behi-

He was whirling on his knees as the rear door hidden behind the shed's curing racks crashed inward and a bolt of fire lit the dimness. It sprayed his last companion across the wall, and a nightmare image filled his eyes- a tall shape, slender despite bulky furs; a quilted trouser leg, shredded and darkest burgundy; hair like a snow-matted sunrise framing eyes of emerald ice; and a deadly rifle muzzle, held hip-high and swinging, swinging...

He screamed and squeezed his trigger as the shadows blazed again.

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"Still nothing from Two-One-Niner?"

"No, sir."

"Bring her up on remote."

"But, sir-what about Singh and-"

"Fuck Singh!" Howell snarled, and stabbed his finger at the plot. The blue dot was inside Mathison V. Another hour and the destroyer would be in sensor range, ready for the maneuver he most feared: an end-for-end flip to bring its sensors clear of the Fasset drive's black hole. The other captain could make his reading, flip back around, and skew-curve around the primary, holding his drive between himself and Howell's weapons like an impenetrable shield. Howell could still have him, but it would require spreading his own units wide-and accomplish absolutely nothing worthwhile.

"Sir, it's only a destroyer. We could-"

"We could nothing. That son-of-a-bitch is running a birds-eye, and if he gets close enough for a good reading, we're blown all to hell. He can flip, scan us, and get his SLAM drone off, and he's got three of them. If we blow the first one before it wormholes, he'll know how we're doing it. He'll override the codes on the others, and killing him after the fact will accomplish exactly nothing, so get that shuttle up here!"

"Yes, sir."

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She huddled in the snow, crouched over her brother, stroking the fair hair. His face was untouched, snowflakes coated his dead, green eyes, and she felt the hot flow of blood soaking her own parka. More blood bubbled at the corner of her mouth, and her strength was going fast.

The shuttle's ramp retracted, and it rose on its counter-gravity and hovered for just a moment. Then its turbines whined, its nose lifted, and it streaked away. She was alone with her dead, and the tears came at last. There was no more need for concentration, and her own universe slowed and swooped back into phase with the rest of existence as the tick released her and she held her brother close, cradling an agony not of her flesh.

A side party, Stevie, she thought. At least I sent you a side party.

But it wasn't enough. Never enough. The bastards behind it were beyond her reach, and she gave herself to her hatred. It filled her with her despair, melding with it, like poison and wine, and she opened to it and drank it deep.

I tried, Stevie. I tried! But I wasn't here when you needed me. She bent over the body in her arms, rocking it as she sobbed to the moaning wind. Damn them! Damn them to hell! She raised her head, glaring madly after the vanished shuttle.

Anything! Anything for one more shot! One more-

She froze as that alien thought trickled through her wavering brain, for it wasn't hers. It wasn't hers!

She closed her eyes on her tears, and crimson ice crackled as her hands fisted in her brother's tattered parka. Mad. She was going mad at the very end.

Air hissed in her nostrils as the alien voice whispered to her once more. It was soft as the sighing snow, and colder by far. Clear as crystal and almost gentle, yet vibrant with a ferocity that matched her own. She tried to clench her will and shut it out, but there was too much of herself in it, and she folded forward over her dead while the strength pumped out of her with her blood.

the voice murmured,

She laughed jaggedly as her madness whispered to her, but there was no hesitation in her.

"Anything!" she gasped.

"Anything!" She raised her head and screamed it to the wind, to her grief and hate and the whisper of her own broken sanity, and a curious silence hovered briefly in her mind. Then-

the voice cried, and the darkness took her at last.

Chapter Two

Captain Okanami stepped into his tiny office, shivering despite the welcome heat. Wind moaned about the prefab, but Okanami's chill had little to do with the cold as he shucked off his Fleet-issue parka and scrubbed his face with his hands. Every known survivor of Mathison's World's forty-one thousand people was in this single building. All three hundred and six of them.

He lowered himself into his chair, then looked down at his fresh-scrubbed hands. He had no idea how many autopsies he'd performed in his career, but few of them had filled him with such horror as those he'd just finished in what had been Capital Hospital. It hadn't been much of a hospital by Core World standards even before the pirates stripped it-that was why his patients were here instead of there-but he supposed the dead didn't mind.

He dry-washed his face again, shuddering at the obscene wreckage on his autopsy tables. Why? Why in God's name had anyone needed to do that?

The bastards had left a lot of loot, yet they'd managed to lift most of it out. They might have gotten it all if they hadn't allowed time to enjoy themselves, but they hadn't anticipated Gryphon's sudden arrival. They'd run, then, and Gryphon had been too busy rescuing any survivor she could find to even consider pursuit. Her crew of sixty had been hopelessly inadequate in the face of such disaster! Her minuscule medical staff had driven themselves beyond the point of collapse... and too many of the maimed and broken victims they'd found had died anyway. Ralph Okanami was a physician, a healer, and it frightened him to realize how much he wished he were something else whenever he thought about the monsters who had done such things.

He listened to the wind moan, faintly audible even here, and shivered again. The temperature of Mathison's settled continent had not risen above minus fifteen for the past week, and the raiders' first target had been the planetary power net. They'd gotten in completely unchallenged-not that Mathison's pitiful defenses would have mattered much-and gone on to hit every tiny village and homestead on the planet, and they'd taken out every auxiliary generator they could find. Most of the handful who'd escaped the initial slaughter had died of exposure without power and heat before the Fleet could arrive in sufficient strength to start large-scale search operations.

This was worse than Mawli. Worse even than Brigadoon. There'd been fewer people to kill, and they'd been able to take more time with each.

Okanami was one of the large minority of humans physically incapable of using neural receptors, and his fingers flicked keys as he turned to his data console and brought up his unfinished report. The replacement star-com was in, and Admiral Gomez's staff wanted complete figures for their report. Complete figures, his mind repeated sickly, staring at the endless rows of names. And those were only the dead they'd identified so far. SAR parties were still working the more distant homesteads in hopes of

finding someone else, but the odds were against it. The overflights had detected no operable power sources, none of the thermal signatures which might suggest the presence of life.

A bell pinged, and he looked away from the report with guilty relief as his com screen flicked to life with a lieutenant he didn't recognize. A shuttle's cockpit framed the young woman's face, and her eyes were bright. Yet there was something amiss with her excitement, like an edge of uncertainty. Perhaps even fear. He shook off the thought and summoned a smile.

"What can I do for you, Lieutenant-?"

"Surgeon Lieutenant Sikorsky, sir, detached from Vindication for Search and Rescue." Okanami straightened, eyebrows rising, and she nodded. "We've found another one, Captain, but this one's so weird I thought I'd better call it in directly to you."

"Weird? How so? The rising eyebrows lowered again, knitting above suddenly intent eyes at Sikorsky's almost imperceptible hesitance.

"It's a woman, sir, and, well, she ought to be dead." Okanami crooked a finger for her to continue, and Sikorsky drew a deep breath.

"Sir, she's been hit five times, including a shattered femur, two rounds through her liver, one through the left lung, and one through the spleen and small intestine." Okanami flinched at the catalog of traumas. "So far, we've put over a liter of blood into her, and her BP's still so low we can barely get a reading. All her vital signs are massively depressed, and she's been lying in the open ever since the raid, sir-we found her beside a body that was frozen rock solid, but her body temperature is thirty-two-point-five!"

"Lieutenant," Okanami's voice was harsh, "if this is your idea of humor-"

"Negative, sir." Sikorsky sounded almost pleading. "It's the truth. Not only that, she's got the damnedest-excuse me, sir. She's been augmented, and she's got the most unusual receptor net I've ever seen. It's military, but I've never seen anything like it, and the support hardware is unbelievable."

Okanami rubbed his upper lip, staring at the earnest, worried face. Lying in sub-freezing temperatures for over a week and her temperature was depressed barely five degrees? Impossible! And yet...

"Get her back here at max, Lieutenant, and tell Dispatch I want you routed straight to OR Twelve. I'll be scrubbed and waiting for you.

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Okanami and his hand-picked team stood enfolded in the sterile field and stared at the body before them. Damn it, she couldn't be alive with damage like this! Yet she was. The medtech remotes labored heroically, resecting an intestine perforated in eleven places, removing her spleen, repairing massive penetrations of her liver and lung, fighting to save a leg that had been brutally abused even after the hit that shattered it. Still more blood flooded into her... and she was alive. Barely, perhaps-indeed, her vital signs had actually weakened when the support equipment had taken over-but alive.

And Sikorsky was right about her augmentation. Okanami had decades more experience than the lieutenant, yet he'd never imagined anything like it. It had obviously started life as a standard Imperial Marine Corps outfit, and parts of it were readily identifiable, but the rest-!

There were three separate neural receptors-not in parallel but feeding completely separate sub-systems-plus the most sophisticated set of sensory boosters he'd ever seen, and some sort of neuro-tech webbing covered all her vital areas. He hadn't had time to examine it yet, but it looked suspiciously like an incredibly miniaturized disrupter shield, which was ridiculous on the face of it. No one could build a shield that small, and the far bulkier units built into combat armor cost a quarter-million credits each. And while he was thinking about incredible things, there was her pharmacopoeia. It contained enough pain suppressors, coagulators, and stim boosters (most of them straight from the controlled substances list) to keep a dead man on his feet, not to mention an ultra-sophisticated endorphin generator and at least three drugs Okanami had never even heard of. Yet a quick check of its med levels indicated that it wasn't her pharmacope which had kept her alive. Even if it might have been capable of such a feat, its reservoirs were still almost fully charged.

He inhaled gratefully as the thoracic and abdominal teams closed and stepped back to let the osteoplastic techs concentrate on her thigh. Her vitals kicked up a hair, and blood pressure was coming back up, but there was something weird about that EEG. Hardly surprising if there was brain damage after all she'd been through, but it might be those damned receptors.

He gestured to Commander Ford, and the neurologist swung her monitors into place. Receptor Two was clearly the primary node, and Okanami moved to watch Ford's screens over her shoulder as she adjusted her equipment with care and keyed a standard diagnostic pattern.

For just a moment, absolutely nothing happened, and Okanami frowned. There should be something-an implant series code, if nothing else. But there wasn't. And then, suddenly, there was, and buzzers began to scream.

A lurid warning code glared crimson, and the unconscious young woman's eyes jerked open. They were empty, like the jade-green windows of a deserted house, but the EEG spiked madly. The thigh incision was still open, and the med remotes locked down to hold her leg motionless as she started to rise. A surgeon flung himself forward, frantic to restrain that brutalized body, and the heel of her hand struck like a hammer, barely missing his solar plexus.

He shrieked as it smashed him to the floor, but the sound was half lost in the wail of a fresh alarm, and Okanami paled as the blood chem monitors went berserk. A binary agent neuro-toxin drove the toxicology readings up like missiles, and the security code on Ford's screen was joined by two more. Their access attempt had activated some sort of suicide override!

"Retract!" he screamed, but Ford was already stabbing buttons in frantic haste. Alarms wailed an instant longer, and then the implant monitor died. The toxicology alert ended in a dying warble as an even more potent counter-agent went after the half-formed toxin, and the amber-haired woman slumped back on the table, still and inert once more while the injured surgeon sobbed in agony and his fellows stared at one another in shock.

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"You're lucky your man's still alive, Doctor."

Captain Okanami glowered at the ramrod-straight colonel in Marine space-black and green who stood beside him, watching the young woman in the bed. Medical monitors watched her with equal care-very cautiously, lest they trigger yet another untoward response from the theoretically helpless patient.

"I'm sure Commander Thompson will be delighted to hear that, Colonel McIlheny," the surgeon said

frostily. "It only took us an hour and a half to put his diaphragm back together."

"Better than what she was going for. If she'd been conscious he'd never have known what hit him-you can put that on your credit balance."

"What the hell is she?" Okanami demanded. "That wasn't her on the table, it was her goddamned augmentation processors running her!"

"That's exactly what it was," McIlheny agreed. "There are escape and evasion and an anti-interrogation subroutine buried in her primary processor." He turned to favor the surgeon with a measuring glance. "You Navy types aren't supposed to have anything to do with someone like her."

"Then she's one of yours?" Okanami's eyes were suddenly narrow.

"Close, but not quite. Our people often support her unit's operations, but she belongs-belonged-to the Imperial Cadre."

"Dear God," Okanami whispered. "A drop commando?"

"A drop commando." McIlheny shook his head. "Sorry it took so long, but the Cadre doesn't exactly leave its data lying around. The pirates took out Mathison's data base when they blew the governor's compound, so I queried the Corps files. They don't have much data specific to her. I've downloaded the available specs on her hardware and gotten your medical types cleared for it, but it's limited, and the bio data's even thinner, mostly just her retinal and genetic patterns. All I can say for sure is that this-" his chin jutted at the woman in the bed "-is Captain Alicia DeVries."

"Devries?! The Shallingsport DeVries?"

"The very one."

"She's not old enough," Okanami protested. "She can't be more than twenty-five, thirty years old!"

"Twenty-nine. She was nineteen when they made the drop-youngest master sergeant in Cadre history. They went in with ninety-five people. Seven of them came back out, but they brought the hostages with them."

Okanami stared at the pale face on the pillow-an oval face, pretty, not beautiful, and almost gentle in repose.

"How in heaven did she wind up out here on the backside of nowhere?"

"I think she wanted some peace," McIlheny said sadly. "She got a commission, the Banner of Terra, and a twenty-year bonus from Shallingsport-earned every millicred of it, too. She sent in her papers five years ago and took the equivalent of a thirty-year retirement credit in colony allotments. Most of them do. The Core Worlds won't let them keep their hardware."

"Hard to blame them," Okanami observed, recalling Commander Thompson's injuries, and McIlheny stiffened!

"They're soldiers, Doctor." His voice was cold. "Not maniacs, not killing machines-soldiers." He held Okanami's eye with icy anger, and it was the captain who looked away.

"But that wasn't the only reason she headed here," the colonel resumed after a moment. "She used her allotment as the core claim on four prime sections, and her family settled out here."

Okanami sucked in air, and McIlheny nodded. His voice was flat when he continued.

"She wasn't there when the bastards landed. By the time she got back to the site, they'd murdered her entire family. Father, mother, younger sister and brother, grandfather, an aunt and uncle, and three cousins. All of them."

He reached out and touched the sleeping woman's shoulder, the gesture gentle and curiously vulnerable in such a big, hard-muscled man, then laid the long, heavy rifle he'd carried in across the bedside table. Okanami stared at it, considering the dozen or so regulations its presence violated, but the colonel continued before he could speak.

"I've been out to the homestead." His voice had turned soft. "She must've been out after direcat or snow wolves-this is a fourteen-millimeter Vorlund express, semi-auto with recoil buffers-and she went in after twenty-five men with body armor, grenades, and combat rifles." He stroked the rifle and met the doctor's eyes. "She got them all."

Okanami looked back down at her, then shook his head.

"That still doesn't explain it. By every medical standard I know, she should have died then and there, unless there's something in your download that says different, and I can't begin to imagine anything that might."

"Don't waste your time looking, because you won't find anything. Our med people agree entirely. Captain DeVries" -McIlheny touched the motionless shoulder once more "-can't possibly be alive."

"But she is," Okanami said quietly.

"Agreed." McIlheny left the rifle and turned away, waving politely for the doctor to precede him from the room. The surgeon was none too pleased to leave the weapon behind, even without a magazine, but the colonel's combat ribbons-and expression-stilled his protests. "That's why Admiral Gomez's report has a whole team of specialists on their way here at max."

Okanami led the way into the sparsely appointed lounge, empty at this late hour, and drew two cups of coffee. The two men sat at a table, and the colonel's eyes watched the open door as Okanami keyed a small hand reader to access the medical download. His cup steamed on the table, ignored, and his mouth tightened, as he realized just how scanty the data was. Every other entry ended in the words "FURTHER ACCESS RESTRICTED and some astronomical clearance level. McIlheny waited patiently until Okanami set the reader aside with sigh.

"Weird," he murmured, shaking his head as he reached for his own coffee, and the colonel chuckled without humor.

"Even weirder than you know. This is for your information only-that's straight from Admiral Gomez-but you're in charge of this case until a Cadre med team can get here, so I'm supposed to bring you up to speed. Or as up to speed as any of us are, anyway. Clear?"

Okanami nodded, and his mouth felt oddly dry despite the coffee.

"All right. I took my own people out to the DeVries claim because the original report was so obviously impossible. For one thing, three separate SAR overflights hadn't picked up anything. If Captain DeVries had been there and alive, she'd've showed on the thermal scans, especially lying in the open that way, so I knew it had to be some kind of plant."

He sipped coffee and shrugged.

"It wasn't. The evidence is absolutely conclusive. She came up on them from the south, with the wind behind her, and took them by surprise. She left enough blood trail for us to work out what must've happened, and it was like turning a saber-tooth loose on hyenas, Doctor. They took her down in the end, but not before she got them all. That shuttle must've been lifted out by remote, because there sure as hell weren't any live pirates to fly it.

"But that's where it gets really strange. Our forensic people have fixed approximate times of death for the pirates and her family, and they've pegged the blood trails she left to about the same time. Logically, then, she should have bled to death within minutes of killing the last pirate. If she hadn't done that, she should have frozen to death, again, probably very quickly. And if she were alive, the thermal scans certainly should have picked her up. None of those things happened-it's like she was someplace else until the instant Sikorsky's crew landed and found her. And, Doctor," the colonel's eyes were, very intent, "not even a drop commando can do that."

"So what are you saying? It was magic?"

"I'm saying she's managed at least three outright impossibilities, and nobody has the least damned idea how. So until an explanation occurs to us, we want her right here in your capable hands."

"Under what conditions?" Okanami's voice was edged with sudden frost.

"We'd prefer," McIlheny said carefully, "to keep her just like she is."

"Unconscious? Forget it, Colonel."

"But-"

"I said forget it! You don't keep a patient sedated indefinitely, particularly not one who's been through what she has, and especially not when there's an unknown pharmacology element. Her medical condition is nothing to play games with, and your download-" he waved the hand reader under the colonel's nose "-is less than complete. The damned thing won't even tell me what three of the drugs in her pharmacope do, and her augmentation security must've been designed by a terminal paranoiac. Not only do the codes in her implants mean I can't override externally to shut them down, but I can't even go in to empty her reservoirs surgically! Do you have the least idea now much that complicates her meds? And the same security systems that keep me from accessing her receptors mean I can't use a standard somatic unit, so the only way I could keep her under would be with chemicals."

"I see." McIlheny toyed with his coffee cup and frowned as he came up against the captain's Hippocratic armor. "In that case, let's just say we'd like you to keep her here under indefinite medical observation."

"Whether or not her medical condition requires it, eh? And if she decides she wants out of my custody before your intelligence types get here?"

"Out of the question. These 'raids' are totally out of hand. That's bad enough, and when you add in all the unanswered questions she represents-" McIlheny shrugged. "She's not going anywhere until we've got some answers."

"There are limits to the dirty work I'm prepared to do for you and your spooks, Colonel."

"What dirty work? She probably won't even want to leave, but if she does, you're the physician of record of a patient in a military facility."

"A patient," Okanami pointed out, "who happens to be a civilian." He leaned back and eyed the colonel with a marked lack of affability. "You do remember what a 'civilian' is? You know, the people who don't wear uniforms? The ones with something called civil rights? If she wants out of here, she's out of here unless there's a genuine medical reason to hold her. And your 'unanswered questions' do not constitute such a reason."

McIlheny felt a grudging respect for the surgeon and tugged at his lower lip in thought.

"Look, Doctor, I didn't mean to step on any professional toes, and I'm sure Admiral Gomez doesn't want to, either. Nor are we medieval monsters out to 'disappear' an unwanted witness. This is one of our people, and a damned outstanding one. We just need to... keep tabs on her."

"So what's the problem? Even if I discharge her, she's not going anywhere you can't find her. Not without a starship, anyway."

"Oh, no?" McIlheny smiled tightly. "I might point out that she's already been somewhere we couldn't find her when all the indications are she was lying right there in plain sight. What's to say she can't do it again?"

"What's to say she has any reason to do it again?" Okanami demanded in exasperation.

"Nothing. On the other hand, what's to say she did it on purpose the first time?" Okanami's eyebrows quirked, and McIlheny grinned sourly. "Hadn't thought about that, had you? That's because you're insufficiently paranoid for one of us much maligned 'spooks,' Doctor, but the point is that until we have some idea what happened, we can't know if she did whatever she did on purpose. Or what might happen to her if she does it again."

"You're right-you are paranoid," Okanami muttered. He thought hard for a moment, then shrugged. "Still doesn't matter. If a mentally competent civilian wants to check herself out, then unless you've got some specific criminal charge to warrant holding her against her will she checks herself out, period. End of story, Colonel."

"Not quite." McIlheny leaned back and smiled at him. "You see, you've forgotten that she wasn't Fleet or Marine, she's Imperial Cadre."

"So?"

"So there's one fact most people don't know about the Cadre. Not surprising, really; it isn't big enough for much about it to become common knowledge. But the point is that she's not really a civilian at all." Okanami blinked in surprise, and McIlheny's smile grew. "You don't resign from the Cadre-you just go on inactive reserve status. And if you don't want to hang onto our 'civilian' for us, then we'll just by God reactivate her!"

Chapter Three

The being men had once called Tisiphone roamed the corridors of her host's mind and marveled at what she found. Its vast, dim caverns crackled with the golden fire of dreams, and even its sleeping power was amazing. It had been so long since last Tisiphone touched a mortal mind, and she had never been much interested in those she had invaded then. They had been targets, sources of information, tools, and prey, not something to be tasted and sampled, for she was an executioner, not a philosopher.

But things had changed. She was alone and diminished, and no one had sent her to punish this mortal; she had been summoned by the mind in which she wandered, and she needed it. Needed it as a focus and avatar for her weakened self, and so she searched its labyrinthine passages, finding places to store her self, sampling its power and fingering its memories.

It was so different. The last human whose thoughts she'd touched had been-the shepherd in Cappadocia? No, Cassander of Macedon, that tangled, ambitious murderer. Now there had been a mind of power, for all its evil. Yet it was no match for the strength, clarity, and knowledge of this mind. Man had changed over her centuries of sleep, and even cool Athena or clever-fingered Haphaestus might have envied the lore and skill mortals had attained.

But even more than its knowledge, it was the power of this mind which truly astounded her-the focused will, crystal lucidity... and ferocity. There was much of her in this Alicia DeVries. This mortal could be as implacable as she herself, Tisiphone sensed, and as deadly, and that was amazing. Were all mortals thus, if only she had stopped to see it so long ago? Or had more than man's knowledge changed while she slept?

Yet there were differences between them. She swooped through memories, sampled convictions and beliefs, and had she had lips, she would have smiled in derision at some of the foolishness she found. She and her selves had not been bred for things like love and compassion- those had no meaning for such as they, and even less this concept of "justice." It caught at her, for it had its whetted sharpness, its tangential contact with what she was, yet she sensed the dangerous contradictions at its core. It clamored for retribution, yes, but balance blunted its knife-sharp edge. Extenuation dulled its certitude, and its self-deluding emphasis on "guilt" and "innocence" and "proof" weakened its determination.

She studied the idea, tasting the dynamic tension which held so many conflicting elements in poised balance, and the familiar hunger at its heart only made it more alien. Her selves had been crafted to punish, made for vengeance, and guilt or innocence had no bearing on her mission. It was a bitter-tasting thing, this "justice," a chill bitterness in the hot, sweet blood-taste, and she rejected it. She turned away contemptuously, and bent her attention on other gems in this treasure-vault mind.

They were heaped and piled, glittering measurelessly, and she savored the unleashed violence of combat with weapons Zeus himself might have envied. They had their own lightning bolts, these mortals, and she watched through her host's eyes, tasting the jagged rip-tides of terror and fury controlled by training and science and harnessed to purpose. She was apt to violence, this Alicia DeVries... and yet, even at the heart of her battle fury, there was that damnable sense of detachment. That watching presence that mourned the hot blood of her own handiwork and wept for her foes even as she slew them.

Tisiphone spat in mental disgust at that potential weakness. She must be wary. This mortal had sworn herself to her service, but Tisiphone had sworn herself to Alicia DeVries' purpose in return, and this mind was powerful and complex, a weapon which might turn in her hand if she drove it too hard.

Other memories flowed about her, and these were better, more suited to her needs. Memories of loved ones, held secure and precious at her host's core like talismans against her own dark side. Anchors, helping her cling to her debilitating compassion. But they were anchors no more. They had become whips, made savage by newer memories of rape and mutilation, of slaughter and wanton cruelty and the broken bodies of dead love. They tapped deep into the reservoirs of power and purpose, stoking them into something recognized and familiar. For beneath all the nonsense about mercy and justice, Tisiphone looked into the mirror of Alicia DeVries' soul and saw... herself.

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Jade eyes opened. Darkness pressed against the spartan room's window, moaning with the endless patience of Mathison's winter wind, but dim lights cast golden pools upon the overhead. Monitors chirped gently, almost encouragingly, and Alicia DeVries drew a deep, slow breath.

She turned her head on her pillow, studying the quiet about her, and saw the rifle on her bedside table. The weapon gleamed like memory itself in the dimness, and it should have brought the agony crashing in upon her.

It didn't. Nothing did, and that was... wrong. The images were there, clear and lethal in every brutal detail. Everyone she loved had been destroyed-more than destroyed, butchered with sick, premeditated sadism- and the agony of it did not overwhelm her.

She raised a hand to her forehead and frowned, thoughts clearer than they ought to be yet oddly detached. Memories flickered, merciless and sharp as holovids but remote, as if seen through the time-slowng armorplast of the tick, and there was something there at the last, teasing her....

Her hand froze, and her eyes widened as memory of her final madness came abruptly. Voices in her head! Nonsense. And yet-she looked about the silent room once more, and knew she should never have lived to see it.

a cold, clear voice said.

She stiffened, eyes suddenly huge in the dimness, yet even now there was no panic in their depths. They were cool and still, for the terror of that silent voice eddied against a shield of glass. She sensed its presence, felt it prickle in her palms, yet it could not touch her.

"Who-what-are you?" she asked the emptiness, and a silent laugh quivered deep at her core.

"Tisiphone?" There was an elusive familiarity to that name, but-

the voice murmured like crystal, singing on the edge of shattering, and its effort to soothe seemed alien to it.

Alicia's eyes opened even wider, and then she closed them tight. The simplest answer was that she'd been right the first time. She must be mad. That certainly made more sense than holding a conversation with something out of Old Earth's mythology! Yet she knew she wasn't, and her lips twitched at the thought. Didn't they say that a crazy person knew she wasn't mad? And who but a madwoman would feel so calm at a moment like this?

"Touche," Alicia murmured, then shook herself. Immobilizing tractor collars circled her left leg at knee and hip, lighter than a plasticast yet dragging at her as she eased up on her elbows. She raked hair from her eyes and looked around until she spied the bed's power controls, then reached out her right hand and slipped her Gamma receptor over the control linkage. She hadn't used it in so long she had to think for almost ten full seconds before the proper neural links established themselves, but then the bed purred softly, rising against her shoulders. She settled into a sitting position and folded her hands in her lap, and her neck craned as her eyes flitted about the room once more. "Let's say I believe in you... Tisiphone. Where are you?"

"You mean," Alicia said very carefully, a tiny tremor of fear oozing through the sheet of glass, "that you're inside my head?"

"I see." She inhaled deeply. "Why aren't I hanging from the ceiling and gibbering, then?"

the voice added a bit dryly,

"Well," Alicia surprised herself with a smile despite the madness which had engulfed her, "I guess that would be the rational thing to do."

"I imagine it would." She pressed her hands to her temples, feeling the familiar angularity of her subcutaneous Alpha receptor against her right palm, and moistened her lips. "Are you... the reason I don't hurt more?" She wasn't speaking of physical pain, and the voice knew it.

Alicia closed her eyes again, lips trembling, grateful for the pane of glass between her and her loss. She felt endless, night-black grief waiting to suck her to destruction beyond whatever shield this Tisiphone had erected, and it frightened her. Yet there was resentment in her gratitude, as if she'd been robbed of something rightly hers-something as precious as it was cruel.

She sucked in another breath and lowered her hands once more. Either Tisiphone existed, or she truly was mad, and she might as well act on the assumption that she was sane. She opened her hospital gown and traced the red line down her chest and the ones across her abdomen. There was no pain, and quick-heal was doing its job-the incisions were half-healed already and would vanish entirely in time-but they confirmed the damage she'd taken. She let the gown fall closed and leaned back against her pillows in the quiet room.

"How long ago was I hit?"

"Where you and I have been?"

"Would you care to explain that a bit better?"

"You sound like one of those assholes from Intelligence."

Alicia pursed her lips, surprised by Tisiphone's quick understanding.

"Not my Colonel Watts." Alicia's voice was suddenly cold, and a spurt of rage took Tisiphone by surprise, squirting past the clear shield, as Alicia remembered the utter chaos of the Shallingsport Raid. She shook it away, suppressing it with a skill the Fury could not have bettered.

"All right, you're here. Why? What are you going to do?"

"Just the two of us? When the entire Empire can't?" Alicia's laugh was not pleasant. "What makes you think we can do that?"

the voice said softly, and Alicia's head snapped up. Her lips drew back from locked teeth, and a direcat's snarl caught at her throat. Rage flooded her veins, loosed from beyond the shield within her, distilled and pure and hotter than a star's heart. Loss and grief were in that rage, but they were only its fuel, not its heat. Its ferocity wrenched at her like fists of fire, and panic touched her as her augmentation began to respond.

But then it vanished, and she slumped back, panting and beaded with sweat. Her heart raced, and she was weak and drained, like a chemist's flask emptied of acid. Yet something quivered within her, pacing her pulse like an echo of her rage. Determination-no, more than determination. Purpose which went beyond the implacable to the inevitable, ridiculing the very thought that any power in the universe might deflect it.

"God," Alicia whispered, pressing trembling hands to her temples once more. An icicle of terror shivered through her-not of Tisiphone, but of herself. Of the limitless capacity for destruction she had tasted within her fury. Or-she swallowed-was it within her Fury?

"I-" she began, and chopped off as a man in nursing whites charged through the door and skidded to a stop when he saw her sitting up in bed. His eyes widened, then dropped to the bedside monitors, and he lifted a neural lead from the central console. He pressed it to the terminal on his temple, and Alicia hid a twisted smile of sudden understanding. Her vital signs must have gone off the scale when that bolt of distilled rage ripped through her.

The nurse lowered the lead and regarded her with puzzlement. And with something else. There were questions in his eyes, fusing with sympathy into a peculiar tension his professional facade

couldn't quite hide. He glanced away from her, eyes darting for just a moment to the intercom panel, and Alicia swallowed a groan. Idiot! Of course they'd left the com open! What must he think after hearing her half of the insane conversation with Tisiphone?

"Can you?" Alicia spoke aloud out of sheer reflex, then cursed herself as the nurse took an involuntary half-step away from her.

"Can I what, Captain DeVries?"

"Uh... can you tell me how long I've been here?" she improvised frantically.

"Three days, ma'am," he said.

Tisiphone said at the same instant, and Alicia wanted to tear her hair and scream at both of them. The concerned caution in the nurse's voice vibrated bizarrely in her ears, cut through with the amusement in that silent mental whisper.

"Thank you," she said aloud, and

She felt the strong impression of a mental shrug.

Alicia glanced at the wary nurse and smothered a totally inappropriate giggle.

Mental fingers plucked the concept from her mind.

A sense of someone else's surprise echoed within her, as if Tisiphone were unused to hearing orders from a mere mortal, and she suppressed another manic grin in favor of a reassuring smile.

"Thank you," she repeated aloud. "I wonder... I can see it's the middle of the night, but could I see the duty doctor?"

"Captain Okanami is on his way here right now, ma'am. In fact, I was waiting for him when-that is..." His voice trailed off, and Alicia smiled again. Poor guy. No wonder he'd already called in the big guns. There he was, listening to the prize booby blathering away to herself, and then her vitals went crazy. Too.

"I see. Well, in that case-"

The opening door cut her off in mid-inanity. A Fleet captain came through it, his stride brisk but measured, though something suggested he found it difficult to keep it that way. His Medical Branch caduceus glittered in the dim light, and he paused as if surprised to see her sitting up. No, not to see her sitting up; to see her looking rational. Odd, she didn't feel as if she looked rational. One of his hands made a tiny shooing motion, and the nurse tried to hide his relief as he vanished like smoke.

"Well, now," Captain Okanami said, folding his arms across his chest as the door closed, "I'm glad to see you with us again, Captain DeVries."

Yeah, and surprised as hell. She hid the thought behind a smile and nodded back, watching him while she wondered what he was really thinking.

"You're lucky to be alive," he went on gently, "but I'm afraid-"

"I know." She cut him off before he could complete the sentence. "I know," she repeated more softly.

"Yes, well." Okanami looked at the floor and unfolded his left arm to tug at an earlobe. "I'm not very good at expressing my condolences, Captain. Never have been- a failing in a physician, I suppose-but if there's anything I can do, please tell me."

"I will." She looked down at her own hands and cleared her throat again. "I take it you've figured out I'm a Cadrewoman?"

"Yes. It came as quite a surprise, but, yes, we figured it out. It leaves us with a bit of a problem, too, medically speaking."

"I can imagine. I'm just glad you didn't hit any landmines."

"Actually, we did." Her eyes flicked up, and he shrugged. "Nothing we couldn't handle-" she had the definite impression that remark was sliding over slippery ground "-and we've got partial specs on your augmentation. I don't anticipate any more problems before the Cadre med team gets here."

"Cadre med team?" she asked quickly. "Coming here?"

"Of course. I'm not competent to handle your case, Captain DeVries, so Admiral Gomez called them in. I understand there was a Cadre detachment at Alexandria and that they're en route aboard a Crown dispatch boat."

"I see." She chewed on that thought. It had been five years since she'd seen a fellow Cadreman. She'd believed- hoped-she never would again.

"We really don't have a choice, I'm afraid. There are too many holes in the data we've got."

"I see," she repeated more normally. "And in the meantime?"

"In the meantime, I'm keeping you right where you are. We had to do a lot of repair work, as I'm sure you've already realized, and I want someone versed in Cadre augmentation to check it over." She nodded, and he cocked his head. "Are you experiencing any discomfort? I wouldn't want to get into any fancy meds, but I suppose we'd be fairly safe to try old-fashioned aspirin."

"No, no discomfort."

"Good." His relief was evident. "I wasn't sure, but I'd hoped your augmentation would take care of that. I'm glad to see it is."

"Uh, yes," she said, but a quick check of her pharmacopoeia processor told her he was wrong. she asked the voice.

"What's your prognosis?" she asked Okanami after a moment.

"You've responded well to the surgery, and to the quick-heal," Okanami said. "In the long term, you'll probably want to consider replacement for your spleen, but you're coming along very nicely for now. The bone damage to your leg was extreme, and the repairs there are going to need several weeks yet, but the rest-" He waved a dismissive hand and, Alicia noted, carefully did not discuss her mental state. Tactful of him.

He moved a few strides to his right, glancing at her monitor displays, and made a few quick notes on the touchpad, then turned back to her.

"I realize you've just waked up, Captain DeVries-"

"Please, call me Alicia. I haven't been 'Captain DeVries' in years."

"Of course." He smiled with genuine warmth, eyes twinkling with just a touch of sadness. "Alicia. As I say, I realize you've just waked up, but what you really need more than anything else just now is rest. Even if you're not feeling it, this kind of surgery really takes it out of you, quick-heal or no, and you weren't in very good shape before we started."

"I know." She eased back down in the bed, and he pursed his lips.

"If there's anything you'd like to talk about," he began hesitantly, then fell silent as she waved a hand. He nodded and began to turn away.

a voice said in her mind, so suddenly she twitched in surprise at the intensity of its demand.

"Uh, Doctor." He stopped and looked back at the sound of her voice, and she held out her right hand. "Thank you for putting me back together."

"My pleasure." He gripped her hand and smiled, and she smiled back, but shock threatened to wipe it from her lips. Her hand tingled with the power of the spark which had leapt between them at the moment of contact. God, was the man nerve-dead? How could he have missed that flare of power?!

But that was nothing beside what followed it. A column of fire flowed down her arm and licked out through her skin. She looked at their joined hands, expecting to see flames darting from her pores, but there were no flames. Only the heat... and under it a crackle that coalesced suddenly into something she almost recognized. A barrier went down, like an opening door or a closing circuit, and the fire in her arm flared high and faded into a familiar intangible tingle. It was like smelling a color or seeing a sound, indescribable to anyone who had never experienced it, but she had experienced it. Or experienced its like, at any rate.

Information spilled up her arm, crisp and clear as any her Alpha receptor had ever pulled from a tactical net, and that was impossible. Yet it was happening-happening in a heartbeat, like a burst transmission from a forward scout but less focused, more general and disorganized.

Concern. Uncertainty. Satisfaction at her physical condition and deep, gnawing worry about her mental state. Discomfort over his decision not to mention Intelligence's interest. Burning wonder over how she'd survived untended and undetected in the snow. Genuine distress for the deaths of her family, and an even greater distress that she seemed so calm and collected. Too calm, he was thinking, and I have to listen to that recording. Maybe-

He released her hand and stepped back. Clearly, he had sensed nothing at all out of the ordinary, and his hand rose in a small wave.

"I'll see you in the morning, Cap-Alicia," he said gently. "Go back to sleep if you can."

She nodded and closed her eyes as he withdrew... and knew sleep was the last thing she was going to be able to do.

Chapter Four

Benjamin McIlheny looked up from a sheaf of hard copy as a hatch hissed open aboard the battle-cruiser HMS Antietam, then rose quickly as Sir Arthur Keita stepped through it. Keita wore the green-on-green of the Imperial Cadre with the golden harp and starships of the Emperor below the single starburst of a brigadier, and if he was a head shorter than the colonel, he was far thicker and broader. "The Emperor's Bulldog" was silver-haired and pushing a hundred years old; he was also built like the proverbial brick wall, hard-faced, with eyes that were quick and alert under craggy brows. Keita was the Imperial Cadre, and his arrival had been something of a shock. The colonel suspected they would have seen someone far less senior if Keita hadn't been right next door in the Macedon Sector, anyway.

The man behind him could have been specifically designed as his antithesis. Inspector Ferhat Ben Belkassem, well short of his fortieth year, was small, neat, and very dark, with liquid brown eyes and a strong, beaked nose. His crimson tunic's collar bore the hourglass and balance of the Ministry of Justice, and he seemed pleasant enough-which was far from sufficient to reconcile McIlheny to his presence. This was a job for the Fleet and the Marines. By McIlheny's lights, not even Keita had any real business poking his nose in-not that he intended to say so to a brigadier. Particularly not to a Cadre brigadier, and especially not to a Cadre brigadier named Sir Arthur Keita. Which, because Colonel McIlheny was an intrinsically just man, meant he couldn't say it to Ben Belkassem, either. Damn it.

"Sir Arthur. Inspector."

"Colonel," Keita returned crisply. Ben Belkassem merely smiled at the omission of his own name-a lack of reaction which irritated the colonel immensely-and McIlheny waved at two empty chairs across the conference table.

Ben Belkassem waited for Keita to seat himself, then slid into his own chair. It was a respectful enough gesture, but the man moved like a cat, McIlheny thought. Graceful, poised, and silent. Sneaky bastard.

"I've downloaded all of our data to Banshee," he began, "but, with your permission, Sir Arthur, I thought we should probably begin with a general background brief." Keita nodded for him to continue, and McIlheny switched on the holo unit. A display of the Franconian Sector appeared above the table, like a squashed quarter-sphere of stars. An edge of the Empire appeared along its

flattened side, green and friendly, but the scarlet of the Rishathan Sphere crowded its rounded upper edge, and a sparkle of amber Rogue Worlds and blue systems claimed by the Quarn Hegemony threaded through its volume. McIlheny slipped into his headset, connecting the display controls to his neural receptor, and a single star at the sector's heart blinked gold.

"The sector capital." The announcement was probably redundant, but he'd learned long ago to make sure the groundwork was in place. "Soissons, in the Franconia System. Quite Earth-like, but for rather cool temperatures, with a population just over two billion. A bit high for this region, but it's one of the old League Worlds we retook from the Lizards more or less intact."

His audience nodded, and he cleared his throat.

"We really should have organized a Crown Sector out here a century ago, but with the Rishatha hanging up there to galactic north it seemed reasonable to turn our attention to other areas first. God knows we had enough to worry about elsewhere, and the Ministry of Colonization decided not to draw Rishathan attention south until we'd firmed up the central sectors. As you can see-" skeins of stars suddenly winked to life beyond the sector's curved frontier, burning the steady white of unsurveyed space "-there's a lot of room for expansion out there, and once we start curling around their southern frontiers, the Lizards are likely to get a bit anxious. We didn't want them extending their border to cut us off before we were ready."

He glanced up at the others. Ben Belkassem was watching the display as if it were a fascinating toy, but Keita only grunted and nodded again.

"All right. The Crown began organizing the Franconian Sector three years ago and sent Governor General Treadwell out a year later. It's a fairly typical Crown Sector in most ways: ninety-three systems under imperial claim-twenty-six with habitable planets-and thirty-one belonging to someone else in the same spatial volume. We've got five Incorporated Worlds besides Soissons, though one of them, Yeager, just elected its first senators this year. Aside from them, we've got fifteen Crown Worlds with Crown Governors, or-" his mouth twisted, "-we had fifteen Crown Worlds. Now we only have twelve."

Four stars pulsed lurid crimson as he spoke, wide-spaced, almost equi-distant from one another. One was the primary of Mathison's World.

"Typee, Mawli, Brigadoon, and Mathison's World," McIlheny said grimly, one of the stars blinking brighter with each name. "Mawli, Brigadoon, and Mathison's World are complete write-offs; Typee survived... barely. It was the first world hit, and it's been settled for over sixty years-a freeholder colony from Durandel in the Melville Sector-and apparently their population was too spread out for the raiders to hit anything smaller than the major towns. The others-" He shrugged, eyes bitter, and Keita's mouth tightened.

"Things started out quite well, actually," McIlheny went on after a moment. "Governor Treadwell's got three times the normal Crown Sector Fleet presence because of the Rishatha and the Jung Association, so we-"

"Excuse me, Colonel." Ben Belkassem's voice was surprisingly deep for such a small man, almost velvety, with the cultured accent of the mother world. McIlheny frowned at him, and the inspector smiled. "I didn't have time for a complete update on the foreign relations picture out here. Could you give me a little detail on this Jung Association? Am I correct in remembering that it's a multi-system Rogue World polity?"

"Pocket empire, more like," McIlheny said. "These three systems-" three closely-clustered amber lights flashed "-and two treaty dependencies, MaGuire and Wotan." Two more lights blinked. "When the Lizards blitzed the old Terran League, a League Fleet commander-a Commodore Wanda Jung-managed to hold Mithra, Artemis, and Madrigal. The Lizards never even got their toenails into them," he added with grudging respect, "and for somebody their size, they still pack a lot of firepower. All three of their main systems have Core World population levels-about four billion on Mithra, I believe-and they're very heavily industrialized. Until we got ourselves organized, they and El Greco were the major human power bases out here."

The inspector nodded, and McIlheny returned to his original point.

"At any rate, what with the Rogue World odds and sods left over from the League and the proximity of the Rishathan Sphere, the Crown decided Governor Treadwell might need a big stick, so the Franconian Fleet District is unusually powerful. Soissons is very heavily fortified, and Admiral Gomez commands three full battle squadrons, with appropriate supporting elements, which one should think ought to have been enough to prevent things like this."

He paused, brooding over his display's crimson cursors, then sighed.

"What we seem to have here is a highly unusual bunch of pirates. We've always had some in the marches, of course. There are so many single-system Rogue Worlds out here the mercenary business is fairly lucrative; some of them go wolf's-head from time to time, and we've had the odd hijacker outfit get too big for its vac suits, but most of them raid commercial traffic after the freighters go intra-systemic. Even the occasional bunch idiotic enough to hit a planet are usually smart enough to avoid wholesale slaughter rather than force the Fleet to go after them in strength. More than that, most of them don't have anywhere near the firepower to mount a planet-sized raid.

"This bunch has the firepower, and there's something really sick about them. They come barreling in, take out the starcom, then send down their shuttles to take everything. Usually, pirates stick to low-bulk, high-value cargoes, grab whatever's handiest, and pull out; these bastards steal anything that isn't nailed down. Power receptors, hospital equipment, satellite communication gear, machine tools, precious metals, luxury export items... it's like they have a shopping list of every item of value on the planet.

"Worse than that, they don't care who they kill. In fact, they seem to enjoy killing, and if their window's big enough, they take their time about it." McIlheny's face was grim. "This is the worst raid yet, but Brigadoon was almost as bad. I doubt we'd've had any survivors at all from Mathison's if not for Gryphon, and her presence was a total fluke. Her skipper isn't even assigned to Admiral Gomez-he was just passing through on his way to Trianon and decided to stop off at Mathison's to pay his respects to Governor Brno. She'd been his first CO, and since a lot of his crew were fairly green and he was well ahead of schedule, he thought he'd surprise her with a visit and kill a few days on sublight maneuvers. He was two days into them, well outside the outermost planet, when the raiders took out the governor's residence, but she knew he was out there and got off a sublight message and fired out her SLAM drone before they killed her. The bastards caught the drone before it wormholed, but Commander Perez picked up the message-after a six-hour transmission delay-and went to maximum emergency power on his Fasset drive. He was well over drive mass redline, and it seems clear he came whooping in on them long before they expected anyone to turn up."

"In a destroyer?" Keita's was exactly the harsh, gravelly voice one might have expected. "That took guts."

"He may not've been assigned here, sir, but Commander Perez had done his intelligence homework. He knew about the raids-and that we haven't been able to get a sensor reading on any of their units. Analysis suggests they must have at least a few capital ships, and if we knew who'd built them we might be able to figure out where the raiders originated. He also knew the governor's drone hadn't made it out, and he had three SLAM drones of his own."

"Which," Ben Belkassem murmured, "is presumably why they didn't just polish Gryphon off and get on with their business?"

"We believe so," McIlheny agreed, upgrading his opinion of the inspector slightly.

"Continue, Colonel," Keita said.

"Actually, there's not a lot more to say about their operational patterns, sir. Even with her Fleet strength, Admiral Gomez doesn't have the ships to cover this volume of space effectively. We've tried picketing more likely target systems with corvettes, but they don't have the firepower or speed to deal with whoever these people are, and they only carry a single SLAM drone each. We had a picket at Brigadoon, but the raiders either took her out before she got her drone off, or else nailed it before it wormholed. Either way, she wasn't able to get her report to us, and Admiral Gomez isn't happy about 'staking out more goats for the tigers,' as she puts it."

"Don't blame her." Keita shook himself like an Old Earth bear. "No commander likes throwing away his people for no return."

"Exactly. We're trying to find some pattern that'll let us put heavier forces in likely target systems, but no matter where we put them, the raiders always hit somewhere else." McIlheny glared at the display again.

"Do they, now?" Ben Belkassem said softly. "I'd say that's a pattern right there, Colonel."

"I don't like what you're suggesting, Inspector," Keita growled, and Ben Belkassem shrugged.

"Nonetheless, sir, four straight hits without any interception aside from one corvette-destroyed without getting out a contact message-and a destroyer with no official business in the vicinity, stretches well beyond the limits of probability. Unless we wish to assume the raiders are clairvoyant."

"I resent that, Inspector." The edge in McIlheny's quiet voice was sharp enough to suggest he'd considered the same possibility.

"I name no names, Colonel," Ben Belkassem replied mildly, "but logic suggests they must be getting inside information from someone. Which," his own voice hardened just a bit, "is why I am here."

McIlheny started to retort sharply, then pressed his lips together and sat back in his chair, eyes narrowed. Ben Belkassem nodded.

"Precisely. His Majesty has expressed personal concern to Minister of Justice Cortez. Justice has

no desire to step on the military's toes, but if someone is passing information to these pirates, His Majesty wishes him identified and stopped. And, with all due respect, you may be a bit too deep into the trees to see the forest."

McIlheny's face darkened, and the inspector raised a placating hand.

"Please, Colonel, I mean no disrespect. Your record is outstanding, and I'm certain you're checking your internal security closely, but if the hare is running with the hounds, so to speak, an external viewpoint may be exactly what you need. And," he smiled with genuine humor for the first time, "your people are bound to see me as an interloper. They'll resent me whatever I do or don't do, which means I can be as rude and insulting as I like without damaging your working relationships with them."

The colonel's eyes widened, and Keita gave a bark of laughter.

"He's got you there, McIlheny! I was going to suggest I might help you out the same way, but damned if I wouldn't rather let the inspector take the heat. I may have to work with some of your people in the future."

"I... see." McIlheny rubbed a fingertip on the table, then raised it and inspected it as if for dust. "Are you suggesting, Inspector, that I should simply hand my internal security responsibilities over to your"

"Of course not-and if I did, you'd be perfectly justified in kicking me clear back to Old Earth," Ben Belkassem said cheerfully. "It's your shop. You're the proper person to run it, and your people know you'll have to be looking very closely for possible leaks. They'll expect a certain amount of that, and I couldn't simply take over without undercutting your authority. I'd say your chances of finding whoever it is are probably about as good as mine, but if I stick in my oar in the role of an officious, pig-headed, empire-building interloper-a part, may I add, I play quite well-I can do a lot of your dirty work for you. Just tell them Justice has stuck you with an asshole from Intelligence Branch and leave the rest to me. Who knows? Even if I don't find a thing, I may just scare our hare into the open for you."

"I see." McIlheny examined Ben Belkassem's face intently. The inspector had placed an unerring finger on his own most private-and darkest-fear, and he was right. An outsider could play grand inquisitor without the devastating effect an internal witch hunt might produce.

"All right, Inspector, I may take you up on that. Let me run it by Admiral Gomez first, though." Ben Belkassem nodded, and the colonel frowned.

"Actually, something we hit here on Mathison's leaves me more inclined to think you have a point than I would've been," he admitted unhappily.

The inspector quirked an eyebrow, but the colonel turned to Keita.

"We owe it to your Captain DeVries, Sir Arthur. I'm sure you've read my initial report on the affair at the DeVries Claim?"

"I have," Keita said dryly. "Countess Miller personally starcommmed it to me before her henchmen shoved me aboard Banshee and slammed the hatch."

McIlheny blinked. He'd expected his report to make waves, but he hadn't anticipated that the Minister of War herself might get involved.

"At any rate," he shook himself back to the affair at hand, "we still haven't been able to figure out how she happened to survive, and I'm afraid she's a bit... well-" He broke off uncomfortably, and Keita sighed.

"I said I've read the report, Colonel. The questions you raised are the main reason I got sent along with Major Gateau's medical team, and I understand about Ali-Captain DeVries'... mental state." He closed his eyes briefly, as if in pain, then nodded again. "Go on, Colonel."

"Yes, sir. We got a couple of intelligence breaks out of it. For one thing, she's been able to identify the assault shuttles-or, at least one type of shuttle-these bastards are using. It was one of the old Leopard-class boats, which is the first hard ID we've gotten, since none of the other survivors who actually saw the shuttles were military types. A Leopard tends to confirm that we're dealing with at least one capital ship, of course, but Fleet dumped so many of them on the surplus market when the Bengals came in that anyone could have snapped them up. We're running searches on the disposal records to see if anyone out this way was stupid enough to buy up a clutch of them and leave us a paper trail, but I'm not very optimistic.

"But, more importantly, she took out the entire crew of the shuttle which went after her family. We've picked up a few dead pirates before, but they never told us much. Whoever's running them sanitizes his troops pretty carefully, and we haven't had a lot to go on for IDs, aside from the obvious fact that they've all been human. In this case, however, she nailed the assault team commander. He didn't have much on him, either, but we ran his retinal and genetic patterns and got a direct hit."

He still wore his synth link headset, and the star map disappeared, replaced by an unfamiliar red-haired man in a very familiar uniform.

"Lieutenant Albert Singh, gentlemen." McIlheny's voice was light; his expression was not.

"An Imperial Fleet officer?!" Keita exploded. The colonel nodded, and Keita glared at the holo, teeth bared. Even Ben Belkassem seemed shocked.

"An Imperial Fleet officer. I don't have his complete dossier yet, but what I've seen so far looks clean-except for the fact that Lieutenant Singh has now died twice: once from a fourteen-millimeter slug through the spine, and once in a shuttle accident in the Holderman Sector."

"Vishnu!" Keita muttered. One large, hairy hand clenched into a fist and thumped the table gently. "How long ago?"

"Over two years," McIlheny said, and glanced at Ben Belkassem. "Which, I very much fear, lends point to your suggestion that there has to be someone-possibly several someones-on the inside, Inspector. That shuttle accident happened, all right, but when I poked a bit deeper, I found something very interesting. Singh's personnel jacket says he was aboard it and killed, but the original passenger manifest for the shuttle-which was, indeed, lost with all hands-doesn't include his name. Someone between then and now, someone with access to Fleet personnel records added him to it as far as his jacket was concerned, which gave him a nice, clean termination and erased him from our active data base."

"Very good," Ben Belkassem approved. "How did you find him, then?"

"I wish I could take the credit," McIlheny said wryly, "but I was exhausted when I set up the data search, and I didn't define my parameters very well. In fact, I requested a search of all records, and I was more than somewhat irritated when I saw how much computer time I'd 'wasted' on it-until the search spit out his name."

"Never look serendipity in the mouth, Colonel." The inspector grinned. "I don't-and I'm afraid I don't give it credit for my successes, either."

"But a Fleet officer," Keita muttered. "I don't like the smell of this."

"Nor do I," McIlheny said more seriously. "It's possible he did it himself, and I've starcommmed the Holderman Fleet District for full particulars on him, including anything he might have been into before his 'death.' I'm also running a Fleet-wide personnel search to see if any other bogus 'deaths' occurred in the same shuttle accident. I hope I don't find any, because if Singh didn't arrange it, someone else did, and that suggests we may be looking at deliberate recruiting from inside our own military."

"And that whoever did the recruiting may still be in place," Ben Belkassem murmured.

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Alicia looked up as a shortish woman stepped through her hospital door. The newcomer moved with the springy stride of a heavy-worlder in a single gravity, and Alicia's eyes widened.

"Tannis?" she blurted, jerking upright in bed. "By God, it is you!"

"Really?" Major Tannis Gateau, Imperial Cadre Medical Branch, turned her name tag up to scrutinize it, then nodded. "So it is." She crossed to the bed. "How you doing, Sarge?"

"I'll 'Sarge' you!" Alicia grinned. Then her smile faded as she saw the shadow behind Major Gateau's eyes. "I expect," she said more slowly, "that you're about to tell me how I'm doing."

"That's what medics do, Sarge," Gateau replied. She crossed her arms and rocked on the balls of her feet, surveying Captain DeVries (retired) very much as Corporal Gateau had once surveyed Platoon Sergeant DeVries. But there was a difference now, Alicia thought, noting the major's pips on Gateau's green uniform. Oh, yes, there was a difference.

"So how am I?" she asked after a moment.

"Not too bad, considering." Gateau cocked her head judiciously. "Matter of fact, Okanami and his people did a good job on the repairs, from your records. I may not even open you back up to take a personal look."

"You always were a hungry-knifed little snot."

"The human eye," Gateau declaimed, "is still the best diagnostic tool. You've got several million credits' worth of the Emperor's molycircs tucked away in there-only makes sense to be sure they're all connected more or less to the right places, don't you think?"

"Yeah, sure," Alicia said as lightly as she could. "And mentally?"

"That," Gateau acknowledged, "is a bit more ticklish. What's this I hear about you talking to ghosts, Sarge?"

Leave it to Tannis to dive straight in. Alicia rubbed the upper tractor collar on her thigh. They should be taking that off soon, she thought inconsequentially, and lowered her eyes to it as she considered her answer.

Tisiphone suggested.

"Well," Alicia said finally, looking back up at Tannis, "I guess maybe I was a bit shaky when I woke up. Blame me?"

"You didn't sound shaky, Sarge. In fact, you sounded a hell of a lot calmer than you should've. I know you. You're a cold-blooded bitch in combat, but you come apart after the fire fight."

Yeah, Alicia reflected, you do know me, don't you, Tannis?

"So you think I've gone buggy?" she said aloud.

"Buggy," Gateau observed, "is hardly a proper technical diagnosis suited to the mystique of my profession, and you know I'm a mechanic, not a psychobabbler. On the other hand, I'd have to say it sounds... unusual."

Alicia shrugged. "What can I tell you? All I can say is that I feel rational-but I suppose I would, if I've really lost it.

"Um." Gateau uncrossed her arms and clasped her hands behind her. "That doesn't necessarily follow-I think it's one of those self-assuring theories cooked up by people worried about their own stability-but I'd be inclined to write it off as post-combat shock with anyone else. And if we didn't have you on chip still doing it in your sleep."

"Have I had a lot to say?"

"Not a lot. In fact, you tend to shut back up right in mid-word. Frankly, I'd prefer for you to run down instead of breaking off that way."

"Oh, come on, Tannis! Lots of people talk in their sleep."

"Not," Gateau said at her driest, "to figures out of Greek mythology. I didn't even know you'd studied the subject."

"I haven't. It's just- Oh, hell, forget it." Gateau raised an eyebrow, and Alicia snorted. "And get that all-knowing gleam out of your eye. You know how people pick up bits and pieces of null-value data."

"True." Gateau hooked a chair closer to the bed and sat. "The problem, Sarge, is that most people who talk in their sleep haven't dropped right off Fleet scanners for a week-and they don't have weird EEGs, either."

"Weird EEG?" It was time for Alicia's eyebrows to rise, and her surprise was not at all feigned.

"Yep. 'Weird' is Captain Okanami's term, but I'm afraid it fits. He and his team didn't know what they had on their table till they twanged your escape package, but they had a good, clear EEG on you throughout. Spiked just like it's supposed to when you flattened that poor Commander Thompson-" Gateau paused. "They tell you about that?"

"I asked, actually. I knew they'd hit something, and most of the medicos were too busy staying out of reach to get anything done. I've even apologized to him."

"I'm sure he appreciated it." Gateau's eyes gleamed. "Nice clean hit, Sarge, just a tad low." She grinned, then shrugged. "Anyway, there was the spike and all those other squiggles I recognize as lovable old you. But there was another whole pattern-almost like an overlay- wrapped around them."

"Ah?"

"Ah. Almost looked like there were two of you. Mighty peculiar stuff, Sarge. You taking in boarders?"

"Not funny, Tannis," Alicia said, looking away, and Gateau inhaled.

"You're right. Sorry. But it was odd, Alley, and when you tie it in with all the other odd questions you've presented us with, it's enough to make the brass nervous. Especially when you start talking as if there were someone else living in your head." Gateau shook her head, eyes unwontedly worried. "They don't want a schizoid drop commando running around, Sarge."

"Not running around loose, you mean."

"I suppose I do, but you can't really blame them, can you?" She held Alicia's gaze levelly, and it was Alicia's turn to sigh.

"Guess not. Is that the real reason they've kept me isolated?"

"In part. Of course, you really do need continued treatment. The incisions are all done, but they had to put a hunk of laminate into your femur, and about four centimeters of what they managed to save looked like a jigsaw puzzle with missing pieces. You know how quick-heal slows up on bone repair, and you ripped hell out of your muscle tissue, too."

"I realize that. And I also know I could've been ambulatory in this thing-" she tapped the upper tractor collar "-weeks ago. Okanami's 'have to wait and see; we're not used to drop commandos' line is getting a bit worn. If he weren't such a sweet old bastard, I'd have started raising hell then."

"Is that why you've been so tractable? I was afraid you must really be messed up."

"Yeah." Alicia ran her hands through her amber hair. "Okay, Tannis, let's get right down to it. Am I considered a dangerous lunatic?"

"I wouldn't go so far as to say 'dangerous,' Sarge, but there are... concerns. I'm taking over from Captain Okanami as of sixteen hundred today, and we'll be running the whole battery of standard diagnostics, probably with a bit of psych monitoring cranked in. I'll be able to tell you more then."

Alicia smiled a crooked smile. "You're not fooling me, you know."

"Fooling?" Gateau widened her eyes innocently.

"Whatever your tests show, they're going to figure I'm over the edge. Post-combat trauma and all that. Poor girl's probably been suppressing her grief, too, hasn't she? Hell, Tannis, it's a lot harder to prove someone's not loopy, and we both know it."

"Well, yes," Gateau agreed after a moment. "You always liked it straight, so I'll level with you. Uncle Arthur came out with me, and he's going to want to debrief you in person, but then you and I are Soissons-bound. Sector General's got lots more equipment, so that's where the real tests come in. On the other hand, I have Uncle Arthur's personal guarantee that I'll be your physician of record, and you know I won't let them crap on you."

"And if I don't want to go?"

"Sorry, Sarge. You've been reactivated."

"Oh, those bastards!" Alicia murmured, but there was a trace of amused respect in her voice.

"They can be lovable, can't they?"

"How long do you expect your tests to take after we hit Soissons?"

"As long as they take. You want a guess?" Alicia nodded, and Gateau shrugged. "Don't make any plans for a month or two, minimum."

"That long?" Alicia couldn't quite hide her dismay.

"Maybe longer. Look, Sarge, they want more than just a psych evaluation. They want answers, and you already told Okanami you don't know what happened or why you're alive. Okay, that means they're going to have to dig for them. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is."

"And while they're looking, the scent's going to freeze solid."

"Scent?" Gateau sat up straighter. "You in vigilante mode, Sarge?"

"Why not?" Alicia met her eyes. "Who's got a better right?"

Gateau looked away for a moment. "No one, I guess. But that's going to be a factor in their thinking, too, you know. They won't want you running around to do something outstandingly stupid."

"I know." Alicia made herself smile. "Well, if I'm stuck, I'm stuck. And if I am, I'm glad I've got at least one friend in the enemy camp."

"That's the spirit." Gateau rose with a grin of her own. "I've got an appointment with Uncle Arthur in ten minutes-gotta go give him my own evaluation of your condition-but I'll check back when it's over. I may even have more news on your upcoming, um, itinerary."

"Thanks, Tannis." Alicia leaned back against her pillows and smiled after her friend, but the smile faded as the door closed. She sighed and looked pensively down at her hands.

Tisiphone said sternly.

Mental silence hovered for a moment, broken by a soundless sigh.

Alicia wrapped herself in consideration for a long moment, thinking too quickly for Tisiphone to follow, then smiled. She rubbed the tractor collar again.

Tisiphone agreed.

There was a positively gleeful note to the mental whisper, and Alicia DeVries grinned. Then she

lowered her bed into a comfortable sleeping posture and smiled dreamily up at the ceiling.

"Well, Tisiphone," she said aloud, "it doesn't sound like they're going to be too reasonable. The Cadre can be that way, sometimes. In fact, this reminds me of the time Sergeant Malinkov's pharmacope got buggered on Bannerman and pumped him full of endorphins. He got this glorious natural high, you see, and there was this jammed traffic control signal downtown. Now, Pasha was always a helpful soul, and he had his plasgun with him, so-"

She tucked her hands behind her head and babbled cheerfully on to Tisiphone's invisible presence... and the recorders.

Chapter Five

The Lizards were showing off again, damn them.

Commodore James Howell gritted his teeth as the Rishathan freighter coasted towards him at five hundred kilometers per second. Rishatha were physically unable to use synth units-much less cyber synth links-and they resented it. Which was why they insisted on over-compensating by showing humanity their panache... and also explained why he always met his Rishatha contacts well outside the Powell limit of any system body. Their drives could come closer than humanity's to a planet without destabilizing (or worse), but not by all that much, and losing one's drive during a maneuver like this one could lead to unpleasant consequences all round.

Five hundred KPS wasn't all that fast, even for intra-system speeds, but the big freighter was barely fifteen thousand kilometers clear, already visible on the visual display, however assiduously Howell might refuse to look at it, and proximity alarms began to buzz. He made himself sit quite still despite their snarls, then sighed with hidden relief as the Rishathan captain flipped her ship end-for-end, pointing her stern at his flagship. The flare of the freighter's Fasset drive (for which, of course, the Rishatha had their own unpronounceable name) was clear to his gravitic detectors, even though its tame black hole was aimed directly away from them. The ship slowed abruptly, then drifted to a near perfect rendezvous in just under fifty-seven seconds. Amazing what nine hundred gravities' deceleration could do.

Attitude and maneuvering thrusters flared as the Fasset drive died, nudging the freighter alongside Howell's dreadnought, and he grinned in familiar, ironic amusement. Mankind-the Rish-kind, unfortunately-could out-speed light, generate pet black holes, and transmit messages scores of light-years in the blink of an eye, yet they still required thrusters the semi-mythical Armstrong would have recognized (in principle, at least) a thousand years before for that last, delicate step. Ridiculous- except that people still used the wheel, too.

He shook off the thought as the freighter's tractors latched onto his command and it nuzzled up against cargo bay ten, extending a personnel tube to his number four lock. He glanced around his bridge at the comfortable, nondescript civilian coveralls of his crew and thought wistfully of the uniform he had discarded with his past. The Lizards weren't much into clothing for protection's sake, but they understood its decorative uses, and their taste was, quite literally, inhuman. It would have been nice to be able to reply in kind to the no doubt upcoming assault on his optic nerves.

His synth link whispered to him, announcing the imminent arrival of a single visitor, and he skinned off the headset and slipped it out of sight under his console. The rest of his command crew were doing the same. The Rish would know they'd done it to avoid flaunting the human ability to

form direct links with their equipment, but there were civilities to be observed. Besides, hiding it all away was actually an even more effective way of calling attention to it-and one to which his visitor could take exception only with enormous loss of face. He hoped Resdyrn still commanded the freighter. She always took the con personally for the final approach, and he loved the way her fangs showed when he one-upped her one-upmanship without saying a word.

The command deck hatch hissed open, and Senior War Mother Resdyrn niha Turbach stepped through it.

She was impressive, even for a fully mature Rishathan matriarch. At 2.5 meters and just over three hundred kilos, she towered over every human on the bridge yet looked almost squat. Her incredibly gaudy carapace streamers enveloped her in a diaphanous cloud, swirling from her shoulders and assaulting the eye like some psychotic rainbow, but her face paint was sober-for a Rish. Its bilious green hue suited her temporary "merchant" persona and made a fascinating contrast with her scarlet cranial frills, and Howell wondered again if Rishathan eyes really used the same spectrum as human ones.

"Greetings, Merchant Resdyrn," he said, and listened to the translator render it into the squeaky, snarling ripples of Low Rishathan. Howell had once Known an officer who could actually manage High Rishathan, but the same man could also reproduce the exact sound of an old-fashioned buzz-saw hitting a nail at several thousand RPM. Howell preferred to rely upon his translator.

"Greetings, Merchant Howell," the translator bug in his right ear replied. "And greetings to your line mother."

"And also to yours." Howell completed the formal greeting with a bow, amazed once more by how lithely that bulky figure returned it. "My daughter officers await you," he continued. "Shall we join them?"

Resdyrn inclined her massive head, and the two of them walked into the briefing room just off the command bridge. Half a dozen humans rose as they entered, bowing welcome while Resdyrn stalked around the table to the out-sized chair at its foot.

Howell moved to the head of the table and watched her slip her short, clubbed tail comfortably through the open chairback. Despite their saurian appearance and natural body armor, the Rishatha were not remotely reptilian. They were far closer to an oviparous Terrestrial mammal, if built on a rather over-powering scale. Or, at least, the females were. In his entire career, Howell had seen exactly three Rishathan males, and they were runty, ratty-looking little things. Fluttery and helpless, too. No wonder the matriarchs considered "little old man" a mortal insult.

"Well, Merchant Howell," the irony of the honorific came through the translator interface quite well, "I trust you are prepared to conclude our transaction for the goods your line mother has ordered?"

"I am, Merchant Resdyrn," he replied with matching irony and a gesture to Gregor Alexsov. His chief of staff keyed the code on a lock box and slid it to Resdyrn. The Rish lifted the lid and bared her upper canines in a human-style smile as she looked down at a prince's ransom in molecular circuitry, one of the several areas in which human technology led Rishathan.

"These are, of course, but a sample," Howell continued. "The remainder are even now being transferred to your vessel."

"My line mother thanks you through her most humble daughter," Resdyrn replied, not sounding particularly humble, and lifted a crystalline filigree of seaweed from the box. She held it in long, agile fingers with an excessive number of knuckles and peered at it through a magnifier, then grunted the alarming sound of a Rishathan chuckle as she saw the Imperial Fleet markings on the connector chips. She laid it carefully back into its nest, closed the lief once more, and crooked a massive paw protectively over it. The gesture was revealing, Howell thought. That single box, less than a meter in length, contained enough molycircuitiy to replace her freighter's entire command net, and for all her studied ease, Resdyrn was well aware of it.

"We, of course, have brought you the agreed upon cargo," she said after a moment, "but I fear my line mother sends your mother of mothers sad tidings, as well." Howell sat straighter in his chair. "This shall be our last meeting for some time to come, Merchant Howell."

Howell swallowed a muttered curse before it touched his expression and cocked his head politely. Resdyrn raised her cranial frills in acknowledgment and touched her forehead in token of sorrow.

"Word has come from our embassy on Old Earth. The Emperor himself-" the masculine pronoun was a deliberate insult from a Rish; the fact that it was also accurate lent it a certain additional and delicious savor "-has taken an interest in this sector and dispatched his war mother Keita hither."

"I... had not yet heard that, Merchant Resdyrn." Howell hoped his dismay didn't show. Keita! God, did that mean they were going to have the Cadre on their backs? He longed to ask but dared not expend so much face.

"We do not know Keita's mission," Resdyrn continued, taking pity on his curiosity (or, more likely, simply executing her own orders), "but there are no signs that the Cadre has been mobilized. My line mother fears this may yet happen, however, and so must sever her links with you at least until such time as Keita departs. I hope that you will understand her reasoning."

"Of course." Howell inhaled, then shrugged, deliberately exaggerating the gesture to be sure Resdyrn noted it. "My mother of mothers will also understand, though I'm sure she will hope the severance will be brief."

"As do we, Merchant Howell. We of the Sphere hope for your success, that we may greet you as sisters in your own sphere."

"Thank you, Merchant Resdyrn." Howell managed to sound quite sincere, though no human was likely to forget the way the Rishatha had set the old Federation and Terran League at one another's throats in order to pick their joint bones. Four hundred years later, humanity was still coping with the lingering echoes of the League Wars in places like Shallingsport.

Fortunately, the Rishatha's military follow through had been less successful than their diplomatic judo throw. They'd ingested most of the old League during the First Human-Rish War while a war-weary Federation writhed in the throes of civil war, but their calculations hadn't allowed for the Empire which had arisen from the Federation's ruins under then Fleet Admiral Terrence Murphy, and Terrence I and the House of Murphy had kicked the Lizards back into their pre-war boundaries in the Second Human-Rish War.

"In that case," Resdyrn rose, ending the unexpectedly brief meeting, "I shall take my leave. I am

covered in shame that it was I who must bring this message to you. May your weapons taste victory, Merchant Howell."

"My daughter officers and I see no shame, Merchant Resdyrn, but only the faithful discharge of your line mother's decree."

"You are kind." Resdyrn bestowed another graceful bow upon him and left. Howell made no effort to accompany her. Despite her "merchant's" role, Resdyrn niha Turbach remained a senior war mother of the Rishathan Sphere, and the suggestion that she could not be trusted aboard his vessel without a guard would have been an intolerable insult to her honor. This once, he was just as glad of it, too. Contingency plans or no, this little bit of news was going to bollix the works in fine style, and he needed to confer with his staff.

"Jays, Skipper," one member of that staff said. "Now what the bloody hell am I supposed to do?"

"Keep your suit on, Henry, Howell replied, and his long, cadaverous quartermaster leaned ostentatiously back in his chair.

"No problem-yet. But we're gonna look a bit hungry in a few months with our main supply line cut."

"Agreed, but Greg and I knew this-or something like it-might happen. I wish it had waited a while longer, but we've set up our fallbacks."

"Oh? I wish you'd told me about them," Commander d'Amcourt said.

"We're telling you now, aren't we? You want to lay it out, Greg?"

"Yes, sir." Alexsov leaned slightly forward, cold eyes thawed by an atypical amusement as he met d'Amcourt's lugubrious gaze. "We've set up alternate supply lines through Wyvern. It'll be more cumbersome, because our purchase orders will have to be spread out carefully, and it was certainly convenient to have the Rishatha as a cutout in our logistics net, but there are advantages, too. For one thing, we can get proper spares and missile resupply direct. And we've already been dumping a lot of luxury items through Wyvern. I don't see any reason we can't fence the rest of our loot there-they certainly won't object."

He shrugged, and heads nodded here and there. Most Rogue Worlds were fairly respectable (by their own lights, at least), but Wyvern's government was owned outright by the descendants of the captain-owners of one of the last piratical fleets of the League Wars to go "legitimate." It bought or sold anything, no questions asked, and was equally indiscriminate in the deals it brokered. Many of its fellow Rogue Worlds might deplore its existence, yet Wyvern was too useful an interface (and too well armed) for most of them to do anything more strenuous. Which, since the Empire had both the power and the inclination to smack the hands of those who irritated it, gave Wyvern's robber-baron aristocracy a vested interest in anything that might disrupt the nascent Franconian Sector's stability.

"As for our other support-" Alexsov paused, mentioning no names or places even here, then shrugged "-this shouldn't pose any problems. Unless, of course, Keita's presence means the Cadre plans to shove its nose in."

"Exactly, and that's what worries me most," Howell agreed. He glanced at the rather

fragile-looking commander seated at Alexsov's right elbow. Slim, dark-skinned Rachel Shu, Howell's intelligence officer, was the sole female member of his staff... and its most lethal. Now she shrugged.

"It worries me, too, Commodore. My sources didn't say a thing about Keita's coming clear out here, so my people don't have any idea what he's up to. On the face of it, I'm inclined to think the Rishatha have overreacted. They don't dare antagonize the Empire by getting caught involved in something like this, and they remember what Keita and the Cadre did to them over the Louvain business, so they're pulling in their horns and getting ready to disclaim any responsibility. But I don't think my sources could have missed the signs if the Cadre were being committed on any meaningful scale."

"Then why's Keita here? Wasn't he their point for Louvain, too?"

"He was, but the Cadre's too small for him to have pulled out any major force without my people noticing it. Besides, my last reports place him in the Macedon Sector, not on Old Earth, so this looks more like a spur of the moment improvisation, and the timing's about right for it to be in response to Mathison's World. He was right next door and they banged him on out-they didn't deploy him from the capital. I suspect he's on some sort of special intelligence-gathering mission for Countess Miller. She's always preferred to get a reading through Cadre Intelligence to crosscheck on ONI, and Keita's always been happier in the field than an HQ slot. If he hadn't, he'd have the general's stars and Arbatov would be his exec."

"Which means we could see the Cadre yet," Rendlemann pointed out.

"Unlikely," Shu replied. "Our support structure's very well hidden and dispersed, and the Cadre's a precision instrument for application to precise targets. In fact, I'd say the Ministry of Justice was more dangerous than either the Fleet or Cadre, since it's the covert side of this whole operation that's most likely to lead the other two to us, and Justice is best equipped for getting at us from that side. As far as the Cadre's concerned, I'll start to worry when we see a major transfer of its personnel to this sector or one of its neighbors. Until that happens, Keita's just one more spook. A good one, but no more than that."

"I think you're right, Rachel," Howell said. At any rate, he certainly hoped she was. "We'll proceed on that basis for now, but I want you to double-check with Control ASAP."

"Yes, sir. The next intelligence courier's due in about five days. It may already be bringing us confirmation; if it isn't, I'll send a request back by the same dispatch boat."

"All right." Howell toyed with a stylus, then danced at Alexsov. "Is there anything else we need to look at while we're all together, Greg?" Alexsov shook his head. "In that case, I think you and Henry might make a quick run to Wyvern to set things in motion there. Don't take along anything incriminating-we've got the liquidity to pay cash for the first orders-but sound out the locals for future marketing possibilities."

"Can do," Alexsov replied. "How soon can you leave, Henry?"

"Ummmm... a couple of hours, I'd guess."

"Good," Howell said, "because unless I miss my guess-and unless Keita is going to make problems-we ought to be getting our next targeting order from Rachel's courier. I'll want you back

here for the skull sessions, Greg."

"In that case, I'd better get packed." Alexsov stood, a general signal for the meeting to break up, and Howell watched his subordinates file out of the briefing room. He walked over to the small-scale system display in the corner and stood brooding down at the holograph star and its barren, lifeless planets. Rachel was probably right, he decided. If Keita were the spear-point of a Cadre intervention, he would have brought at least an intelligence staff with him. On the other hand, Keita was the tip of a damned spear all by himself; the rest of the weapon could always be brought in later, and that could complicate life in a major way.

He reached out, cupping a palm around the minute, silvery mote of his flagship, and sighed. Problems, problems. The life of a piratical freebooter had seemed so much simpler-and so much more lucrative-than a career with the Fleet, and the bigger objective was downright exciting. There were the minor drawbacks of having to become a mass murderer, a thief, and a traitor to his uniform, but the rewards were certainly great... assuming one lived to enjoy them.

He released his flagship with a heavier sigh, folding his hands behind him, and started thoughtfully towards the briefing room hatch.

How in hell, he wondered silently, had Midshipman James Howell, Imperial Fleet, Class of '28, ended up here?

Chapter Six

"Still so eager to be up and about?"

Alicia inhaled a spray of sweat as she gasped for breath, but she welcomed the teasing malice in Lieutenant de Riebeck's voice. The physical therapist was a fellow Cadreman, without a trace of the semi-awe her drop commando reputation woke in ordinary medics. That was refreshing enough, and his complete indifference to her mental state was even more so. Alicia had agitated so noisily to get out of bed that even Okanami and Major Gateau had finally given in, but de Riebeck had been their revenge. His sole interest lay in getting one Captain Alicia DeVries not merely ambulatory but fully reconditioned, and his was clearly an obsessive personality.

"Looking a little worn to me, Captain," he continued brightly, and cranked the treadmill's speed control up a bit. "Care for another five or six klicks? How about another five percent of grade just to make it interesting?"

Alicia moaned and collapsed over the handrails. The still-moving treadmill carried her feet from under her, and she twitched with a horridly realistic death rattle and belly-flopped onto the belt. It deposited her on the floor with a thump, and she oozed out flat.

Lieutenant de Riebeck grinned, and someone applauded from the training room door. Alicia rolled over and sat up, raking sweat-sodden hair from her forehead, and saw Tannis Gateau clapping vigorously.

"I give that a nine-point-five for dramatic effect and, oh, a three-point-two for coordination." Alicia shook a fist, and the major chuckled. "I see Pablo is being his usual sadistic self."

"We strive to please, Major, ma'am," de Riebeck smirked. Alicia laughed, and Gateau reached down to pull her to her feet.

"You know, I never thought I'd admit it, but this is one part of the Cadre I've missed," she panted, massaging her rebuilt thigh with both hands. The repaired muscles ached, but it was the good ache of exercise, and she straightened with a sigh. Despite her reactivation, she refused to cut her hair, which had escaped its clasp once more. She gathered it back up and refastened it, then scrubbed her face with a towel.

"I think I'm going to live after all, Pablo."

"Aw, shucks. Wen, there's always tomorrow."

"An inspiring thought." Alicia hung the towel around her neck and turned back to Cateau. "May I assume you arrived for some reason other than to rescue me from Lieutenant de Sade?"

"Indeed I have. Uncle Arthur wants to see you."

"Oh." The humor flowed out of Alicia's voice, and her forefingers moved in slow circles, wrapping the towel-ends about them. Her success in so far avoiding Keita made her feel a bit guilty, but she really didn't want to see him. Not now, and perhaps never. He was going to bring back too many painful memories... and Cadre rumor credited him with telepathy, among other arcane powers. He'd always made her feel as if her skull were made of glass.

"Sorry, Sarge, but he insists. And I think it's a good idea myself."

"Why?" Alicia demanded bluntly, and Cateau shrugged.

"You didn't quit the Cadre just to avoid Uncle Arthur, and you've been hiding from him long enough. It's time you faced up to him. He knows, whether you do or not, that you didn't 'fail' him by resigning, but you're never going to feel comfortable about it till you talk to him in person. Call it absolution."

"I don't need 'absolution'!" Alicia snapped, jade eyes flashing with sudden fire, and Cateau grinned crookedly.

"Then why the sudden heat? Come on, Sarge." She hooked an arm through Alicia's. "I'm surprised he's let your debrief wait this long, so you may as well get it over with."

"You can be a real pain in the ass, Tannis."

"True, too true. Now march, Sarge."

"Can't I even clean up first?"

"Uncle Arthur knows what sweat smells like. March!"

Alicia sighed, but the steel showed under Gateau's humor, and she was right. Alicia couldn't keep pretending Keita wasn't here. But Tannis only thought she understood why Alicia had resigned. No one-not even Tannis-knew the real reason for that, and how much it had cost her or why she had turned her back so utterly upon the Cadre. No one but Sir Arthur. Yet even reliving that decision, horrid as it would be, was only part of her present hesitance.

A heat which was rapidly becoming familiar tingled in her right arm, radiating from its contact with Gateau's left elbow, and she felt her friend's thoughts. Amusement. Pride in the way she was bouncing back from her wounds. Carefully hidden worry over the upcoming interview. A burning curiosity as to the reasons for her dread over meeting Keita and concern over their possible consequences, and under it a deeper, more persistent worry about Alicia's stability-and what to do about her if she was, in fact, unstable.

A mental grumble answered, but the information flow died, and she was grateful. Stealing Tannis's thoughts was a violation of her privacy and trust-almost a form of rape, even if she never felt a thing-and Alicia hated it.

Not that it hadn't been useful, she conceded. The first time Tannis had hugged her, Tisiphone had plucked a disturbing suspicion from the major's mind. Alicia's monologues had gotten just a bit too enthusiastic, and Tannis knew her too well.

Forewarned, Alicia had tapered off and allowed her manufactured dialogues to run down as if she were tiring of the game. Tannis had written them off as a sarcastic response to the people who suspected her sanity, and thereafter Alicia had restricted herself to occasional verbal responses to actual comments from Tisiphone. That worked much better, for they were spontaneous, fragmentary, and enigmatic yet consistent-clearly not something manufactured out of whole cloth for the sole benefit of eavesdroppers-and their genuineness had turned Tannis's thoughts in the desired direction.

Alicia hated deceiving her, but she was having those conversations. It was always possible she truly was mad- a possibility she would almost prefer, at times-and if she wasn't, she certainly wasn't responsible for Tannis's misinterpretations of them.

She squared her shoulders, tucked the ends of the towel into the neck of her sweat shirt, and walked down the hallway at her friend's side.

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Tisiphone watched through her host's eyes as they marched along the corridor. The past few weeks had been the oddest of her long life, a strange combination of impatient waiting and discovery, and she wasn't certain she had enjoyed them.

She and Alicia had learned much about her own current abilities. She could still pluck thoughts from mortal minds, but only when her host brought those other mortals into physical contact. She could still hasten physical healing, as well, yet what had once been "miracles" were routine to the medical arts man had attained. There was little she could do to speed what the physicians were already accomplishing, and so she had restricted herself to holding pain and discomfort within useful limits and insuring her host's sleep without medication or one of the peculiar somatic units. Tisiphone hated the somatic units. They might sweep Alicia into slumber through her receptors, but sleep was a stranger to Tisiphone. For her, the somatic units' soothing waves were a droning, scarcely endurable static.

She and Alicia had also determined to their satisfaction that she still could blur mortals' senses, even without physical contact. Their technology, unfortunately, was something else again, and that experiment had almost ended in disaster. The nurse had known the bed was empty, but her medical scanners had insisted it was occupied. Not surprisingly, the young woman had panicked and turned to run, and only the testing of another ability had saved the situation. Tisiphone could no longer beguile and control mortal minds, but she could fog and befuddle them. Actually taking memories from them might have become impossible, but she had blurred the recollection into a sort of fanciful daydream, and that had been just as good-this time.

Their experiments had combined dismay and excitement in almost equal measure, yet neither Tisiphone's own sense of discovery and rediscovery nor Alicia's amazement at what she still could accomplish had been sufficient to banish her boredom. She was a being of fire and passion, the hunger and destruction of her triumvirate of selves. Alecto had been the methodical one, the inescapable stalker patient as the stones themselves, and Megarea had been the thinker who analyzed and pondered with a mind of ice and steel. Tisiphone was the weapon, unleashed only when her targets had been clearly identified, her objectives precisely defined. Now she could not even know who her targets were, much less where to find them, and she felt... lost. Ignorance added to her sense of frustration, for if she had no doubt of her ultimate success, she was unused to delays and puzzles. It had turned her surly and snappish (not, she admitted privately, an unusual state for such as she) with her host until a fresh revelation diverted them both.

Tisiphone had discovered computers. More to the point, she had encountered the processors built into Alicia's augmentation, and had she been the sort of being who possessed eyes, they would have opened wide in surprise.

The data storage of Alicia's processors was little more than a few dozen terabytes, for bio-implants simply couldn't rival the memories of full-sized units, yet they were the first computers Tisiphone had ever met, and she had been amazed by how easy they were to access. It had taken no effort at all, for they were designed and programmed for neural linkage; the same technique which slipped into a mortal's thoughts through his nerves and brain worked just as well with them, and the vistas that opened were dazzling.

It was almost like finding the ghost of one of her sister selves. A weak and pallid revenant, without the rich awareness which had textured that forever-lost link, yet one which expanded her own abilities many-fold. Tisiphone had only the vaguest grasp of what Alicia called "programming" or "machine language," but those concepts were immaterial to her. A being crafted to interface with human minds had no use or need for such things; anything structured to link with those same minds became an extension of them and so an instinctive part of herself.

She had scared Alicia half to death, and felt uncharacteristically penitent for it afterward, the first time she activated her host's main processor and walked her body across the room without consulting her. Their security codes meant nothing to Tisiphone, and she unlocked them effortlessly, exploring the labyrinthine marvels of logic trees and data flows with sheer delight. Their molycirc wonders had become a vast, marvelous toy, and she flowed through them like the wind, recognizing the way in which she might use them, in an emergency, as both capacitor and amplifier. They restored something she had lost, restored a bit of what she once had been, and she had sensed Alicia's amusement as she chattered away about her finds.

Yet it was past time for them to be about their mission, and she wondered if Alicia's meeting with Sir Arthur Keita would bring the moment closer or send it receding even further into the future.

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Alicia's spine stiffened against her will as she stepped into the sparsely appointed conference room. A small, spruce man in the crimson tunic and blue trousers of the Ministry of Justice's uniformed branches stood looking out a window. He didn't turn as she and Tannis entered, and she was just as happy. Her eyes were on the square, powerful man seated at the table.

He still refused to wear his ribbons, she noted. Well, no one was likely to pester him about proper uniform. She came to attention before him, clasping her hands behind her, and stared three inches over his head.

"Captain Alicia DeVries, reporting as ordered, sir!" she barked, and Sir Arthur Keita, Knight Grand Commander of the Order of Terra, Solarian Grand Cross, Medal of Valor with diamonds and clasp, and second in command of the Personal Cadre of His Imperial Majesty Seamus II, studied her calmly.

"Cut the kay-det crap, Alley," he rumbled in a gravel-crusher voice, and her lips quirked involuntarily. Her eyes met his. He smiled. It was a small smile, but a real one, easing a bit of the tightness in her chest.

"Yes, Uncle Arthur," she said.

The shoulders of the man looking out the window twitched. He turned just a tad quickly, and her lips quirked again at his reaction to her lese majeste. So he hadn't known how the troops referred to Keita, had he?

"That's better." Keita pointed at a chair. "Sit."

She obeyed without comment, clasping her hands loosely in her lap, and returned his searching gaze. He hadn't changed much. He never did.

"It's good to see you," he resumed after a moment. "I wish it could be under different circumstances, but-" A raised hand tipped, as if pouring something from a cupped palm. She nodded, but her eyes burned with sudden memory. Not of Mathison's World, but of another time, after Shallingsport. He'd known the uselessness of words then, too, when she'd learned of her promotion and medal and he'd shared her grief. A time, she thought, when she'd actually believed she would remain in the Cadre and not just of it.

"I know I promised we'd never reactivate you," he continued, "but it wasn't my decision." She nodded again. She'd known that, for if Sir Arthur Keita seldom gave his word, that was only because he never broke it.

"However," he went on, "we're both here now, and I've postponed this debrief as long as I could. The relief force pulls out for Soissons day after tomorrow; I'll have to make my report-and my recommendations-to Governor Treadwell and Countess Miller when we arrive, and I won't do that without speaking personally to you first. Fair?"

"Fair." Alicia's contralto was deeper than usual, but her eyes were steady, and it was his turn to nod.

"I've already viewed your statement to Colonel McIlheny, so I've got a pretty fair notion of what happened in the fire fight. It's what happened after it that bothers me. Are you prepared to tell me more about it now?"

The deep voice was unusually gentle, and Alicia felt an almost unbearable temptation to tell him everything. Every single impossible word. If anyone in the galaxy would have believed her it was Uncle Arthur. Unfortunately, no one could believe her, not even him, and they weren't alone. Her eyes nipped to the Justice man, and an eyebrow arched.

"Inspector Ferhat Ben Belkassem, Intelligence Branch," Keita said. "You may speak freely in front of him."

"In front of a spook?" Alicia's eyes snapped back to Keita's face, suddenly hard, and the temptation to openness faded.

"In case you've forgotten, I'm a spook," he replied quietly.

"No, sir, I haven't forgotten. And, sir, I respectfully decline to be debriefed by Intelligence personnel." It came out clipped and colder than she'd intended, and Ben Belkassem's eyebrows rose in surprise.

Keita sighed, but he didn't retreat. His eyes bored into her across the table, and there was no yield in his voice.

"That isn't an option, Alley. You're going to have to talk to me."

"Sir, I decline."

"Oh, come on, Alley! You've already spoken to McIlheny!"

"I have, sir, when under the impression that he remained a combat branch officer. And-" her voice turned even colder "-Colonel McIlheny is neither Cadre nor a representative of the Ministry of Justice. As such, he may in fact be an honorable man."

She felt Cateau flinch behind her, but Tannis held her tongue and Ben Belkassem stepped back half a pace. It wasn't a retreat; he was simply giving her room, declaring his neutrality in whatever lay between her and Keita.

The brigadier leaned back and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"You can't decline, Alley. This isn't like last time, and I can't make any bargains with you." She sat stonily silent, and his face hardened. "Allow me to correct myself. In one respect, this is exactly like last time: you can damned well end up in the stockade if you push it."

"Sir, I respectful-"

"Hold it." He interrupted her in mid-word, before she could dig in any more deeply, then shook his head. "You always were a stubborn woman, Alley. But this isn't the case of a captain breaking a colonel around the edges-" Ben Belkassem's eyes widened fractionally at that "-and I don't have the latitude to allow you a gesture." He raised a palm as her eyes flared hot. "You had a right to it. I said so then, and I say so now, but this isn't then, and the questions aren't coming just from

me. Countess Miller personally charged me with uncovering the truth."

His eyes drilled into hers, and she sat back in her chair. He meant it. If it had been only him, he might have let her off-again. But he had his orders, and orders were something he took very seriously, indeed.

"Excuse me, Sir Arthur.' Ben Belkassem raised one placating hand as he spoke. "If my presence is the problem, I will willingly withdraw."

"No, Inspector, you won't." Keita's voice was frosty. "You are part of this operation, and I will value your input. Alley?"

"Sir, I can't. It- I promised the company, sir." Her own hoarseness surprised her, and a tear glistened. She felt Tisiphone's surprise at the surge of raw, wounded emotion, then relaxed minutely as the Fury slipped another pane of that mysterious glass between her and the anguish. She drew a deep breath, meeting Keita's eyes pleadingly but with determination. "You understand about promises, sir."

"I do," Keita didn't wince, though his voice gave the impression he had, "but I have no choice. I know what happened at Shallingsport, and I was at Louvain. I understand your attitude. But I have no choice."

"Understand?" Alicia's voice cracked. She swallowed, but she couldn't stop. Despite all Tisiphone could do, an old, old agony drove her. "I'm not sure you do, sir. I don't think anyone could-except Tannis, perhaps. We went in with a company, sir-a company!-and came out with less than a squad!"

"I know."

"Yes, and you know why, too, sir! You know why that son-of-a-bitch screwed our mission brief to hell! You know he sent us in against a 'soft target,' a bunch of crackpot League separatists with 'improvised weaponry' and no tactical training. Well, I've got news for you, sir- there were two fucking thousand of the bastards, with the best weapons money could buy! But Captain Alwyn took us in, and we did our job. Oh, yes, we did our goddamned job, and seven of us came out alive!"

"Alley. Alley!" Alicia's augmentation crackled with prep signals as emotion jangled through her, and Gateau's hands massaged her shoulders, trying to relax her tension. "They did their best, Sarge." Tannis's voice was soft. "Intelligence screws up sometimes. It happens, Alley."

"Not like this," Alicia grated. "Not like this time, does it, Uncle Arthur?" Her eyes were green flint, challenging his, and he inhaled deeply.

"No, Captain. Not like this," he said at last, quietly, and looked over her head at Major Gateau. "Did Alley ever discuss this with you, Major?"

"No, sir." Tannis sounded confused, Alicia thought, and no wonder.

"No," he sighed, and turned his eyes back to Alicia. "Forgive me. You promised me you wouldn't, didn't you?"

She stared back, face like marble, and he pursed his lips in thought, then nodded slowly.

"Perhaps it's time someone did, Major." He gestured at the chair beside Alicia and waited until Gateau sat. "All right. You know about the, um, flap when Alicia resigned?" Tannis nodded. "Then you know it was part of a bargain-a cover-up, if you will. In return for her resignation, the Cadre agreed not to press charges for striking a superior officer. Correct?" She nodded again. "Do you happen to know the identity of the officer she struck?"

"No, sir."

"I'll be damned. I never thought the cover-up would hold." Keita pinched the bridge of his nose again. "That officer, Major Gateau, was Colonel Wadislaw Watts, Imperial Cadre, the man-" he met her eyes, not Alicia's "-responsible for the Shallingsport intelligence assessment. And she didn't just 'strike' him; she hospitalized him in critical condition. In fact, it was, by her own subsequent admission, her intent to kill him.

Tannis gasped and turned to stare at her friend, but Alicia looked straight ahead, eyes stony, showing her only her profile, while Keita continued in that same flat, steady voice.

"Precisely. You and I know, Major, that the Cadre isn't perfect, whatever the Empire as a whole may believe. We make mistakes. Not often, perhaps, but we make them, and when we do, they can have... major consequences. Shallingsport was one such mistake."

"Mistake!" Alicia hissed like a curse, then caught herself and pressed her lips together. Keita frowned, but he didn't reprimand her. He simply went on speaking to Tannis as if they were the only people in the room.

"Alley's right," he told her. "It wasn't a mistake that killed ninety-three percent of your company. It was a crime, because those casualties-" he laid his palms on the tabletop, as if for balance "-were completely avoidable. Colonel Watts had in his possession data which gave an accurate picture of the opposition you faced. Data which he suppressed."

Gateau's race was white, twisted with disbelief and anguish, and Keita folded his hands together and frowned down at them.

"He thought he could get away with it, hide it," he said softly, "and he very nearly did."

"But... but why, sir?"

"Blackmail. The... foreign power actually behind the Shallingsport terrorists had suborned him. He'd been feeding them information-minor data, but valuable- for seven years before the raid, and he'd been very, very clever. He went through several routine security checks and one regular five-year close scrutiny, and we never realized. But when Shallingsport came up, his employers informed him that he could either cook his intelligence analysis to guarantee a blood bath that ended in failure, or be exposed by them."

"You're saying we were set up," Gateau whispered.

"Exactly. You were supposed to be wiped out and 'push' the terrorists into massacring their hostages, thus blackening the Cadre's reputation and branding the Emperor with the blame for a catastrophic military adventure. That plan failed for only two reasons: the courage and

determination of your company and, in particular, of Master Sergeant Alicia DeVries."

Alicia glared at him, hands taloned in her lap under the table edge, and horror boiled behind her eyes. Captain Alwyn and Lieutenant Strassman dead in the drop. Lieutenant Masolle dead two minutes after grounding. First Sergeant Yussuf and her people buying the breakout from the LZ with their lives. And then the nightmare cross-country journey in their powered armor, while people-friends-were picked off, blown apart, incinerated in gouts of plasma or shattered by tungsten penetrators from auto cannon and heavy machine-guns. Two-man atmospheric stingers screaming down to strafe and rocket their weeding ranks, and the wounded they had no choice but to abandon. And then the break-in to the hostages. Private Oselli throwing himself in front of a plasma cannon to shield the captives. Tannis screaming a warning over the com and shooting three terrorists off her back while point-blank small arms battered her own armor and she took two white-hot tungsten penetrators meant for Alicia. The terror and blood and smoke and stink as somehow they held they held they held until the recovery shuttles came down like the hands of God to pluck them out of Hell while she and the medic ripped at Tannis's armor and restarted her heart twice....

It was impossible. They couldn't have done it-no one could have done it-but they had. They'd done it because they were the best. Because they were the Cadre, the chosen samurai of the Empire. Because it was their duty. Because they were, by God, too stupid to know they couldn't... and because they were all that stood between two hundred civilians and death.

"The plan failed," Keita's quiet voice cut through the surreal flashes of hideous memory, "because of you people, but we didn't know how the intelligence had gone so horribly wrong. We looked-I assure you we looked- but we never found the answers. And then, two years later, on Louvain, Captain DeVries captured a dying Rishathan War Mother. Her medics did their best for the Rish, but she was too far gone. And because she was dying and Alley had spared her war daughters' lives, she repaid her honor debt."

More memories wracked Alicia, and Tisiphone rushed to harvest their rage, gathering it up and storing its fiery strength. Alicia remembered the dying Rish. She remembered the beautiful golden eyes blazing in that hideous face as the matriarch discovered she was that DeVries and bestowed the priceless, poisonous gift in the name of honor.

"There was no proof, no record, only the word of a dying Rish, but Alley knew it was true. And because she had no proof, she returned to the command ship, found Colonel Wadislav Watts, the mission's assistant intelligence chief, and challenged him with what she'd learned. He panicked and tried to run, confirming his guilt, and she shattered his skull, his ribs, and both legs with her bare hands before they could pull her off him."

The room was very quiet, and Alicia heard her own harsh breathing while echoes of savagery burned in her nerves. Only her hate had spared Watts's life. Only her need to make him feel it, to return just a taste of what her people had suffered. If only she'd kept control of herself! One clean blow--just one!--would have left the medics nothing to save.

"And that," Keita said sadly, "was when the cover-up began. Baron Yuroba was Minister of War at the time. He decided no breath of disgrace could be permitted to mar our success at Louvain, and Minister of Justice Canaris agreed for reasons of his own. The reason for Alley's attack was hushed up, and she was given her choice: resign or face trial for assaulting a superior officer. No scandal. No messy media circus and gory court martial to befoul the honor we'd won at Louvain or provoke a fresh 'incident' with the Rishatha. Watts was retired, stripped of his pension, and

turned over to Justice, who-in return for his secret testimony and assistance in breaking the Rishathan espionage net which had run him-amnestied him for his crimes."

Tears trickled down Gateau's face, and her eyes were sick.

"That's why Alley won't talk to 'spooks,' Tannis. Not even to me. She doesn't trust us."

"I trust you, sir," Alicia said very quietly. "I know how you fought it-and I know I only got off as lightly as I did because of you."

"That's crap, Alley," Sir Arthur replied. "They wouldn't have dared push it in the end-not when they'd have had to explain why they were breaking one of the three living holders of the Banner of Terra."

"Maybe. But it doesn't change anything, sir. I would have forgiven them anything but letting Watts live-letting him keep his honor by purging the record. My people deserved better than that."

"They did, and I couldn't give it to them. We live in an imperfect universe, and all we can do is the best we can. But that's the real reason they sent me clear out here in person. Countess Miller's read the sealed records. She knows how you feel and why, but she's been instructed by His Majesty himself to discover how you managed to survive and evaded all of our sensors. I am directed to inform you that this matter has been given Crown priority, that I speak with the Emperor's own voice, as your personal liege. No doubt the intent is to duplicate the capability in other personnel, but there is also an element of fear. The unknown has that effect even today, and they're determined to get to the bottom of it. I would... greatly prefer to be able to tell them myself, Alley."

His eyes were almost pleading, and she looked away. He still wanted to shield her. Wanted to protect her from those less wary of her wounds or what their questions might cost her. But what could she do? If she told him the absolute, literal truth, he'd never believe her.

the voice in her mind was soft,

she replied bitterly.

Tisiphone suggested.

Alicia blinked. She actually hadn't considered this possibility when she decided to maintain her semblance of insanity. She should have realized she would be forced to confront the Cadre and her past directly, but the old wound had been too deep for her to consider all its implications, and she'd never guessed the Emperor himself might insist on probing the matter.

But suppose she told Keita the whole story? He had a built-in lie detector no hardware could

match. He'd know she was telling the truth... as she believed it, at any rate. What would he do with her then?

What his orders dictated, of course. He'd return her to Soissons for further investigation-and, no doubt, treatment for her insanity. That might even be good, since the sector capital would be a much more practical base from which to begin her own search for the pirates. But because he would know she was far, far over the edge, he'd also do what the book demanded and shut down her augmentation through Tannis's overrides.

Tisiphone had followed her internal debate.

Alicia looked back up and met Keita's pain-filled gaze. She couldn't tell them everything. Even if they didn't believe in Tisiphone, they might be alarmed enough to take precautions against the Fury's ability to read thoughts and handle her augmentation. But if she cut off, say, with the day Tannis had arrived, before they'd begun their experiments....

"All right, Uncle Arthur," she sighed. "You won't believe me, but I'll tell you exactly where I was and how I got there."

Chapter Seven

Tisiphone observed as Major Gateau's left leg scythed viciously for Alicia's ankles.

She levitated above its arc, and her own foot lashed out. Tannis never saw it coming, but the moves and counters, action and reaction, were part of them both, as automatic as sneezing on dust. She fell away from the lack, robbing it of its power, and slammed a wrist up under Alicia's ankle. Alicia fell to the mat as Tannis landed on her own shoulder blades and flowed into a backward somersault. She tucked and rolled until her toes touched the mat and dug in-then straightened her knees explosively and catapulted back toward Alicia in a ferocious charge. Alicia had rolled sideways and bounced up herself, but she was still off-center when the major reached her. Arms snaked about one another, hands flashed and parried in a flickering blur, and then Tannis was leaning forward, one leg bent, the other in full extension, while Alicia cartwheeled through the air with a squawk of dismay. She hit the mat with a mighty thud, flat on her belly and tried to roll upright, only to grunt in anguish as a knee drove into her spine, a hand cupped the back of her head, and a forearm of iron pressed into her throat.

"How about it, Sarge?" Tannis panted in a disgustingly pleased tone.

Tisiphone asked interestedly,

Alicia snapped back, and went limp with a groan.

"Uncle," she said.

"Damn, that feels good." Gateau's grin sparkled, and she rose, then leaned forward to help Alicia to her feet.

"For one of us," Alicia muttered, massaging the small of her back cautiously. She and Tannis wore light protective gear and sparring mittens-no mere precaution but a necessity when drop commandos practiced full-contact- but every bone and sinew ached.

"Out of shape, that's your problem," the major jibed. "You used to take me three falls out of five, and now you're letting a pill-pusher throw you around the salle? Dear me, whatever would Sergeant Delacroix say?"

"Nothing. He'd just take both us uppity bitches round to the advanced class and lay us out cold."

"Ah, for the good old days!" Tannis sighed, and Alicia chuckled. Learning to do that again hadn't been easy. The last few weeks had been bad, not shattering but drably depressing, for her senses were dull and dead, deprived of the needle-sharp acuity of her sensory boosters. Those boosters had been a part of her for so long she felt maimed without them.

She knew her friend had shut down her own augmentation to make their sparring even. Not, she admitted, with another groan, that Tannis any longer needed the edge her hardware might have given her. She stood barely one hundred sixty-five centimeters to Alicia's own one-eighty-three, but her home world boasted a gravity thirty percent greater than Earth's, and there were no noncombatant drop commandos. Medics were medics first but only first, and Tannis had spent the last five years keeping her edge in workouts just like this one. Alicia hadn't. In fact, the mind boggled at how any of Mathison's citizenry would have reacted to an invitation to an all-out bout.

She got herself fully upright and pushed her non-reg bangs out of her eyes, knowing she looked a wreck and wondering where the vid sensors were. All her military rights had been scrupulously observed, and Keita himself, as regs prescribed, had formally notified her (not without an unusual, wooden embarrassment) that she would be kept under observation at all times. She was carried on the sick list, and-technically-she wasn't a prisoner, which gave her full run of the transport, but they couldn't take a chance on her vanishing again. And, if she did, they wanted a complete readout with every instrument they had on precisely how she'd managed it.

Which was an excruciatingly polite way of saying they couldn't let her run around unwatched when they were no longer confident she could count to twenty with her shoes on.

As much as she'd expected-and, yes, worked for it- it hurt, and it had wounded more than her alone. Keita could have let Tannis explain it all to her as her physician if he weren't such an honorable old stick... and if he hadn't known how distressed Tannis already was over deactivating her augmentation. All of her processors had been shut down, and her pharmacope, and her Alpha and Gamma receptors, as well. He'd made an exception for her Beta receptor, so she could still at least directly access the computers for information and entertainment, and he'd stood beside her in sickbay, offering her his support and acknowledging his personal responsibility for the decision. He'd looked so unhappy she'd wanted to comfort him.

Of course, he didn't know Tisiphone had run her own tests since and demonstrated that the "unbreakable" reactivation codes were as effective as so much smoke against her.

"Nother fall, Sarge?" Gateau inquired lazily. Alicia backed away with a shudder that was only half-feigned, but the glint in those brown eyes was a great relief. She'd worried over Tannis's reaction to the truth about Shallingsport, yet she'd weathered the news well. And while she might be throwing herself into this sparring just a bit more enthusiastically to hide from it, Tannis's real motive-and the real reason for Tisiphone's teasing, though the Fury would never admit it-was to take Alicia's mind off her problems. Not that knowing made bruises feel any better.

"Between you and Pablo, I'll be back in sickbay by the time we hit Soissons. Damn it, woman! I've only been back in shape for this for a week! Give me a break, will you?"

"Which vertebra?" Tannis purred, then collapsed in most unprofessional giggles at Alicia's expression. "Sorry," she gasped. "Sorry, Sarge! It's just that I'm enjoying being the one kicking your tail for a change!"

"Oh?" Alicia gave her a sidelong, measuring glance, then curled her lip in a vulpine smile. "Why, that's very wise of you, Major. It's two more weeks to Soissons, after all." Bared teeth glinted pearl-white at her friend. "Care for a little side bet on who's going to be kicking whose tail by the time we get there, ma'am?"

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Inspector Ben Belkassem sipped coffee and slid the folder of record chips aside. The ventilators sucked a rope of fragrance away from Sir Arthur's pipe, and he sniffed appreciatively, but his face was serious.

"She seems so convinced I sometimes find myself believing it," he said at last, and Keita grunted agreement. "There don't seem to be any loose ends, either. It's all internally consistent, however bizarre it sounds."

"That's what worries me," Keita admitted. "She sounds convincing because she believes it-I knew that even before she went under the verifier. There's absolutely no question in her mind, no doubts, and it's not like Alicia to accept things unquestioningly. She wouldn't, unless there really were something 'speaking to her,' so either she's truly broken down into some sort of multiple personality disorder, or else some external force has convinced her of the complete accuracy of everything she's told us."

Ben Belkassem straightened in his chair, eyebrows rising. "Are you seriously suggesting that there actually is something else, some sort of entity or puppeteer, living inside her head, Sir Arthur?"

"There's certainly an entity, even if it's a product of her own delusions." Keita busied himself relighting his pipe. "And she certainly believes it's a foreign one."

"Granted, but surely it's far more probable that she's slipped into some kind of delusionary pattern. My understanding from Major Gateau is that this high degree of internal consistency and absolute self-belief is normal in such cases, and Captain DeVries has certainly been through more than enough to produce a breakdown. I had no idea how traumatic her military service had been, but when you add that to the brutal way her family was massacred and her own wounds..." His voice trailed off, and he shrugged.

"Um." Keita got his pipe drawing and squinted through its smoke. "How much do you know about Cadre selection criteria, Inspector?"

"Very little, other than that they're quite rigorous and demanding."

"Not surprising, I suppose. Still, you do know the Cadre is the only arm of the military whose strength is limited by Senate statute, correct?"

"Of course. And, with all due respect, it's not hard to understand why, given that the Cadre answers directly to the Emperor in his own person. Everyone knows you're a corps d'elite, but you're also the Emperor's personal liegemen, and he has enough power without giving him that

big a stick."

"I won't disagree with you, Inspector." Keita chuckled around his pipe stem as Ben Belkassem's right eyebrow curved politely. "Every emperor since Terrence the First has known the Empire's stability ultimately depends on the balance of its dynamic tensions. There has to be a centralized authority, but when unchecked power becomes too concentrated in one body or clique you've got real trouble. You may survive for a generation or two, but eventually the inheritors of that concentration turn out to be incompetents or self-serving careerists-or both- and the whole system goes into the toilet. A sufficient outside threat may slow the process, but the gradual destruction is inevitable. However, I wasn't referring to concerns over praetorianism on our part. What I meant to point out is that the Imperial Cadre is limited to forty thousand personnel. But what you may not realize is that no emperor has ever recruited the Cadre up to its full allowable strength."

"No?" Ben Belkassem watched Keita over the rim of his coffee cup.

"No. Keeping us small keeps us aware of our 'elite' status, of course-you know, 'The Few, the Proud, the Cadre' sort of thing-and maintains a sort of familial relationship among us, but there are more mundane reasons. Four out of five Cadremen are drop commandos; the rest are basically their support structure, and by the time you allow for augmentation, training, combat armor, and weaponry, you could just about buy a corvette for what a drop commando costs. There are senators who suggest we ought to do just that, too. Unfortunately, you couldn't use that same corvette to take out a bunch of terrorists without killing their hostages or stage a reconnaissance raid on a Rishathan planetary HQ, though some of the old codgers-" he used the term "codger" totally unselfconsciously, Ben Belkassem noted wryly, despite his own age "-always seem to have trouble grasping that.

"But even cost isn't the real limiting factor. To put it simply, Inspector, the supply of potential drop commandos is extremely finite because they require inborn qualities which are very, very rare in combination.

"First, they must come from the sixty-odd percent of the human race who can use neural receptors, and they must be able to tolerate and master an augmentation package far more sophisticated than anyone outside the Cadre even suspects. Secondly, they must possess extraordinary physical capabilities-reaction time, coordination, strength, endurance, and other physiological requirements, some classified, that I won't go into. Many of those can be learned or developed, but at least the potential for them must exist from the start. But third, and most important of all in a sense, are the psychological and motivational requirements."

Keita fell silent for a brooding moment, then continued thoughtfully.

"That isn't unique to the Cadre. A thousand years ago, when chem-fuel rockets were still the ultimate weapon on Old Earth, navies faced the same problems when choosing strategic submarine commanders. They needed people sufficiently stable to be trusted with independent command of such firepower, yet for their military posture to be credible, those same stable people had to be capable of actually firing those weapons if the moment came.

"You see the problem?" He shot Ben Belkassem a sharp glance. "A nuclear submarine, for its time, was every bit as complex as anything we have today. They had to find people with the same intelligence we need in a starship commander, which meant they exactly understood the consequences if their weapons were ever used, and those same extremely bright people had to be stable enough to live with that knowledge yet able to face and accept the possibility of pushing the

button if their duty required it."

He paused, waiting until the inspector nodded in understanding.

"Well, we've got the same problem, if on a rather less comprehensive scale. That's why we select our people for certain specific mental qualities and then enhance and strengthen them throughout their training and service.

"You know what Alicia did, but have you really reflected on the odds? She went in against twenty-five men in a free-flow tac link through their helmet coms, all in light armor, armed with combat rifles, side arms, and grenades, who only had to get one pilot and a weaponeer into their shuttle to kill her. Her sole pre-engagement intelligence consisted of her own last-minute reconnaissance; she was armed only with a civilian rifle and survival knife; and she killed all of them. Of course, she had surprise on her side, and her rifle was unusually powerful, but in my considered opinion, Inspector, she would have gotten all of them even if she'd been unarmed at the start."

Ben Belkassem made a noise of polite disbelief, and Keita grinned. It wasn't a pleasant expression.

"You might consider what she did at Shallingsport, Inspector," he suggested softly. "I don't say she'd've done it the same way. Most likely, she would have taken out one man first and appropriated his weapons to go after the others, but she would have gotten them. Admittedly, Alicia DeVries is outstanding, even by the Cadre's standards-"

He paused and cocked his head as if in thought, then shrugged.

"I suppose that sounds arrogant, but it's true, and a very real part of the Cadre's mystique. A drop commando knows he's the best. There's no question in his mind. He wouldn't be there unless he wanted to prove he can hack it in the toughest, most challenging and dangerous job the Empire offers. He's there to serve, but that need to meet any challenge with the best, as one of the best, is essential to his makeup, or he'd never be accepted.

"Yet at the same time, he has to recognize that what he does-the purpose for which he exists-is a horrible one. However much it demands in courage and self-sacrifice, however deeply it contributes to the safety and well-being of others, he's a killer. A drop commando is trained to kill without hesitation when killing is required, to use his weapons and skills as naturally as a wolf uses his teeth, but he also has to be aware that killing is an ugly, hideous thing. One of our ancient ancestral organizations put it very well indeed: the Cadre does a lot of things we wish no one had to do.

"And, perhaps even more importantly, drop commandos don't know how to quit. There are some people like that in any combat outfit. They're the ones at the sharp end of the stick, the ones who come through when the going gets worst, and there are seldom enough of them. They're self-motivated-the rare ones who carry the bulk of the outfit with them by example or by kicking them in the ass when they're so tired and scared and hungry all they want to do is die. But in the Cadre, they're the norm, not the exception. You can kill a drop commando, but that's the only way to stop one, and that absolute inability to quit is another fundamental requirement for the Cadre.

"And when you take that kind of pride, killer instinct, and utter tenacity and combine it with the capabilities our people have after they've been augmented and trained, you'd better make damned sure they're stable, rational people. They have to be warriors, not murderers. We turn them into

something that scares the average civilian shitless, but they have to be people you can trust to know when killing isn't required-who can do what they must without becoming callous or, even worse, learning to enjoy it-which is why our psych requirements are twice as high as the Fleet Academy's. That makes the Cadre an extraordinary body of men and women by any measure. The Empire has over eighteen hundred inhabited worlds, Inspector, with an average population of something like a billion, and we still can't find forty thousand people we'll accept as drop commandos. Think about that. Oh, they're not really superhuman, and some of them do break, but Alicia DeVries, who tested extraordinarily high even for the Cadre, is one of the last people in the galaxy I would believe could do that."

"But surely it isn't impossible," Ben Belkassem suggested gently.

"Obviously not, since that's precisely what she seems to have done. But that's why I'm so bothered by it. None of this makes sense. I don't understand how she did what she did, and I'd have said Alley DeVries would die before she broke under any conceivable strain. And you're right about how convincing she is, how rational she seems in every other way." Keita turned his coffee cup in his hands, staring down into it with eyes as dark with worry over someone for whom he cared deeply as with puzzlement. "I almost want to believe she's succumbed to some form of external influence or control."

"Mind control? Brainwashing? Some sort of conditioning?"

"I don't know, damn it!" Keita set down his cup so hard coffee splashed. "But I can't get that damned EEG out of my mind."

"I thought that had cleared up," the inspector said in surprise.

"It has. Major Gateau confirmed its presence during her initial examination, but then the cursed thing just vanished in the middle of a scan. It's gone, all right, and Alicia's current EEG exactly matches the one in her medical jacket, but if it was related to her delusion, why is she still insisting this 'Tisiphone' entity is still present after the EEG's faded out? And where did it come from in the first place? Neither Tannis nor any of her other people have ever seen anything like it."

"Like what?" The inspector's eyes were fascinated, and Keita shrugged.

"I don't know," he repeated. "Neither do they, and I'd feel a lot happier if they did." He rubbed his upper lip. "I know science has never demonstrated anything like reliable, trainable extra-sensory perception among humans, but what if that's exactly what Alley's stumbled into? We know the Quarn have limited intra-species telepathy- could she have activated some previously unused portion of her own brain? Tapped into some latent human capability we've never been able to isolate? If she has, is it something just anyone could learn to do? Would recreating the same abilities in someone else send them over the edge, as well? And what if she's got other capabilities-ones even she doesn't know about yet-that lack in under some fresh stress?"

The inspector began to speak again, then closed his mouth as he recognized Keita's very real concern. It was all fantastic, of course. However special the Cadre might be they weren't gods. Even Keita admitted that at least some of them broke under stress, and Ben Belkassem had never encountered a human with more right to break than Alicia DeVries, so-

His train of thought suddenly hiccupped. A right to break, certainly, but Keita was right in at least

one respect; that simple and comforting answer left other questions unanswered. How had she survived unattended in subfreezing temperatures with those wounds, and why hadn't the Fleet's sensors detected her before someone went in on the ground to identify the dead?

Could there be something to this notion of a second entity? It didn't have to be a Greek demon or demi-goddess just because that was what it told DeVries it was, but Mathison's World was on the very fringe of known space. No one had ever encountered anything like this before, but the possibility that something existed couldn't be entirely ruled out. Bizarre as DeVries's claims might be, no one had been able to suggest an explanation that was less bizarre, and it was axiomatic that the simplest hypothesis which explained all known facts was most likely to be correct....

He leaned back in his chair, toying with his coffee cup, and his eyes were very, very thoughtful.

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The admittance signal chimed, and the hatch slid instantly aside. Ben Belkassem hesitated in the opening, startled by how quickly it had appeared, then looked across the small, neat cabin at the woman he had come to see.

Alicia DeVries sat with her left hand fitted awkwardly into a normal interface headset, and her eyes were unfocused. They turned to him without really seeing him, and he recognized that inward-turned expression. She was linked into the transport's data systems, and his eyebrows rose, for he'd understood that her computer links had been shut down.

His presence registered on Alicia, and she blinked slowly.

Impatient refusal whispered through her mind, and her next thought was louder.

Tisiphone was suddenly fully back within Alicia's skull, her mental voice glowing with vitality as it always did after one of her jaunts through the ship's computers. She'd discovered roundabout routes to the most unlikely places, and she'd been studying the transport's Fasset drive when Alicia interrupted her. she pointed out, not for the first time.

Alicia replied, blinking again and letting her eyes drift back into focus. It was Ben Belkassem, and she wondered why he'd sought her out as she gestured politely to the cabin's only other chair.

The Justice man sat, studying her openly but inoffensively. She was a striking woman, he reflected as her blank expression vanished. Tall for his taste-he liked to make eye contact without getting a crick in his neck- and slender, yet broad-shouldered. She moved with hard-trained, disciplined grace, and one forgot she was merely pretty when her face came alive with intelligence and humor, but there was something more under that. A cool, cat-like something and an amused tolerance, rather like what looked out of his own mirror at him, but with a peculiar compassion... and a capacity for violence he knew he could never match. This was a dangerous woman, he thought, yet so utterly self-possessed it was almost impossible to think of her as "mad."

"Forgive me," he began. "I didn't mean to burst in on you, but the hatch opened on its own."

"I know." Her contralto voice had a soft, furry edge, and her smile was wry. "Uncle Arthur's been kind enough to allow me free run of the ship, but given the, um, concern for my stability, I thought it would be a bad idea to go all secretive on him when I don't actually need privacy."

He nodded and leaned back, crossing his legs, then cocked his head. "I noticed you were interfacing," he observed, and her eyes twinkled.

"And here you thought Uncle Arthur had deactivated all my receptors." She disengaged her hand from the headset and wiggled her stiff fingers.

"Something like that, yes."

"Well, he left my Beta receptor open," she told him, opening her hand. She flexed her wrist, stretching her palm, and he saw the slight angularity of a receptor node against the taut skin. "I have three, you know, and this is the most harmless of them."

"I knew you had more than one," he murmured, "but don't three get a bit confusing?"

"Sometimes." She raised her arms and stretched like a cat. "They feed separate subsystems, but one of the requirements for the job is the ability to concentrate on more than one thing at a time-sort of like being able to play chess on a roof in a driving rain and carry on a conversation about subatomic physics while you replace the bad shingles between moves."

"Sounds exhausting," he remarked, and she smiled again.

"Mildly. This-" she touched her temple "-is my Alpha node. It's the one connected to my primary processors, and it's configured for broadband access to non-AI computer interfaces like shuttle controls, heavy weapons, tac nets, and data systems. It also handles things like my pharmacope, so it makes sense to put it here. After all, if I lose this-" she thumped the top of her head gently "-I won't miss any of the peripherals very much."

Her smile turned into an urchin-like grin at his expression, and she opened her right hand to show him its palm.

"This is my Gamma node. We use it to interface with our combat armor, unlike Marines, who keep their armor link here." She tapped her temple again. "I could run my own armor through the Alpha link, but I'd have to shut down a lot of other functions. The Gamma link is sort of a secondary, load-sharing system. And this-" she opened her left palm again "-is dedicated to remote sensors and sensory data. It's got some limited ability to take over for the Gamma node if I lose my other hand or something equally drastic, but it's not the most efficient one for computer linkages by a long shot. That's why Uncle Arthur chose to leave it open when he closed the others down."

"I see." He studied her for a moment. "You don't seem particularly angry, I must say." She shrugged, but he persisted. "I understood the reason most drop commandos who survive retire to colony worlds is because they resent the Core World requirement that their augmentation be deactivated."

"That's only partly true. Oh, it's a good part of it, but we're not exactly the sort who find ultra-civilization to our taste, and we can be damned useful on the out-worlds. Most of them are glad to get us. But if you're asking if I resent being closed down this way, the answer is that I do."

There's no particular point getting angry over it, though. If I were Uncle Arthur, I'd do precisely the same thing with any Cadreman I thought had... questionable contact with reality."

Her tone was edged yet glittered with a trace of true humor, and it was his turn to grin. But his smile faded as he leaned forward, hands clasping his right ankle where it lay atop his left knee, and spoke softly.

"True. But I can't help wondering, Captain DeVries, if your contact with reality is quite as questionable as everyone seems to think."

Her eyes stilled for just a moment, all humor banished, and then she shook herself with a laugh.

"Careful, Inspector! A remark like that could get you checked into the room next to mine."

"Only if someone heard it," he murmured, and her eyes rounded as he reached into his pocket and withdrew a small, compact, and highly illegal device. "I'm sure you recognize this," he said, and she nodded slowly. She'd never seen one quite that tiny, but she'd used military models. It was an anti-surveillance device, known in the trade as a "mirror box."

"At the moment," Ben Belkassem slid the mirror box back into his pocket, "Major Gateau's sensors are watching a loop of the five or six minutes before I rang your doorbell. I hadn't hoped that you'd be using your neural link. No doubt you've been sitting right there concentrating with minimal movement for quite some time, so the chance of anyone noticing my interference is lower than I'd expected, but I still have to cut this fairly short."

"Cut what short?" she asked quietly.

"Our conversation. You see, I don't quite share the opinion of your fellow Cadremen. I'm not sure what really happened or exactly what you're up to, and I'm certainly no psych specialist, but something Sir Arthur said about your personality rubbed up against something Major Gateau said about a desire on your part to go after whoever's behind these raids."

"And?"

"And it occurred to me that under certain circumstances being considered mad might be very useful to you, so I thought I'd just drop by to share a little secret of my own. You see, everyone out here thinks I'm with Intelligence Branch. That's what I wanted them to think, though I never actually said I was with Intelligence. I'm an inspector, all right-but with O Branch."

Alicia's lips pursed in a silent, involuntary whistle. O Branch-Operations Branch of the Ministry of Justice- was as specialized, and feared, as the Cadre itself. It consisted of hand-picked troubleshooters selected for initiative, flexibility, and pragmatism, and its members were charged with solving problems any way they had to. It was also very, very small. While "inspector" was a fairly junior rank in the other branches of the Ministry of Justice, it was the highest field rank available in O Branch.

"You're the only person out here who knows that, Captain DeVries," the inspector said, levering himself out of his chair.

"But... why tell me?"

"It seemed like a good idea." He gave her a crooked smile and straightened his crimson tunic fastidiously. "I know how you feel about spooks, after all." He walked calmly to the closed hatch, then half turned to her once more. "If you decide you have anything you want to tell me, or if there's anything I can do for you, please feel free to let me know. I assure you it will remain completely confidential, even from your kindly physicians."

He gave her a graceful, elegant bow and punched the hatch burton. It opened, then whispered shut behind him.

Chapter Eight

This invisible bubble was getting tiresome, Alicia thought, eyeing the empty tables around her in the lounge. No one would ever be crude enough to mention her insanity-but no one wanted to get too close to her, either.

she complained.

Alicia snorted, and hooked a chair further under the opposite side of the table to rest her heels on it. Her dialogues with Tisiphone no longer felt odd, which worried her from time to time, but not nearly so much as they comforted her. She had to be so wary, especially of her friends, that the relief of open conversation was almost unspeakable. Of course, her lips twitched wryly, it was still possible Tannis was right, but their exchanges remained a vast relief, even if Tisiphone didn't exist.