



Crystal Structures

1

W A R N I N G
rated R for
violence, abortion,
non consent,
sex, adult language

Please note that this is a cumulative rating of the whole story.
Not every chapter includes material of all the offensive points listed above.

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...and countless other people nudging me on to finally publish this!
It took only about fifteen years.

A. Kniggenndorf

Crystal Structures 1

The true test of crystallinity is not the superficial appearance of a large specimen, but whether on the microscopic level the ions are arranged in a periodic array.

[Ashcroft / Mermin: Solid State Physics p. 064]

By a crystalline defect one generally means any region where the microscopic arrangement of ions differs drastically from that of a perfect crystal. Defects are called surface, line, or point defects, according to whether the imperfect region is bounded on the atomic scale in one, two, or three dimensions.

Like human defects, those of crystals come in a seemingly endless variety, many dreary and depressing, and a few fascinating.

[Ashcroft / Mermin: Solid State Physics p. 616]

The Xeryon

What Do We Really Know About This Race of Spacefarers?

an essay by D. I. Morron (professor of archaeology at Earth University)

Soon after mankind crossed interplanetary space in the mid-twenty-first century and founded its first colonies on planets outside the Solar System, we stumbled upon the remnants of an obviously ancient and widely spread spacefaring race on many of the worlds where mankind set foot. That race was the Xeryon, who left behind few but very characteristic buildings and artifacts our scientists failed to understand at the time.

During the past two years of increased space exploration and because of our scientific exchange program with our League allies, especially the historians of Andor, our knowledge of the Xeryon improved dramatically.

If you asked one of my honored colleagues today about the Xeryon and our knowledge of them, you would most likely learn many fascinating facts, such as that

- *Traces of the Xeryon have been found on planets as far apart as Cheops (near Tarkon and the border with Tortuna) and Ozark (in the Empty Zone).*
- *Their culture was highly developed and based on ideas close to the ancient Greek concepts of direct democracy, a system possible because of their sophisticated communication and information networks. The acquisition and preservation of information and knowledge was considered the most valuable aspect of culture, a value expressed not only by their worship of teachers and students, but also by the fact that the planetographical coordinates of the main library on their homeworld can be found in beautiful symbols as part of the decoration on almost all their crystal artifacts.*
- *Their buildings are made of a kind of concrete our engineers so far cannot reproduce. The material appears to be a type of glass, but with a nature similar to our permacrete.*

An exhaustive list of these facts would fill many issues of this journal, but more interesting is what we do not know about the ancient Xeryon.

First, "ancient Xeryon" is a misnomer. The Andorians had their last contact with them in historic times less than two hundred years ago.

Secondly, many people today believe that the Xeryon were the ancestors or at least a kind of 'evolutionary driver' of the Andorian evolution and development. However, that opinion is entirely incorrect. Just as we are, the Andorians are the result of a long and complicated evolutionary process on their home planet in which they went through prehistoric and historic epochs just like we did until they reached their current level of development. There is no hint that an earlier species developed before or during their evolution, and there is certainly no hint of any external factors in their development until they learned to travel the stars. Another piece of evidence for their independent evolution is that there are no connections between Andorian and Xeryon technology. The Andorian scientists do not understand Xeryon crystal technology any better than our human scientists do.

Thirdly, the Xeryon disappeared suddenly about two hundred years ago. Even the Andorians, who during that era had sporadic contacts with them in space, never learned what happened to them.

Finally, and most importantly, we still do not know their homeworld. We learned a great deal about their technology from the remnants, artifacts, inscriptions, and frescoes they left behind on their various colony worlds, but the coordinates of their homeworld with its glorious library in the middle of the huge capital were never found. It is widely believed among my honored colleagues that the Xeryon considered their homeworld so well known that they never thought of writing its coordinates down anywhere. A rumor still circulates that they are an extragalactic species, but again no hint or proof of that theory is available.... [...]

[League Scientific, 2087-10-28, pp. 129876]

2088

University of Earth
Archaeological Faculty
Room 313

"Please, let it be the same result... the same result..." The small, almost delicate-looking elderly man clasped his hands together frantically then shoved them through the white hair around the bald patch on the back of his head. If the astronomical coordinates based on the maps from the second artifact matched the first set of coordinates, he'd be able to raise the funds for an expedition to the lost home-world of the Xeryon for which he'd been looking for so long.

The console beeped. A row of numbers blinked in honey-colored yellow. He stared at them then compared them with the set from the last calculations. He almost couldn't believe it: the same!

All he had to do now was enter this set of coordinates with appropriate error tolerances into the program he'd written to translate Xeryon coordinates into the current system. He typed fast, yet double-checking every keystroke. His pointer finger wavered slightly above the Enter key. One last keystroke and he would know the planet where he had to search for the remnants of the glorious ancient spacefarer race to which he'd dedicated his scientific career. He tapped the key. It was...

He froze as he read the name that blinked to the right of the six numbers. His assistant, looking over his shoulder, finally said aloud what Prof. Morron only dared to think:

"Holy shit!"

2088-07-18

BetaMountain
Cmdr. Walsh's Office

"Thank you for sparing the time for me on short notice, Commander." The president of the University of Earth, Dr. Paul Aubéry, took a seat in the chair in front of Walsh's desk. "I don't want to make more out of this affair than absolutely necessary, but I fear that one of our most respected professors, Dorian Immanuel Morron, has done something really stupid."

"What's his specialty?"

"He's an archaeologist. Brilliant in his field, and his lectures on the Xeryon space race are among the most popular at our institute. But he lives in an ivory tower regarding anything but his research."

"And why are you here?"

Aubéry sighed. "Morron organized an expedition to an unimportant site on Cheops. Two weeks ago, he left Earth together with sixteen final-year students in one of the university's vessels, but they never arrived on Cheops."

"There could have been an engine malfunction or some other problem. Your vessels aren't among the newest, Doctor."

"We've already thought of that, Commander. We checked their route thoroughly according to the flight plan they handed in. It looks as if Morron's expedition wasn't actually headed for Cheops." Aubéry laid his hands on the edge of Walsh's desk. "For that reason, I had Morron's office and lab opened up and his computer scanned. I'm here because we discovered a set of coordinates that belongs to a world beyond Cheops."

"Cheops is almost on the border." Walsh frowned. "What coordinates did your people find?" Aubéry handed him a small printout.

Walsh didn't have to check the coordinates. These he would recognize even drunk and sound asleep. "All right, Doctor. They *are* in trouble." Walsh laid the note aside and stood up. "I'll see to it, immediately."

"That's what I hoped for." Aubéry shook hands with him. "Thank you."

2088-07-22

Planet Nebraska
Public Landing Field
Bay 11

Niko slung her bag over her shoulder. The pedulont vessel was already waiting.

This was an unpleasant job and the first mission after her return from 17798¹. A solo mission no less: her colleagues had all been sent to different locations. Goose had been the last to go. He'd gotten a mission on an outskirts planet with a name she couldn't recall. She had the strong feeling that Walsh had given her this job mostly because she was the only Series-5 Ranger available, and not, as he'd said, because she knew the initiator of this nonsense personally.

Professor... What on Earth made you do this? She shook her head and looked ahead at the battered ship. Its captain was waiting for her next to the main lock. She sighed.

After the Battle of Tarkon, BETA had been ordered not to provoke the Queen under any circumstances because the BWL, supported by the superior League Council, wanted to rebuild the lost ships before they ended up in another quarrel with the Tortunian armada. *As if the Queen would have any regard for what we do or don't do. All that counts for her are victims for her Psychocrypt to keep her supplied with slaverlords.* But the order had been given, and it took a lot of administrative work — and luck — for Commander Walsh to get official permission for jobs on Tortuna these days.

And that was why Niko had to take a smelly pedulont vessel with a bad-tempered captain to go and bring her old archaeology professor and sixteen of his students back into League space, hopefully in their own vessel. *"Don't you dare leave evidence or an Andorian hyperdrive behind"* had been the exact words with which the commander dismissed her.

She had had almost no time to prepare for this mission: just fifteen minutes to leave a note for Shane, telling him they'd have to reschedule their plans for the weekend. Tightening her fingers around the shoulder strap of her bag, she wished she'd had time to deal with the frightening feelings he'd begun to trigger in her.

Her cheeks still flamed at the memory of their last encounter². She still didn't understand what had driven her to do what she'd done. She'd been thinking about how her life should go on from now on and had ended up in his arms, playing with his claws, his fangs, tempting the wolf within, outside where anybody could see...

She knew desire, even lust. Her psionic powers had ensured that. You couldn't be a telepath as strong as she was without being confronted with these strongest of emotions. But this...

She felt helpless. Niko ground her teeth and grimly expelled the thoughts from her mind, increasing her pace. The pedulont captain seemed pretty impatient by now.

¹ See „Lost“ (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

² See „Hot Summer Night“ (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

Planet Tortuna
Capital Space Port
Landing Platform 3

Niko sat in the rear freight bay and checked her equipment one last time. *As if I could change anything if something were wrong now.* Weapons; supplies of food and water; sun protection; money for bribes in case she'd come too late and the archaeologists were already psychocrystallized, in which case she'd need their pedulont contacts in Tortuna City to leave the planet; her parachute... *Everything's okay.*

"Touchdown in less than five standard minutes," came the rough voice of the pedulont freighter captain, Prodush, via intercom. "I'll open both freight bay locks. You'll have about two minutes to disappear. How you manage not to get caught by Her Majesty's soldiers isn't my business. If you're seen I shoot you as a stowaway. Clear?"

"Clear, Prodush," Niko answered. She put on her parachute and tightened the straps, then attached her bag with the snaplinks and waited.

A screeching bump rolled through the ship as the vessel touched ground. The lock mechanism began to hum. The pedulont's final sentence surprised her: "Good luck, humming."

I must be insane. She jumped down the three meters from the second rear lock to the permacrete. From the side of the vessel facing the city dome, the heavy footsteps of armored crowntroopers approached. There were about ten meters crumbling concrete between Prodush's ship and the huge pit swallowing most of Tortuna City's effluent.

"Somethin' aboard Her Majesty'd like?" grumbled an electronically distorted voice on the other side of the ship.

"Nope, nothin' but the order'd scrap metal," came Prodush's rasping answer.

Niko rolled to her feet and ran for the edge, diving in a long jump into the abyss. *BASE jumping on Tortuna. Wonder if it's as illegal here as it would be on Earth.*

She pulled the ripcord, and prayed for an updraft to carry her closer to the opposite shore when the unfolding parachute cut her free fall. She'd have to climb up the steep rock face, and swimming half of the lake first wouldn't help with that.

The surprisingly warm updraft came.

And she wished it hadn't. Its smell seemed designed to work as tear gas, meat tenderizer, and anesthetic gas all at once. When her eyes cleared she saw why: the lake below her glittered in silver and brown — not because of its clear water and muddy ground, but because of mercury and the collected sewage and effluents of the metropolis above. Huge pipes ended in the rock face below Tortuna City and no wastewater treatment plant was in sight.

Tortuna sewage disposal plant number one, Niko thought grimly, readjusting the lines of her parachute while coughing. Hitting the wall on the other side would be better than dropping into that. *Throw it in and forget about it!*

She landed smoothly on the narrow strip of dry land at the foot of the opposite face, almost breathless because of the stink, and counted herself lucky not to have to roll. The level of the disposal lake was obviously higher at times — the ground was covered with things she didn't want to examine too closely. The last of her momentum slammed her against the rocks. Niko felt the skin at her elbows and on one knee abrade. She ignored it.

Her parachute had splashed into the poisoned water behind her. She cut the lines and began pulling it out when she noticed that the slop had started to dissolve the silk. *Okay, then.* She shrugged and threw it back in, shoving the last parts in with her boot. *Best way to leave no evidence.* She shuddered slightly — it was not a pleasant thought that she'd almost fallen into that soup — and looked up the cliff she had to climb, preferably immediately. She didn't want to know what the gases evaporating from the effluent next to her would do to her lungs if she breathed them for too long.

Unpleasant mission doesn't fit, Commander, she thought grimly, recalling her briefing. Shit mission is better! She ground her teeth as she chalked her hands and prepared to climb into the cliff. *First BASE jumping, now free climbing... I'm becoming a specialist in extreme sports.*

Planet Tortuna

a five-hour walk from the city

Niko looked at her compass and rechecked the coordinates where the university vessel was supposed to be. She looked ahead, screening her eyes against the brilliant, burning bright light of Tortuun, a star more powerful than Sol above a planet with a thinner ozone layer than Earth.

Another plain of glassy concrete that had melted and solidified again was lying ahead, waiting to be crossed. These bowls, as the few natives who dared to travel the area called them because of their almost perfectly round shape, had once been the streets, plazas, and buildings of the capital of a huge star empire, bigger than the Crown Empire or the League. But heavy orbital plasma bombardment had turned the metropolis into a glass desert with flat plains disrupted only by the circular walls of impact craters.

Nobody knew how much time had passed since the bombardment. The scars of plasma fire lasted for eternity and would be erased only together with the planet bearing them. The bombardment could have happened a hundred or a thousand years ago; the place would look the same today: bowls of glass, surrounded by ridges of less-melted material where sometimes the ruins of ancient buildings were almost recognizable. Sometimes the glass even carried the shadow of a person unfortunate enough to be around at the time that specific bomb had struck: burned into the glass, a witness to eternities...

Niko slid down into the next bowl. This one was even deeper and the glass walls on the other side seemed to rise higher into the sky. The bomb must have hit at a deeper point, concentrating its energy and creating a deeper, more compact crater. But it wasn't deep enough to provide shade for a sunburned wanderer, and the glassy surface of the ground, polished by wind-driven glass sand, reflected the sunlight, almost doubling the amount of radiation that hit her.

Niko wiped the sweat off her forehead and pulled her hat with its thick, muffling veil further over her face. A glance at her watch told her that she still had half an hour to walk before her next mouthful of water. She'd been to Tortuna often enough to know that thirst was as dangerous out here as the Crown troopers were. And it was possible that she'd have to return to the capital the same way, in case the expedition members were caught and psychocrystallized already.

She ground her teeth and felt sand grains between them. Even the thick Zangwell mufti didn't protect enough against the glass sand that — together with the silhouettes melted into the glass walls — had given this part of the desert its name: Glassy Graves.

Cautiously Niko continued toward the far side of the bowl. She was close to the target coordinates discovered in Morron's university office now. Something reached her ears. She frowned, listened carefully and went on, slowly climbing across the glassy rubble. Reaching the next ridge, she hesitated. Listened. Couldn't believe what she heard.

...I got it one piece at a time
and it didn't cost me a dime...

Johnny Cash?! On Tortuna?! At that volume?! They wouldn't be insane enough to— Niko snorted and increased her speed. What was she thinking? They *were* insane enough for it! They had been insane enough to go on an archaeological expedition to Tortuna!

"Okay, folks. Galaxy Ranger! This folly is over!"

A few of the people, brushing dust off small artifacts and sorting lots of blue crystal tubes marked with tiny symbols, looked up. She recognized some of the faces from Morron's lectures; some of them, she thought of almost as friends. Her eyes narrowed when she recognized Ayse Attalan and Katsumi Nakawa. Together with Jamie³, the four of them had been a close-knit group, staying in contact with her even after she had joined the Ranger Academy. Their contact had lessened only after Niko had become a Series-5 ranger and had been more and more off planet. And Sven Masterson, who'd flirted with her most of the final year of her archaeological studies, Mike, Leonora, Nikita...

She shook her head. She'd believed all of them smart enough to know better than this! The rest were younger, likely final-year students from Morron's current class, but still—

"Niko. Is that you?" The professor, eager as usual, approached her from one side and smiled broadly. "Good that you're here. I hoped that they'd send you."

"Professor, you are subject to arrest for violating the League Law, paragraph 58 and additions," Niko told him coldly. "This is a prohibited planet." She turned around and shouted at the student nearest the screaming music player: "TURN THAT OFF! NOW!! — And a more-than-dangerous planet," she said into the following silence.

"Oh sure, Niko. Sure..." Morron patted her arm and shuffled past her towards one of the tables, which held an assortment of various artifacts, meticulously numbered and tagged with small RFIDs. "But you have to have a look at this."

"All of you are risking not only your own lives but those of millions of others. If the Queen gets to you, you'll be put in the psychocrypt and your life force will be transferred into a holographic warrior to be used against the League. Against your *homeworlds*. And—"

The professor clapped his hands and looked sternly at his students. "Please, people. Don't waste precious daylight. We have supplies for only three months and there's a lot of work to be done."

Flabbergasted, Niko watched the other members of the expedition going back to their work. Some of them giving her apologetic smiles first, but they still turned their backs. "As an official representative of the League Force I have to bring you and your expedition back into League space. Immediately."

"Oh..." Morron looked up and blinked at her through his dust-covered glasses. "But we won't leave, Niko. This is far too important to—"

"I *am* authorized to use appropriate force to fulfill my order, Professor. And I will do it. So stop this nonsense and pack up. We are leaving as soon as possible."

"Niko... Niko... Niko..." Morron shook his head. "You should really have a look at the discoveries—"

"That includes the application of physical force—"

"You'll need at least two of us to get this baby off the ground." Sven —blond, in his twenties but not grown up— interrupted her, grinned, and patted the hull of the ship that formed one side of the excavation camp. Niko ground her teeth. "So you can't stun us all. And you obviously need the ship to bring us away from here. So you can't blow it up either."

"Sven's completely right about that." Morron continued his work as if she hadn't said anything, entering descriptions and registration codes for the blue crystalline artifacts aligned on the table into the datapadd he used to scan the ID tags attached to them.

"That doesn't apply to the excavation site itself." Niko unclipped a thermal detonator from her belt. "If you don't follow my orders I'll be forced to—" She unlocked the safety latch and showed the activated LEDs.

"Niko." Professor Morron looked up from his work and smiled warmly. None of the others took any notice of her. "We all know as well as you do that you'd never be able to do that — to destroy one of the most important findings about the Xeryon ever made. So stop this nonsense, and have a look at these crys—"

³ See „Starwynd Theta“ (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

“Professor, you already have to face trial for entering enemy territory and bringing others into danger. Please, be sensible and don’t add resisting arrest to the charges.”

“Niko.” Morron finally came around the table and answered her in a very calm and serious voice: “We don’t care about political or military regulations, but we are not stupid. All of us know that by coming here and staying we have committed a criminal offense according to the laws of the League. I know that I will face at least five years in prison for what I’ve done and my students know that as well. All of us have heard about Tortuna in the news, and we were pretty frightened when we realized where we’d have to go. *But this is the main library of the ancient Xeryon. I’m sure of it. We already discovered some of the lobbies and we are close to entering the great hall, where we expect to find the main data banks containing invaluable information about Xeryon culture, technology, and maybe even about their mysterious disappearance. We all have decided to accept our punishment. Later.*” He grinned at her, almost like a schoolboy. “Once we are done, you can arrest us. We will be very well-behaved little prisoners then.”

“Professor! This isn’t a joke!”

“We know that.” Ayse, Morron’s second lab assistant and the closest friend Niko saw among the members of this tactical nightmare, joined them. “And I know that you and a lot of people at home are very, very worried and concerned about us.” Her brown eyes held Niko’s, despite knowing about Niko’s abilities. “But we have to do this. And I’m sorry that we drag you into this, but there’s no choice. You, being an archaeologist and a student of the Xeryon culture yourself, should know that better than anyone.”

Niko put her hand to her forehead in disbelief. What should she do? What could she do? She still held the thermal detonator. It seemed to vibrate in her hand. Her fingers twitched on the trigger. She was ready to throw it into the entrance to the underground library...

...and was painfully aware that Professor Morron was right: she couldn’t do it. Her job, her career, her reputation as a Ranger, and most likely her freedom — disobeying an order was a major offense, allowing civilians in Crown controlled space even more so — depended on it. But she couldn’t do it. She couldn’t destroy the Xeryon equivalent of the ancient Egyptian library of Alexandria. She simply could not. With a sigh of despair, she secured the detonator.

I’m insane, she thought — not for the first time during this mission. “I need some water and bandages, if possible. And then we have to talk about safety measures. You can’t continue like this. You are less than a hundred kilometers away from Tortuna City. It’s a miracle that you weren’t discovered and psychocrystallized by now.”

Morron accepted that with a nod. “That’s fine. Any suggestions?”

“Stop the loud music. Be silent. No lights, lasers or other energy systems outside the ship or the underground site. Especially not at night. Cover the bright areas. It’s pure luck that the ship’s hull is almost the same color as the underground. So we don’t need to add camouflage. And for heaven’s sake, put on hats and thick shirts. Tortuun is a much stronger star than Sol! Let me see your weaponry and I have to conscript some of you as guards. They’ll have to be alert around the clock, and—”

Ayse laid her hand on Niko’s shoulder. “Come into the ship, first,” she said. “You look horrible. You have to get out of the sun and get a cool shower, fresh clothes, and something to eat. And then we’ll find you a place to rest. There’s a bed in the clothes storeroom. And some sleep...”

Niko didn’t pay attention any more. She was stunned. She ached all over. She was — in more than one way — shocked. And she was horribly tired, with a throbbing headache from heat and stress and dehydration. *She urgently needs a vocal cord extraction.*

Niko started at her own thought.

Niko woke from persistent knocking that bordered on thumping on the door. Her head still throbbed. A throbbing that increased when she remembered where she was, what she were doing, and what she had failed to do.

“Niko-san?” Katsumi asked through the door. “Would you like to join us in the mess?”

“No,” Niko answered honestly when she sat up to close the few shirt buttons she’d opened to ease her sleep. “I don’t even want to be on this planet.”

“May I come in?”

“Yes.”

The door opened into the room. The already blindingly bright early morning light of Tortuun filling the corridor revealed a big, handwritten sign taped to the door. In Ayse’s slightly curled capitals it read: “PRIVATE CABIN. RANGER. KNOCK OR GET SHOT.” Niko groaned. Whether about the sign or about the airlock being left open, she wasn’t sure.

“Are you in a better mood than yesterday?” Katsumi asked, placing a small tray with traditional green tea in small cups on the crate that served as a table.

“Does your team have a better idea of camp security than yesterday?” Niko replied caustically, before wincing at her lack of manners.

Katsumi looked back at the wide-open airlock and smiled. “I guess not.”

“Then, no, I don’t.” Niko accepted the small cup of green tea with a graceful nod.

“But we’re getting better at it,” Katsumi replied, raising her own cup. “And we’ll be done soon. The seismic analysis—”

“Seismic analysis!?” The tea cup clacked onto the tray. “Don’t tell me you used a thumper out here!”

“We had to.” Katsumi shrugged and took a sip. “We can’t drill without knowing the layout of the library. Why do you think the professor took both Mike and Leonora on this expedition? Their second field is geology. They know how to do SAs. And out here, nobody will be disturbed—”

“Nobody but the Queen,” Niko interrupted her. “I have to talk to the professor. Now. They’ll know where we are. We have to leave immediately. We—”

“I doubt they have located us,” a deep voice said from the open door, and Mike weaseled into the room. His small stature in no way matched his deep rumbling voice. “The ground is almost like a solid shell. It rang like a big saucer being pinged. Took up all our computer power and Leo’s skills to calculate the library’s structure from all that background.”

“When did you thump?” Niko asked uncomfortably.

“Yesterday, after you went to sleep.”

“They would be here already if they knew about us,” Katsumi added.

“Not necessarily,” Niko bit off. “Their chain of command isn’t the fastest. Their computers are probably slower...” She squeezed herself past the two archeologists to go and search for the professor. “You are all nuts.”

“Niko,” Mike reminded her calmly, “we are professionals. We know this is a dangerous excavation site. We aren’t insane. The geological structures kept us from being located, believe me.”

“And did you know that before you set up the thumper?” Niko looked back at him.

“No, but—”

“That’s what I thought!”

2088-07-30

BetaMountain
Cmdr. Walsh's Office

"Ranger Niko is on a rescue mission for an archaeological expedition to Tortuna, Gooseman," the commander said without any prelude when Goose came to attention in front of Walsh's desk. "They're six days overdue."

Gooseman narrowed his eyes at that information. "On Tortuna, sir?"

Walsh sighed. "Yes. Go out there and find them. Bring them back, if possible; if not..."

Walsh's face told him enough. *Damage control*. He ground his teeth at the unspoken order. It meant liquidating the new slaverlords and destroying captured Andorian technology. Their— *Niko's* chances weren't good.

"There's more," Walsh continued. "The mission's semi-official."

"Meaning?"

"Ranger Niko's mission got the okay from the Board, but there's no chance to get the approval for another Ranger on Tortuna. Your job is officially listed as part of her mission, which means no additional funds or outside channels. You'll have to find your own way onto that planet. Ideas?"

He didn't hesitate. "Code Meteor, sir. With one of the damaged ships."

"Are you sure, Gooseman? It was never your specialty."

"It's the fastest way, sir. She's twelve days gone, meaning ten days on Tortuna. I can do it with a fully charged implant and a good AI on the ship to maintain control till the very last moment." He propped himself with a clenched fist on Walsh's desk and added, "I didn't get her through 17798 to lose her now!"

"You know that most likely you can't do anything else but ending her slaverlord existence?"

Goose straightened. "I am aware of that, sir."

"You'll start immediately. Dismissed."

He felt Walsh's thoughtful look at his back as he left the office.

Planet Tortuna

"Professor, you just have to see that—" Niko clenched her hands into fists on the small table in the mess of the university vessel.

"Niko, I do understand that you want to leave here at all costs. But the opening of the great library is coming up. It's impossible for us to leave here now." He shrugged. "But you can go without us. Don't let us keep you."

"*Professor!!!*" She slammed her fists on the table and jumped up. "That's not the problem and you know it! You're not just dense, you're *moronic!*" She threw her hands up. "This is ridiculous! I need to get out of here!" She shoved the person behind her aside and stormed out of the room.

"Wow," the tall man said, impressed, and looked after her with a smile, growing more and more interested. "I didn't know that Nikki had such a temper. — Ayse, you think I'd have a chance with her now?"

"Not if you want to keep your head on your shoulders, Sven," the second lab assistant answered dryly. "This is likely going to cost Niko the job she loves, and you are part of the problem. She's not in the mood to see your positive features right now." After a moment, she added with a grin, "After all, she didn't see them four years ago, so they aren't that easy to find. If there are any, that is."

“Tell me when they come, ALMA. Continuous scan. Keep the extrapolated point of impact as close as possible to the given coordinates.” Goose ground his teeth, concentrating for the transformation. He hated Code Meteor. Hated it deeply. Had hated it at Wolf Den: whenever Meteor was on the training schedule he’d known he was in trouble.

=Coordinates checked. Point of impact localized, Goose,= ALMA’s calm electronic voice said.
=Crown fighters approaching.=

“Thanks. See you when you’re reprogrammed.”

=I’m only a copy, Goose. Luck.=

“Luck.” He took a deep breath, pressed the small titanium case with his light replacement clothes to his stomach, and reached for his badge.

Code Meteor.

The protective cocoon of energy enclosed him. He transformed his body into a ball, enclosed the case in his center, working frantically at the layers necessary to protect him. He didn’t have much time: the protective energy cocoon lasted up to thirty seconds. The transformation had to be complete when it collapsed — or else...

The surface: a thin layer of Neutronium, using up most of his body tissue, so even a direct collision wouldn’t crack the ball. The second layer he formed out of a titanium-ceramics, protecting him against heat and deformation during fall and impact. The rest became the life-supporting parts: heart, lungs, brain, bloodstream... all intertwined with titanium struts to further stabilize the ball and keep the case enclosed in it in a steady position. It wouldn’t do to have his innards crushed by his luggage!

The explosion ripped the ship apart and threw him down toward the planet.

“Hey, people, look at this!” One of the sentries called out pointing away from the camp.

Expecting the Crown attack she’d been waiting for, Niko grabbed her blasters and ran, looking for the danger in the direction Mike indicated. She stared with narrowed eyes at the landscape, searching for the approaching deathsteeds, and saw nothing. She was just about to ask when she finally discovered what Mike meant: a shower of shooting stars high up in the still-bluish morning sky. Before long, Tortuun would bleach the blue with its heat into burning white and the color of molten metal. “And for this you call an emergency?” she hissed furiously at him. “You idiot!” She turned on her heel and marched back into camp.

Ayse and the professor had asked her early this morning if she would help position the lasers for cutting the final entrance into the great hall. Their scatterbrained seismic analysis had detected it behind the opposite wall of the small lobby they had already excavated before she’d arrived.

Niko sighed deeply. Furious about the situation as she was, it was better to do something, or it wouldn’t take long and she’d be a bigger danger than the Queen for these fools. She’d almost pistol-whipped Mike with her blaster for his mistake. At least, the earlier they had access to the actual library, the earlier she would get them off Tortuna.

Shane woke with the bright midday sun burning on his bare back. His charge had run out while he was still unconscious. His head throbbed and his throat felt as if he’d chewed sand. That and the sensation of severe sunburn on his back and legs told him, he’d been out for quite a while. He propped his arms on the ground and pushed himself into a sitting position. His eyes narrowed to mere slits against the scorching sun as he searched for the titanium case. It lay only a half meter away. He pulled it close and swore as the sun-heated metal burned his palms when he opened it. He swallowed the small amount of water in the case and pulled on his clothes, grinding his teeth when the rough UV-blocking cloth touched his burned skin.

Wonderful, Shane, he thought sarcastically. Of all transformations, you had to volunteer for the only one that Ryker really does better than you!

He slung his weapon belt around his hips, pulled on the light boots, and staggered to his feet, ignoring the intensified heat-induced headache. If his sense of direction was right, he had a march of about an hour ahead.

Hell, that was a close shave! If he hadn't spotted the sentry on the opposite wall as he prepared to climb down into the bowl, he'd have crossed the wide bowl instead of circling it around the ridge — and the Crown trooper patrol would have surprised either him or the group to which the guard belonged. Goose tucked the severed head of one of the Crown soldiers under his arm, and marched on. Maybe he could finagle the current com frequency of the Crown soldiers out of the helmet systems.

Ayse released her held breath silently. She'd watched the fierce fight down at the edge of the plain, but hadn't dared to call the camp. Any sound could draw attention to them — Niko had been adamant about that — and there'd been no way to leave her post without being in plain sight of the fighters: Crown soldiers and a single man on foot.

She frowned. The dust whirling up in huge clouds cut off her vision. A breeze cleared it a moment later and the lone wanderer had disappeared, leaving all the soldiers dead on the ground. If not for the corpses, she'd believe she'd dreamt the whole thing, but—

The guard turned out to be a human woman, at least as far as he could tell: she wore a huge straw hat, and a dark shawl covered her face. Her red blouse had given her away. The color almost glowed in Tortuun's brilliant light.

A tiny shard skidded under his boots. She started and grabbed for a blaster in her lap.

"No need," Goose said dryly in a voice rasping from thirst. "If I were your enemy you'd be dead by now." He noticed that she stared at the head under his arm and grinned cruelly. "Friend of mine. And speaking of friends," he growled, growing dead-serious, "where are the idiots?"

"What— Who—"

"Where?!" he snapped, running out of patience. She simply pointed down into the next bowl. Goose tapped at his temple as if laying a finger on the brim of a hat in an ironical gesture of greeting, and stalked past her.

"Oh, you mean Niko." The old guy he'd grabbed by the sleeve to get his full attention smiled warmly at him. "She's at the excavation site. In the great Xeryon library. Really!" The dodderer pointed at the opening in the slope behind them. "She's a great help with her powers, Mr.—?"

"Ranger Gooseman," he growled.

"You see," the professor continued, following him, "without your colleague's help we wouldn't have come half as far as we—"

"All that's here are wannabe-slaverlords!" Gooseman interrupted him with a clearly audible click of fangs. "And if you don't pack your shit to get the hell out of Dodge, I'll blow your damn X-library to orbit!" He left the annoying idiot behind and headed with long furious strides for the entrance to the underground site.

The first few meters were the characteristic round tunnel left behind by a laser ablation driller. What followed were narrow, interconnected corridors and small chambers filled with rubble. Whatever they contained at the time the plasma bombs fell from the sky had been destroyed by the heat or shattered by the seismic shocks. Nevertheless, the expedition team had meticulously marked and mapped all of it. Small position markers stuck everywhere, allowing for precise, one-to-one holographic rendering of the location once the raw data had been processed. The round, barrel-like holo-droid with "R2D2" written in bright pink lacquer on its bulk and a note "look but don't touch" taped to its top, slowly wheeled around recording everything.

The library itself had been partially underground and thus suffered less damage than the upstairs facilities. Its cavernous hall slowly filled with an increasingly detailed color holograph... of itself. The archeologists moved like ghosts through it, placing notes and markers, sticking RFIDs to artifacts they were going to wrap up and take with them. Not before marking their position in the hologram, not before expanding the hologram to the place where the artifact had previously been, incorporating the information of the artifacts' interiors into the main hologram. Thus, the countless lots of crystal holders placed into neat shelves — where those shelves hadn't been shattered, that was — were slowly but surely added to the database, each crystal getting a unique RFID and its ID number, description, and location being marked both in the hologram and in the corresponding database.

Later, they would recreate the whole site in one of the holographic chambers at the University of Earth — after they got out of jail that was. Then she'd be able to tour the site without looking over her shoulder for slaverlords. If she was still welcome on Earth, that was.

Niko wasn't too sure about the latter. She carefully extricated another lot out of a hexagonal shelf place and attached small, orange RFIDs to each of its six blue crystal poles. Numbers 578 to 584. She studied their end faces briefly, then knelt to take detail holos of the engraved symbols—

“Do you have any idea what you're doing?”

The calm voice, carrying only a slight hint of suppressed anger, made her jump. “Shane?” she asked warily, her hand at her weapon. The other archeologists around her had frozen.

“If it weren't me it would have been this thug!” The severed head of a Crown trooper, helmet still attached, landed next to her with a thump. “In case you forgot: this is *Tortuna*.”

“Crown troopers!” Niko jumped to her feet, scrambling over the countless hologram projector-recorders that marked the actual front line like a surreal robot army, as Goose came out of the colored veils of the hologram. “Where?”

“No five minutes from here.” He stopped her with a hard arm around her waist. “Don't worry. I did a very *thorough* job of it.”

She tried to push herself off him. “Did they send a message?”

“Unlikely. It was a very deep bowl and we were close to the walls.” He grinned cynically. “And there was a hyperdrive explosion in orbit that should jam Queenie's comm satellites for twenty-four hours.”

“A hyperdrive explosion...,” she repeated slowly then stared at him in shock. “The meteor shower this morning. That was you, wasn't it?”

“Let's say, me — and the sad remnants of Explorer-38.” He pulled her close. “So now, if you don't mind, I'd like an explanation for what's going on here.” There was a faint growl in his voice that she felt almost as a vibration in her bones. “You know, it's always great fun to fall flat on your face — from orbit.”

Niko sighed, straightening out of his hold. “I failed to force the professor and his students to leave.” She said it plainly. “I tried everything short of blowing up the site itself.” She lowered her head, admitting defeat. “I— I couldn't do it. I wish I could have.”

He nodded. “We are taking off tomorrow when Tortuun is behind us from the capital.”

“What do you plan?”

“To blow this shit up if we aren't gone by midday.”

“Shane, these findings are among the greatest—”

“These findings *are* on Tortuna,” he snarled at her, “and what's not packed up when we leave will stay on Tortuna! The Queen will miss that decommissioned patrol and we're sitting ducks out here with a bunch of loonies.” Grabbing the trooper's head off the ground, he headed back through the tunnel with her. “Are there tools in that wreck they call a ship?” he asked. “I want Queenie's com frequency in case we have to haul ass early.”

“Whoa.” Sven snatched the Crown trooper helmet off the table after Shane had gone to adjust their communicator to the Crown frequency. “After reading that documentary in *Roving Stars* I always wondered what it's like to wear one!” He held it up with both hands.

"There's only a small problem with that," Goose's dry voice came from behind. He emerged from the ship with a mug of water and a shovel.

Niko looked up from aligning blue crystals on one of the long tables and packing them into narrow boxes. "I thought you got the frequency already."

"What problem?" Sven started to put it on. "It looks to be just my siz—" He screamed and dropped it.

"Its original owner is still using it." Goose swished another sip of water around in his dry mouth.

"You mean you didn't...?" Niko began to snicker helplessly.

"Nope. — Hey, beachboy!" Goose tossed the shovel over to where Sven was heaving. "Since you guys like digging so much, you bury it."

"Shane, you're impossible," Niko whispered when he joined her, watching Sven picking up the head — together with its helmet — with a lot less enthusiasm than before to bury it outside the camp. She giggled.

Goose watched her silently in the growing darkness. *Niko, laughing about a severed head, about the nausea someone weaker than them felt about touching it?* He frowned and almost jumped when she suddenly took his arm, leaning into him. He felt her breath on his cheek as she whispered, "You're so serious. We can't do anything now. Whatever we do, we can only do it *tomorrow*." Her scent found its way into his perception a second before he felt her lips touching his. Her arms slipped up around his neck. "We can do nothing in the darkness during the night." She breathed it against his lips. It felt as if she was smiling. Or was he? He didn't know for sure any longer. Her body touched his full length. Her words weren't true. There was something to... had been something to...

"Or at least *almost* nothing."

The nature of her scent changed, became intimate... inviting... Her lips closed again over his, signing the promise. She made a small, dancing step back, luring, tempting him into the ship, into the cabin with the note on the door. He recognized the smell of her in it, on the clothes in the open locker, on the sheets. Her hands slipped under his shirt, onto his skin, opened the magnetic clasps slowly, one by one. Her lips touched the skin of his chest. What was with her? This—

...Shhhhh... her thoughts whispered in his mind. ...Don't you know? The desire that comes from danger. No one can resist it all the time, it's too strong...

Mental tendrils soothed his wariness, erased his alarm at the unmasked mental contact and his already weakened resistance against the sensual attraction of her as she glided out of her clothes in front of him. She touched him again. Her hands pushed his shirt down his arms, whisking across the last remnants of sunburn on his back before slipping it down and tugging at his pants. She leaned back, sank down onto the narrow bed. He followed her, his hand on her spine, fingertips vibrating on her skin. He breathed her in, soaring in her presence beneath him—

Her nails tore across his back, making him arch back in reflex. He saw his face reflected in the violet darkness of her eyes, widened at the choked sound of pain coming from deep in his throat.

2088-08-01

The sounds of the archaeological team going about their morning routine echoed through the crowded vessel, waking Niko. Her body throbbed with the dull exhaustion of exaggerated physical satisfaction. Her hair was tangled beneath her, some strands caught in the buttons of the pillow. She freed her hands from the twisted sheet to untangle her hair and froze, staring at the dark marks around her wrists. It looked like she'd been held down violently by a vise clamped far too tightly around her wrists. The soft sheet whispered down her bare skin, revealing more dark marks on her ribs below her breasts and on her inner thighs when she sat up.

What happened?

She shivered, dizzy and shocked. She was alone.

Glimpses of memory arose in her mind: hands on her skin, fangs flashing in the darkness above her face; her body tense, her hands on his wet back, her teeth at his throat. He had caught her wrists in one hand and pressed them to the bed high above her head, forcing her to stretch beneath him, writhing against him, her legs finding no hold on the smooth cloth...

It was the first time he'd used his strength against her.

She pulled her legs close, slung her arms around them, hid her face against her knees, and cowered shivering in the middle of the rumped bed.

Shane. Why?

Then she noticed the blood.

Long, dark streaks on the sheet, nearly drawing her silhouette.

And remembered.

His.

She had wounded him. Had left him no chance to resist, but to give in.

And he was the one with the fangs.

She erased the light, not wanting to see the results of her excesses. Darkness wouldn't help, but it would cover until she regained her balance, until—

The narrow door to the corridor opened. She would always recognize his silhouette. He moved soundlessly into the room, warily. It seemed he didn't want to disturb her. As if there were anything left of her that wasn't already disturbed. "Shane, I'm sorry," she whispered into the darkness after the door had closed, erasing the light again.

"It doesn't matter," came the calm answer.

"It does matter. I hurt you." She clenched her hands around the sheet, suppressing a sob. "Shane. I— I don't know what happened."

"You lost control." He said it patiently, as if she were a child who didn't understand.

Cloth rustled in the dark. A choked sound from him eroded her nerves. "Light!" she ordered harshly — and pressed her hand to her mouth in shock. The cold white light of the diodes revealed long, bloody gashes in his back, still dark red despite his bio defenses working on them. The wounds matched the dark streaks on the shirt in his hands. "I'm so sorry," she whispered, choked.

"I said it doesn't matter." Standing in front of the lockers, he looked briefly over his shoulder at her, before he pulled a new shirt from the locker, wincing slightly as he pulled it on. "It's healing." He closed the locker and turned back for the door. "I wouldn't have come, but the shirts are all here."

"But your back—!"

He turned at her cry — and her eyes widened at the sight of four deep scratches across his left cheek. Her lips trembled, but no words came.

He saw it. "It doesn't matter," he repeated and added quietly with his hand already lying on the door lock, "You've got a problem, girl, but I'm not it." The door closed behind him.

Niko felt more than uncomfortable when she joined the archaeologists in the mess hall. She'd buttoned her uniform shirt tightly, had pulled the sleeves as far down as possible to hide the bruises at her wrists, but she still felt exposed. *Guilty*. Because she was.

But she couldn't hide any longer. They would take off in the early afternoon when Tortuun stood in contra-direction to Tortuna City, hopefully blinding the Crown sensors during the first part of their ascension through atmosphere. She had to make sure that the professor and the others had their findings packed by then. Shane would do anything to get them off planet, no discussions. She dug her nails into her palms. He was right: it was pure luck that they hadn't been discovered so far.

The room was crowded. Usually she was among the first here, to get her morning tea and save herself a comfortable chair before all the others gathered in the narrow room. "Good morning, Niko," Professor Morron greeted her, pointing at the empty stool at the bar next to him.

She shoved herself past Mike, Lawrence, and Katsumi and sat, careful that her sleeves didn't show her wrists. She managed a smile for her old teacher. "Professor."

"Niko, it's great. We just scanned the second side tunnel and discov—"

“Professor.”

“—ered that there’s another room — most likely a second archive cabinet! If we finish the mapping of the anterooms today, we’ll be able to move the holo—”

“Professor!” Niko raised her voice to cut in. She was aware that everyone else in the room stared at her. “Professor, I’m sorry. But we must do what we should have done fourteen days ago: pack up and leave. My colleague is right when he says we’ve pushed our luck already!”

“But I thought you’d talk with him about—”

She shook her head impatiently. “Professor, he wants us to leave. He won’t accept any argument for staying. *And I won’t either.*”

Morrone gave her a soft smile. “And? He wouldn’t destroy the most important archeological discovery of the Millennium, would he?”

Niko stared at him. “Professor, *I’m* the one who couldn’t do that — and I should have done it two weeks ago — but *he* will do it without a doubt.”

The professor looked at her closely, obviously seeing the truth in her face, because he started and leaped to his feet, clapping his hands. “People, we have to wrap the second row of crystals, then, if we...” He shushed a group of chewing students out of the mess hall, scrambling after them muttering to himself.

“You don’t mean that seriously, do you, Nikki?” Sven took the professor’s vacated stool. “It’s an irreplaceable site and—” He reached for the milk pitcher and knocked against her glass of instant juice. She caught it hastily to prevent it from falling. He winked at her, grinning knowingly. “I saw you two yesterday. Don’t tell me that *you* can’t convince him to—”

“Sven, please—”

“Gods, Nikki!” He jumped up and stared at her hand on the juice glass. “What has the bastard done to you?!”

She followed his look. Her sleeve had slipped up her arm as she caught the glass. “Nothing. Don’t—” she stuttered hastily, pulling it back down.

“I’ll tear him to pieces!”

“It’s none of your business!” Niko determinedly blocked his way.

“*That ass*—”

“Sven Masterson! Watch your language and stop making a fool of yourself!” Ayse pushed herself past him and took her stand next to Niko. “She’s right. It’s none of your business if she doesn’t want to make it your business.”

“You haven’t seen her arm. It looks as if—”

“As if it’s none of your business,” Ayse laid a protective arm around Niko, who twitched at the sudden contact. “She’s like my sister. And *my* family is very important to me. *You* don’t want to bother my *sister by choice*, do you?” She raised a questioning brow. “If that man hurt her, I’ll hand him his balls on a platter, but *you*,” her brown eyes glared at him, “get out of our way. Now!” She pushed Niko out towards the cabin she used as her workspace and slammed the door shut, before urging Niko down on the chair at the small table. “Sven can be such an idiot.” She said into the awkward silence, then pulled Niko’s hands over to her. “Let me see.”

“You mustn’t—”

“Shhh.” Ayse examined Niko’s wrists quickly. “That’s not as bad as it looks. Do you have other injuries?”

“No.” Niko pulled her sleeves back down. “Please. You mustn’t think that he—”

“What I think isn’t important,” Ayse said firmly. “Whatever happened between the two of you, I’m sure he isn’t alone responsible for it” Niko stared at her. “I saw your colleague’s face this morning,” Ayse explained wryly. “He sure as hell wasn’t in the mood to talk, but I was on guard when he arrived yesterday, and I *saw* him tearing off the head of deathhorse and slapping the rider to the ground with it.” She snorted. “If that man lost his temper with you, you wouldn’t be at breakfast the next day.” She sat back, watching Niko earnestly. “It was you who lost her self-control, am I right?” she asked.

Niko looked down at her wrists. The bruises were almost black next to the white uniform sleeve. "I— I don't know why," she answered finally. "This is such a big mess," she shook her head helplessly, "and I hurt him. I never once—"

"Then take responsibility for it. Make sure it doesn't happen again. Apologize." She put a consoling hand on Niko's shoulder. "Talk with your colleague once he's calmed down, choose a place safe to him. If he isn't a complete idiot, he'll at least hear you out. After all, in the beginning there were both of you into it, weren't you?"

Niko swallowed. *If only it were that easy...*

Niko wrapped her hands around the steaming cup of tea. The porcelain was thin, the tea still hot, and the heat began to burn her palms. Closing her hands firmer around the cup, she welcomed the pain — and began to shiver as she noticed it.

This wasn't her. But who was this?

"Niko," Goose's voice came out of the intercom. "I need you on bridge for the startup check."

The cockpit was dimly lit when Niko entered it. The phototropic layer of the front screen had already reacted to Tortuun's growing intensity. Gooseman sat in the pilot seat, working on the startup checklist displayed on a small monitor in front of him. The orange-and-gold ball of an AI danced on the larger monitor between the pilot and copilot seats. It wore the rendition of a white headscarf with the snake ornament of a stereotypical pharaoh and the two eyes between the halves of the ball were outlined in the style of ancient Egyptian eye makeup. Niko shook her head. *Crazy.*

Gooseman nodded at her arrival without looking up. "I need your help. This corrupted heap of bytes—" he made an impatient motion with his head towards the monitor with the bopping 'Egyptian' AI— "calls itself 'Ramses', as in completely useless."

=Hey!= The AI squeaked. =I'm named after one of the most famous—=

"Shut up or I'll delete you!" Goose snapped and continued to Niko, "And I don't trust these academics enough to let them have a go at the startup routines."

"Okay. Where do you need me?"

"Engineering console. I can do pilot and copilot together, but this cockpit was designed to stay grounded." He snorted.

She climbed into the chair behind the two pilot seats and powered up the console. With a loud beeping and flashing green and yellow lights the sticker-plastered thing came to life. "I'm online."

"Hypershunt regulator backup systems?"

She searched for the display and made out the data in the scratched LCD screen. "Not good, but check."

"Energy flux overflow valves?"

"Check."

"Engine overheat warning sensor?"

"Wait a moment I've got to scrape off the sticker on the display." She scratched at it with her fingernail and — after a moment — pulled out her boot knife. The way the glue had set, *'Desperately trying to figure out why kamikaze pilots wore helmets'* had covered the display for more than a year.

"Niko." Shane kept his voice low. He didn't look up from the checklist. Her blade stilled on the display. "Yesterday, did you use your powers against me?" The beeping and humming of the cockpit systems only seemed to emphasize the silence between them. "I need to know. I was... trained to stay focused on the mission. On Granna I didn't know what was coming, but this time..." She saw him shaking his head before adding quietly, "There's no excuse for my failure."

"I did," she answered in a choked whisper, her hand cramping around the knife's hilt so that her knuckles turned white. "You didn't fail." Goose didn't move. The silence lengthened, seemed to slowly drain the oxygen from the room. Then it broke out of her, faint, choked, distraught, *frightened*: "I don't know what happened to me, what changed my powers that much. I— *I invaded your mind*. I violated rules I defended all my life, rules as fundamental to my existence as breathing. On Xanadu, I'd

be locked up for it, would be kept under permanent watch, maybe for the rest of my life. My powers are corrupted—”

“They don’t have to know about it,” he said with a shrug.

“*I violated your mental integrity, Shane!*” She slumped down in her seat, defeated by her outburst. “I abused my gift. That’s unforgivable.”

He snorted. “Mustn’t be your gift, can be you.” He paused, seemed to be collecting his thoughts. “Not quite. But that shit on 17798 made stuff necessary that wasn’t part of your life before.”

“Ability and self can’t be divided,” she told him firmly. “That’s one of the biggest mistakes a telepath can make.”

“You’d never been a hunter, yet you killed. Hunting isn’t self-defense; it’s preying on the weak, taking what you need.” He didn’t look at her, hadn’t looked at her the whole time. “What you *want*. It’s exhilarating to know you can win. I should know.” He snorted. “You just have to learn when it’s okay and when it isn’t.” He returned his attention to the console in front of him. “Engine overheat warning sensor?” he repeated.

“Check.” Her voice wobbled at the word.

“Coolant pressure?”

“Checklist complete.” Goose got up. “Keep an eye on the systems while I round up our academics and call the registered pilot for take-off. Tortuun’s almost in the perfect spot now.”

Niko stood, too. “I’ll fetch the pilot. Sven—”

“*Beachboy?* Shit. Can’t we leave him dirtside?”

“—afraid not. The situation is bad enough without more offenses on my tab.” She swallowed. “I’ll try to talk to him. He saw my wrists and... jumped to conclusions.”

Goose replied nothing.

Goose found the archaeologists outside, straining to close the drill tunnel into the excavation site with rubble. “Please,” the professor blocked his path, “we know we must leave, but there’s so much left. We can’t leave it in the open. The local barbarians—”

“—will have your hide if we stay,” Goose snapped. “Now get into that ship, or—”

The old man didn’t move. “We have to seal the tunnel, ranger!”

Fuck! Goose threw a glance at Tortuun. They had to take off now or they’d be in plain sight from the city. He pushed past the professor and threw his weight against the pile of dug-out material next to the drill hole, the archeologists had begun to put shard by shard back into the tunnel. The pile wobbled, began to slip. Smaller pieces rolled into the entrance. “Move it!” he snapped, throwing himself against the heap again. *Zach’s never around when his bionics are needed!* He ground his teeth at pain and pushed more, the heels of his boots skidded over the ground. The pile shifted, scattered into the hole.

“Okay, that should do it.” Goose dusted off his hands. “*And now get into the ship! Dammit!*”

“But it’s barely closed. A kid could open it again and—” one of them protested.

“I won’t shield the exhausts at take-off. You’ll need heavy equipment to get through afterwards, and Crown troopers aren’t diggers! Now move your arse or I remove it!” He tapped his wristcom the moment the ramp began to rise behind them. “I’ve got fifteen academics and a fool. You got the pilot?”

=Affirmative. The Crown channels are quiet.=

“They won’t stay that way once our engines fire up. On my way.”

“Leaving atmosphere.” Goose initialized the space maneuver controls and let out a deep breath. So far, so good. “Crown channels?”

“Still quiet.” Niko checked the engineering displays. “Engines are coming along. Number two is getting hot, though.”

"Ignore that. It'll go over 200 and be fine," Masterson told her from his position in the copilot chair. "The sensor's been funky even before we left Earth."

"The sensor or the engine it watches?" Goose asked grimly.

"We're here, aren't we?" Masterson shrugged.

"Don't remind me."

The old university vessel was fit for space, though about as maneuverable as a stubborn BOVO-9, and slower. *Not* the transport to choose when playing cat-and-mouse with the Crown. The best they could hope for was sneaking out of the Queen's space as quietly as—

MY BABY, BABY, BALLA, BALLA—

Niko winced at the screaming music filling the cockpit.

"*OFF!*" Goose shouted, fangs bared, at the AI bouncing happily all over the main screen.

=We always fly with good music,= Ramses quirked indignantly, ruffling its white headscarf and re-rendering the snake ornament. =I want my passengers to be happy and—=

"That's right, Ranger-boy," Masterson stated smugly beside him. "Normal people prefer nicer entertainment than beating women!"

"What makes you think, I'd limit myself to women?" Goose asked, voice threateningly calm.

"Sven. Can it!" Niko snapped.

=I'm programmed to entertain—= Ramses interrupted her.

"That AI's got to face a reprogramming with an axe," Goose muttered, "fast and ugl—"

"Goose! Lots of talk on the Crown channels!" Niko cut in. "We've been spotted."

"Shit. Tactical overlay?"

"Doesn't exist."

"Just great." Goose switched the main screen to location display. Assault scanners locking in one them would cause diffuse blips on it, telling him when to dodge. "Get that fuckin' AI of yours off the screen, dammit!" he snarled at Masterson. "How long till this bucket reaches shunt velocity?"

"Approximately twelve minutes."

"*Twelve!?! Is this one of your artefacts?*" His eyes darted across the front screen, filling agonizingly slow with lines marking the asteroids forming a chaotic belt between Tortuna and its star — and a dozen diffuse blips closing in on them. "Niko, strip the stabilizers and kill the safety protocols. I've got to fly this junk beyond all limits or we'll see the inside of a psychocrystal." He jammed his safety harness shut and switched on intercom. "Attach yourself to the walls, people. It's getting *exciting!*"

Metal screamed just a breath later. The old university ship turned almost upside down, the old gravity generators not able to cope with the sudden change in direction as Goose forced it into a sharp turn using the nearest asteroid for a fly-by maneuver not part of any manual ever written. The straps of his harness creaked as his weight was thrown against it. The engines whined. He ignored it, flooring the pedals as far as possible, firing directional engines along with the main ones.

"Stop it!" Masterson beside him gagged. "The reactor's gonna blow! You'll kill us all—" He reached for the main controls. Goose's backhand threw him back into his seat.

"How long till shunt velocity?"

"Less than a minute at our current rate of acceleration."

"Music to my ears." A grazing shot screamed over the starboard hull. Goose cursed and forced the old freighter into a barrel roll, preventing repeat shots. "Coordinates?"

"Calculated and set." Niko answered. On the screen, the next asteroid came threateningly close. "We're not jumping before hitting that one, though."

"Nope." Goose grinned. "But—" He fired the maneuver engines again at full throttle and the creaking ship screamed over the rough surface. Behind them, two explosions marked the pursuing Crown fighters having missed the turn. "—neither will they."

The screen flickered, and the red streaks of hyperspace replaced the standard continuum. They'd made it. Goose flopped back in his seat, releasing the joystick and stretched. "That was fun."

Niko opened the inter com. "We successfully entered hyperspace and are now on the way back to Earth." She glanced at Goose and the unconscious Masterson hanging by his safety harness in the copilot seat. "You can unfasten your safety belts now." She closed the line, and got up to check on him. "He's going to be all right," she said after a moment, straightening. "But we better monitor for concussion."

Goose snorted. "Don't you need a brain for concussions?"

"Those are in short supply around here. At least, the working ones." She sighed and headed for the lock. "I'll get Katsumi to watch him. She's got first aid training, and we have to prepare a report." She looked aside. "Likely my last one."

2088-08-02

BetaMountain
hangar bay 12

=Gooseman, bring the detainees to the holding block. Ranger Niko, report to commander Walsh immediately. BETA Control, over.=

"Confirmed. Over." Gooseman closed the line and checked the displays. They were right on track, at least as much on track as the old bucket could be. He looked over at Niko, holding copilot now that Masterson had been removed to one of the bunks. "Head up," he told her. "Don't waste your time fretting before Walsh had a chance to holler at you." He gave her a crooked smile. "He hates to waste his efforts."

"Don't laugh," she sighed. "I'm probably bound for Deltoid," looking down at her lap, she added quietly, "and rightfully so. I allowed civilians to stay on Tortuna, Goose, and what I did to you..." her voice trailed off.

"—is none of his bloody business. Get a grip on yourself and we're green." He unbuckled and left the cockpit without looking back.

The archaeologists waited at the ramp. Goose checked them for weaponry, confiscating a multitool and a Swiss army knife, before lowering the ramp. "Don't even think about making trouble again," he warned them as they walked down the dusty ramp. "You wouldn't like my answer." Masterson, holding a cool pack to his face, glowered at him. Gooseman ignored it. "The transport cabin over there.

"What's going to happen with Niko, Gooseman-san?" Katsumi Nakawa asked quietly after the cabin had taken off. "I already reported that we forced her to stay with us, but—"

Gooseman snorted. "That might take the criminal charges off her plate, but the disciplinary action still stands."

"Criminal charges?" Nakawa inquired. "Surely not. She—"

"She allowed civilians to stay on Tortuna and kept a functional—" he checked himself and corrected, "*—barely functional* Andorian hyperdrive in Crown space, despite being physically able to remove both."

"But we forced her to stay."

"Yes," he answered grimly, "and that will cost her."

Holding block
2 hours later

"Keep a close eye on them, Igor." Goose filled out the arrest forms and handed them to the officer on duty for the second signature. "They're more dangerous than you usual customers."

"Dangerous?" Igor's eyes wandered across Morron and his group of students. "These brainiacs with the old stay-at-home? They couldn't harm a garden gnome."

"Be careful, Igor." Goose pushed the forms over the counter. "They spent *three weeks on Tortuna* without being psychocrystallized." He winked. "Be seeing you."

"Three weeks?!" Igor sucked air through his teeth. "I'll free cells in the high-security wing."

Goose's wristcom beeped as he left the block. He pushed up his sleeve to answer, but it wasn't a call, merely a text:

[TRANSFERRED TO PLUTO BASE UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE. I'M SORRY. N.]

Cmdr. Walsh's Office

20 minutes later

=Ranger Gooseman for you, sir,= Sheela announced over the intercom. =He insists it's urgent.=

Walsh sighed and saved the monthly report for the BWL. "Send him in." Gooseman pushed through the door while his hand was still touching the intercom.

"Sir." The salute was brief enough to border on omitted. "Was the classification of my last mission to Tortuna changed?"

"No, it wasn't. Report accordingly. Dism—"

"My report will cause an inquiry." Gooseman remained at attention. "It won't add up that Ranger Niko was transferred off base for disciplinary reasons and I'm not despite having been part of the failed mission from day one." A breath. Goose looked pointedly over his head. "Sir."

"Are you trying to blackmail me, Ranger?" Walsh asked threateningly calm.

"No, sir." Goose inclined his head. "I am concerned about my report."

Walsh cursed inwardly. Transferring Goose was unacceptable, the BWL would immediately order his hibernation. They both knew it. He called up Niko's transfer forms again and changed the destination to BETA Laboratories. He studied the ST still standing motionless in front of his desk.

Unacceptable risk. Perfect deniability. Walsh knew full well where Goose had learned how to blackmail, now it was coming back home. He sighed and signed the form swiftly. "Tell Niko I changed my mind. And Gooseman—" He waited for the ST to meet his eyes. "This will have consequences. For you."

to be continued in
Crystal Structures 2
