



Crystal Structures

2

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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It took only about fifteen years.

A. Kniggenndorf

Crystal Structures 2

Those who have not wandered amidst the mineralogical departments of natural history museums are often surprised to learn that metals, like most other solids, are crystalline, for although one is used to the very obvious crystalline features of quartz, diamond, and rock salt, the characteristic plane faces at sharp angles with one another are absent from metals in their most commonly encountered forms. However, those metals that occur naturally in the metallic state are quite often found in crystalline forms, which are completely disguised in finished metal products by the great malleability of metals, which permits them to be fashioned into whatever macroscopic shape one wishes.

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

It is a familiar fact that a bar of soft metal, after repeated bending back and forth, eventually refuses to be bent, and breaks. This is an example of work hardening. With every bending, more and more dislocations flow into the metal, until there are so many that they impede each other's flow. Then the crystal is incapable of further plastic deformation, and breaks under subsequent stress.

[Ashcroft / Mermin: Solid State Physics p. 636]

BetaMountain

I don't believe this. Captain Zachary Fox stared at his screen. He and Doc had returned yesterday late at night from a mission that had been equally long and uneventful. He hadn't checked his inbox until this morning when he sat down to write his report, expecting everything to be okay. It wasn't.

Niko's S&R mission to Tortuna had been red-flagged, indicating disciplinary measures already in effect. The command synopsis noted her transfer to the BETA labs and the revocation of her deep space clearance, no explanation given. Zach knew it had been a single mission, but now Gooseman was listed as 'assigned personnel' as well and—

The screen flashed. The file was updated while he read it. He returned to the front page. Now the synopsis included a summary punishment for Gooseman as well: The ST was ordered to rename the archive files in the new filing system the BWL had enacted two years ago. *Manually.*

Zachary frowned and looked up. Goose was already in, sitting at his console working silently. "Gooseman, there's a punishment order regarding you."

"Already working on it." Gooseman didn't even look up from his screen.

"You are taking this very calmly."

"I expected it, sir." The ST continued typing.

"Gooseman, as your commanding officer I want to be informed," Zach fixed the ST sternly and specified, "*before* the shit hits the fan."

Goose snorted and resumed typing.

"I expect an answer, lieutenant!"

Goose looked up, leashed anger clear on his face. "One of the archeologists objected to my evasive maneuvers when dodging Crown fighters. I removed him from the cockpit. Physically. *Sir.*"

"You want to tell me Niko's transferred to the labs because you K.O.-ed an archaeologist?" Zach asked coolly. "You expect me to buy that?"

Silence.

Zach reined in his temper. "What got her that deep into trouble?" he asked. "I can't help her if I don't know the details and this—" he indicated his screen still holding the red-flagged report, "—tells me nothing."

The ST looked past him, avoiding eye contact again and obviously considered what to tell him. Zach knew he wouldn't get the full story even before Goose finally said, "It was a fucking mistake to give her that mission. Those people knew her, knew she would care enough about their findings not to destroy the site and arresting all of them wasn't an option. They used that against her."

"They didn't use that against you?" Zach inquired.

"They tried." Gooseman shrugged. "But I'm not civilized enough to give a shit about alien history." He snorted. "Or *archies* pawing my controls in a fight." He nodded at his console. "May I continue? Walsh's pissed enough as it is."

BetaLabs

Officially, the BETA Laboratories was a field office of LongShot, established to cope with the increasing amount of forensic evidence and deep space artifacts that BETA's day-to-day operations produced. That, or the generous allocation of sub-surface floor space at BetaMountain was the result of QBall's successful play for more lab space.

Zach assumed the latter. Indicating his badge, he nodded at the officer on duty and headed past the counter for filing forensic evidence to QBall's local office. The room was every bit as cramped as the large one at LongShot.

"I expected you earlier," QBall greeted him. "Do you know why Niko's here?"

"No idea." Zach shook his head. "The file is virtually blank. I'm here to ask her."

"Good luck with that," QBall said fatalistically. "She's taking inventory in storage room 4. Out the door, right hand side, three intersections down and then follow the signs. And Captain—" The head scientist seemed uncomfortable. "I asked for more personnel with high security clearance, but I never expected them to be taken off active units like yours."

Zach stopped at the door and looked back. "I don't think this has anything to do with your request, but I don't have enough clues to warrant a guess about what does."

Storage room 4 was one of those long narrow tunnels drilled into the bedrock to hold forensic evidence until it was needed in court or deemed unimportant enough to be discarded. The warning signs flashing at its entrance marked it as an LHHS zone — Low Hazard, High Security — about as safe as you could get in the labs. Zach spotted Niko at the far end of the room.

So QBall is worried, he concluded as he headed down the long aisle of shelves towards her. A moment later, he knew why. The telepath looked like death warmed over twice.

"I'm fine, Zachary. Really," Niko said after he'd told her as much. She scanned the ID tag of another item and checked it against the list on her pad. "I didn't sleep well last night, that's all."

"You mean for the last week, don't you?" Zach countered. She ignored him, proceeding with the next item on the shelf. "What's wrong with you?"

"Zachary, please." She marked the item on her list without looking at him. "I failed at the first mission I was given since—" She didn't name 17798. She didn't have to. "I endangered the League. I endangered people I consider my friends since— since before I became a ranger. Don't you think it would be more worrisome if it didn't affect me?" Some strands had escaped her rough ponytail and she shoved them back behind her ear.

Zachary frowned at the broad elastic bandage covering her wrist. The report hadn't mentioned any injuries besides Masterson's, who'd been introduced to Goose's patience. "Niko, what happened on that mission?"

Her jaw worked. "You got the report."

"That says nothing," he retorted. "And you know it. Tell me off the book, if that's better for you, but tell me. I have to know what's going on in my unit."

"I am no longer in your unit!" Niko slammed the notepad down on the shelf beside her. "I'm a lab assistant! Like it or not, *there's nothing you can do!*"

"I understand," he said stonily; formality keeping him from answering her in kind. "If you change your mind, call me. You *are* still one of my friends."

Niko watched Zach leave. Crisp, efficient movements betrayed determination, possibly anger about the situation and about her. Likely about her. The double set of transparent doors opened and closed automatically as he left the room. A faint hiss indicated the reestablished seal. The notepad clattered to the floor after he was gone. She buried her face in her hands.

GRS5 office

Zach returned to the office none the wiser about the reasons behind Niko's transfer. Nothing made sense. Not the order. Not her behavior. Nothing. And regarding the rest of his unit—

"Welcome back, oh captain mine!" Doc called out the moment Zach opened the door. "Care to tell me what's up here? The Goose-man turned taciturnity into an art form. He didn't even *growl* at me! And I haven't seen Niko at all."

"Niko's in punishment transfer," Zach answered grimly, sobering Doc instantly. "Her mission to Tortuna was a disaster and Goose's somehow involved in it, but there are no details to be had. Their mission report is one of Goose's finest *I-won't-tell-you-shit* texts, the transfer order is a copy thereof,

and Niko doesn't say anything, either." He sat down at his console, not bothering to prevent the office chair from creaking under the bionics' full weight.

"Where is she? Did you see her?" Doc asked. "For how long is she transferred?"

Zach sighed. "She's assigned to the labs for a year. Final decision pending."

"A year!?" Doc gaped. "Did she invite the Queen for tea?"

"And Goose served the teacakes?" Zach returned, frustrated. "Whatever it is, Doc. It messed her up, and I don't know enough to do anything about it."

2088-08-05

It was past midnight when Goose turned off his workstation, effectively reducing the office illumination to three red standby LEDs and the yellow-green glow of the emergency exit sign over the door. He stretched. Damn, but Walsh had found the perfect payback for him. He'd spend weeks glued to the fucking console, renaming files nobody ever bothered to search for by filename. He'd considered taking shortcuts, but ALMA had warned him about the monitoring routine installed to track his progress and he knew better than pissing off the commander any more than he already had.

There was already too much on his plate as it was. He had expected trouble after 17798, but that was nothing compared to what would happen if the brass learned about the bruises on Niko's wrists. If she didn't get a grip on herself soon—

He stood abruptly. "ALMA, where's Niko right now?"

=BetaLabs, storage room 4, Goose,= the AI's smoky voice answered through his wrist com. =Do you want untracked access?=
=

This late at night, the labs were deserted. The only staffed position was the forensics counter doubling as a night guard at the main entrance. Goose used one of the service exits three corridors down from it. He navigated the unlit halls deftly, with ALMA bypassing door sensors and security cameras alike. It made him wish his AI would agree to these ventures under less troublesome circumstances.

The double doors to storage room 4 opened and closed without the control panel for the door seal ever changing its color. Niko, only a few steps down the main aisle, didn't seem to notice. *Too exhausted to pay attention*, Goose concluded. *She's going to end up in MedoStat that way*. "You gotta sleep," he told her, snatching the pad away from her.

"Give that back!"

He shook his head and put it out of her reach. "You can't go on like this."

"That's none of your business!" Her eyes flared, a violet veil covered their green and the pad flew back to into her hand. "Now go."

He didn't move. Pressure build in his head as she glared at him, but a glance at her bandaged wrists reminded him that he couldn't afford leaving. "If you keel over, we're both in for it."

"Nonsense! You—"

"Do you think anybody will believe the truth when your injuries are all that's left?" he snapped, ignoring the pain throbbing behind his eyes since her outburst. "The bio defenses work flawlessly. There's no proof that the alternative would have been you, triggering defenses you have no hope to survive!"

She stared at him, her face ashen.

"Please," he begged, swallowing his pride. "Go home. *Sleep*."

She deflated, put a hand on the shelf beside her. "You don't know what you're asking, Shane," she whispered. "I keep seeing you bleeding—" Her gaze flitted to his face as if confirm the lack of blood even now. "I—"

"You have to sleep," he repeated softly. "There's no choice."

Goose watched her leave. The light went out in storage 4 after the doors closed behind her. For the base sensors, he wasn't here. Through the clear door panels, he observed the wandering field of light marking her progress through the deserted labs towards the main entrance. Gooseman sighed after the last one winked out. He knew exactly what he was asking.

MPQ 217

90 minutes later

Admit it Gooseman, he thought wearily after the second attempt to use his bio defenses against the obnoxious headaches. It won't work. Challenging her like that was stupid. Unprofessional and—

ALMA appeared on his console, her usual bright pink turned pale by the screen he'd dimmed to ease his eyes. =Positive, Goose,= the AI confirmed after a brief flicker running over her eyeball told him that nothing said right now would go on record. =KASSANDRA detects disturbed REM sleep.=

Gooseman pressed a palm against his throbbing temple and stood. "Can you get me across the corridor without anyone being the wiser?"

MPQ 219

The door closed right on his heels, its hiss mingling with the electronic squabbling of KASSANDRA objecting to ALMA overwriting her directives. Goose ignored it. The room was dark as expected, smelling of flowers and silk and... *her*. A choked sound brought him down the stairs in three strides. Cold sweat mixed into her scent as he approached the bed.

"Lights!" he ordered and studied her, squinting against the glare still failing to wake her. Struggling against instincts telling him to get the Hell out of here, he sat down on the edge of the bed and shook her shoulder. "Niko, wake up. You're dreaming."

She jerked awake with a cry, buried her head in her hands. "I'm so sorry..."

"It was a dream." He pulled her hands away from her face, forced her to look at him. "See yourself." She blinked in the bright light, freed one of her hands to run trembling fingertips across his cheek. His breath caught when she brushed first stubbles against the grain. *Don't go there, idiot. Don't ever go there — again*, an ugly little voice added, unasked — *or she'll have my head before they put me in the freezer and—*

Her head sank against his arm. He sighed when her slowing breaths told him she was out cold again despite the bright glare wreaking havoc with his headaches. The lights dimmed, unasked. ALMA had noticed his pain. He glanced at the clock. *2 a.m. — too early to leave*. She needed a few hours of sleep and this wouldn't be the last nightmare. He'd have to come up with a solution that didn't involve him being here. Goose ground his teeth. Being here was a recipe for disaster, whether or not he was caught.

6 hours later

=...ake up! You're running late!= the sharp electronic voice penetrated Niko's sleep. In the next moment, a blaring bugle call had her stumble to her feet.

"KASSIE, what on Earth—"

=Good morning, Ranger Niko.= ALMA's pink eyeball appeared on the screen of the com unit above her bed. =I activated your coffee maker and took the liberty to order a cream-and-cereal breakfast from base service for you.=

"ALMA?!" Niko blinked, stupidly. "What are you doing in my systems?"

=Goose wants me to help you cope with your nightmares.=

"My nightmares—" Glimpses of a face marked with the blood she'd drawn and again flawless, untouched, flashed through Niko's mind. She'd slept. And Goose had been here. The bloodied face had been in her dreams and he'd left his AI to— "ALMA, where's KASSIE?"

=Your AI is deactivated. She was uncooperative and I need access to your schedule and its visual configuration files for answering the door and taking external calls.=

"Access to my—" Niko pressed a hand to her suddenly aching head. "ALMA, that's unacceptable! I want you to restore KASSIE and return to Goose. Now."

=I'm sorry, I can't do that. Goose was very explicit with what he'd do if I did that.=

Niko blinked, forcing herself to remain calm. "What does he hope to achieve by having you invade my systems?" she asked.

=He believes I'll be more useful to you since I'm not programmed to obey you.=

"Do you know how many laws you and your owner broke just by you being here?" she snapped, exasperated. "I could have him arrested and you deleted just for violating—"

=Ranger Niko.= ALMA cut in, the AI's voice suddenly ice-cold. =You endangered my ward. I suggest you do your damndest to resolve whatever made you do that in *a very timely fashion*, or I will ignore his commands and take appropriate action against you. I am not programmed to follow his every whim. Have your breakfast. You are expected at work in less than an hour.= The screen went abruptly dark. In the following silence the happy bubbling of her coffee maker filling a cup was eerily loud.

BetaLabs

Niko arrived at the labs right on time, though mentally still very occupied with inventing appropriate descriptions for invasive AIs and their 'wards' in half a dozen languages, not all of them spoken on Earth. ALMA refusing to open her apartment door until she'd emptied the cereal bowl had not improved her mood, though Niko grudgingly admitted that ranting with a full stomach did feel better.

Crossing the last corner almost at a run, she nearly collided with a hip-high crate covered in 'this-side-up', 'breakable', and 'warning – non-League origin' stamps. Recovering from the near accident, she saw the rest of the corridor stacked with crates of all forms and sizes. Yellow freight tags glowed. The one on the crate she'd almost run over suddenly beeped and flashed red.

"There it is!" QBall, white lab coat flying, appeared from behind a stack of crates that almost touched the ceiling. "Good morning, Niko," he greeted her without looking up from his datapad and called back towards whoever was working down the corridor. "We'll have to move the others first. No chance to get No. 56 past them!" He started making extensive notes on his pad while telling Niko, "As you can see, we just got a delivery via one of the most incompetent delivery services I ever—" He stopped, cleared his throat fussily, and continued, "These are the complete findings of that imbecilic expedition to Tortuna. Since Earth University isn't cleared for handling artifacts from hostile territories, the work will fall to us." He finally looked up. "Or more precisely: to you, since you're familiar with the matter." Niko found the pad put into her hands and QBall heading past her towards the exit without waiting for a reply. "Get this chaos into some semblance of order and begin reviewing the contents. Hall 26 and the adjacent rooms should be sufficient. I'll be in my office."

Sublevel 3, Hall 26 6 hours later

The wall-mounted terminal providing computer and network access in Hall 26 beeped faintly, while the input mask for requesting laboratory supplies and furniture appeared on its screen: line by line, with noticeable stops in between. After the better part of an hour, Niko assumed that the terminal

predated BetaMountain as a military installation — or as a mountain in general. No, it was *not* permitted to fill out the first fields while the rest loaded in the background.

She'd spent most of the day with sorting and stacking 386 crates and boxes of various sizes and dimensions into the allocated lab space. Stacking being the operative word, since the only thing Hall 26 sported besides this alibi of a computer terminal was a paint job. Unpacking the crates meant that she first had to acquire a work table to do the unpacking on and laboratory closets for storing the contents of the crates. She'd estimated it would take the better part of the afternoon, only to learn that it would probably take the better part of the week for the input mask to open. Resigned, she decided not to think about how long it would take to send the order, and getting it fulfilled—

She seriously considered sitting on the floor by now.

"Hello, dearest delinquent!" She winced at Doc's cheerful voice coming from the door still partially blocked by a long crate that didn't fit fully into the room. "How about a good friend's visit to cheer you up?"

"How about a good supply manager to get a table, a chair, and some shelves down here?" Niko groaned when the form on screen froze again and slapped the console in frustration. "I'd even settle for a working terminal to get the requests out before I'm retired and erosion creates a skylight!"

Doc arched a brow at her outburst and unclipped his CDU with a dignified flourish. "Dearest damsel in distress, the Doctor may not be qualified to assist you with your furnishing needs, but the last item on your list of duress is just within my expertise." He touched his badge and the holographic display of the CDU unfolded. "Pathfinder, Lifeline. Get your electronic butts out here. I need this work station responsive and functional as of now."

=Eew,= Pathfinder squeaked. =Did you rob a museum?=
=I want an ABC suit. This slow-mo might be infectious! = Lifeline hovered above the still slowly

filling screen. =I haven't seen such a clogged system since you had me check your washing machine.= It vanished inside with a faint sizzle.

=That was probably high-tech compared to this—= Pathfinder flashed and plunged in after its fellow program.

"Not quite what you're used to, eh?" Doc asked, apologetically, looking around in the crate filled hall.

Niko sighed. "I had no idea just *how* privileged we were."

Lifeline flashed out of the console between them. =Network access rate is sped up to what's available down here, not that that's much. And there's a second graphics driver blocking most of what goes for main memory in this antiquity. =

=Yeah, that piece of code is ugly like Doc's mug shot on Saturday mornings.= Pathfinder beeped without emerging from the console. =...deleted it looks much better! = The blue sparkle flitted over to the CDU. =You owe us, Doc! = It declared, circling above it.

Lifeline appeared in the holocube. =Yup! I'll need a week playing Tron to get that filth off my code! =

=You just want to ogle young Boxleitner in his sleek program's outfit again! = Pathfinder remarked.

=And if—? =

Doc shut them up by closing the CDU. "Try it now," he suggested, nodding at the console. "I'm afraid that's the best I can do with hardware as outdated as this one." He gave her a crooked smile. "And don't believe a word these loudmouthed bits say about my Saturdays."

Niko was already filling out the first fields. "This is worlds better than before, Doc," she said, rapidly typing. "Thank you."

He clipped his CDU back to his belt. "You know such ancient hardware often has the weirdest glitches. It might well add flags like 'urgent, fill immediately' to all requests filed from here."

"Really?" Niko looked over her shoulder at him. "I wouldn't notice."

"That's what I hoped for."

Niko continued filling out the form. Now that she could work at normal speed, her wrapped wrists were hindering her, making her miss keys, chafing— inconspicuously, she rubbed her right bandage against the edge of the terminal. Doc, next to her, sucked in a breath. “I didn’t know you got hurt,” he said, suddenly atypically serious. “What happened? Are you—”

“That’s none of your business!” Niko hit Enter to hurl the request across the network without Doc having a chance to see it.

“Whoa!” he stopped dead and held up his hands in plain sight at her growl. “Our ST seems to be infectious. Maybe we all better ask for an immunization shot—”

Niko froze, felt her face warming. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want—” She shook her head. “I’m not myself right now.”

“Like your AI.” Doc propped himself against the wall beside the terminal. “You know, I had the strangest of encounters with her. When I called your place earlier, KASSIE was all green and yellow as usual, but she answered my question with three words and a disconnection, as if she learned com etiquette from ALMA.” He made a theatrically shocked face. “And your AI was always so nice and well-mannered. Maybe she’s caught the e-flu.”

“The what?”

“The electronic flu, of course,” Doc proclaimed. “A virus. Or it’s a horsey— I mean a Trojan. Maybe she even has worms—”

“Doc,” Niko groaned. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to go on with my work. My file has an entry for disobedience already. I don’t need another one for laziness.”

“I promise that the examination won’t take long—”

“That’s enough!” Niko threw her hands up. “Why do you care that my AI is strange? I’m strange, too! Do you want to *examine* me as well? Forget it right there! And now — if you don’t mind — *Leave. Me. Alone!*”

MPQ 219

18:17

“*Leave me alone!*” she had yelled. At Doc who’d just tried to be helpful, who was concerned about her, who—

Niko lowered her head in shame, relieved when her apartment door closed behind her without another incident. And locked. She winced. She could have asked Doc to get ALMA out of her systems, but that meant telling him why ALMA was there in the first place, and she couldn’t do that to Goose. Resigned, Niko left her boots by the door and continued in socks. She was halfway down the stairs when she realized that the AI, instead of greeting her, had dimmed the lighting.

“ALMA, I didn’t ask for lower lights.”

=Your movements indicate a headache. Soft light and silence may ease that.=

Astonished, Niko halted in mid-step. “Do you do that for Goose, too?”

=He seldom has headaches. And he prefers darkness, if he has.= A moment of silence followed, then ALMA added, =I’m not your enemy. I’m here to help.=

Niko sighed. “But this cannot continue. Doc’s already suspicious.”

=I will work on my adaptation of KASSANDRA’s behavior.=

“But that won’t do!” Frustrated, Niko slapped her palm against the bannister. First Doc. Now ALMA preparing to take on Doc— It was all too much. She stomped to the comp on socked feet. “Call MPQ 217!”

=As you wish, Ma’am.= The screen lit up and flickered. =Scrambled line in effect. Two-end-surveillance check in progress.=

“Surv—!?” Niko gaped. “I want to talk with Goose not the chief of staff!”

=Surveillance check in progress,= ALMA repeated, unperturbed. =Communication will be engaged once connection and environment are secure.=

“Are you out of—?”

The screen cleared, showing Goose in a rumpled uniform surrounded by a wide green frame with flashing indicators for encryption depth and monitoring activity at the bottom. “Yes?” he asked, without interrupting his work.

“We’ve got to talk. ALMA can’t—” she stopped, noticing the room behind him. “You aren’t at home, are you?”

“I’m still at the office.”

Niko frowned. “I had ALMA call your place. Why—?”

“There are some advantages to having an independent high-class AI on your side,” Goose answered dryly. ALMA huffed indignantly in the background. “Even if you curse her. She tried the next likely location.”

“She is *not* ‘on my side!’” Niko protested. “She locked me up over breakfast! She—” She stopped when she felt his amusement. *Felt*. The lapse sobered her instantly. “I’m not a child to be mothered, Shane.”

“I wouldn’t know how to do that.” He finally stopped typing and looked up. “But ALMA knows how to deal with nightmares and stress. She’ll wake you before it gets bad.”

“But it doesn’t work!” Niko argued vehemently. “It can’t work! Doc’s on her case already. Today, he told me that KASSIE’s behaving like ALMA. If you don’t want to call her back, then at least install KASSIE’s personality files.”

“So you can talk her into obedience?” This time he did laugh out loud. “Forget it.”

“She threatened me, Shane.”

He lowered his head and said nothing.

“You don’t seem surprised,” Niko observed.

He sighed. “I expected as much. What happened on Tortuna between us—” He shook his head. “If that ever comes out, I’m done for. That’s exactly what they need to have me frozen.”

She stared at him. “But it wasn’t your fault. I will explain—”

“They don’t care for explanations, Niko,” he said tiredly. “When it comes to me they’ll happily use an excuse. Any excuse. ALMA’s here to make sure they don’t get one.”

“And you told her what happened.”

“She’s programmed to protect me, not to obey me, Niko. I have to give her a very good reason for violating my permissions if I want her to fool the surveillance.” A muscle in his jaw worked. “And a stroll in the woods or an afternoon sundae doesn’t count for a visit that by itself could land me in the freezer.”

“You’ve been at my place before,” she reminded him. “I was at yours. Why—?”

“The Board tightened the screws after 17798.” She stared at him, knew she was staring when he arched a brow at her and asked cynically, “What? Did you think they’d like me to sleep around?”

She didn’t know what to say to that. Suddenly, ALMA’s insisting on a scrambled connection made an awful lot of sense. Niko swallowed, embarrassed, trying to find something to say that didn’t hurt. “Why are you still at the office this late?”

One of his cynical half grins flashed across his face. “My punishment job for backhanding beach boy. We’re bound for Andor first thing tomorrow and I doubt Walsh’s inclined to wait this time. I used the big guns to change his mind regarding your exile. I better pay for that without trying his patience.” He reached for the com controls. “Get some rest. You can’t stay dead tired for the rest of your life. It doesn’t work. Good night.”

She stared at the suddenly blank screen.

onboard Ranger-1

"You're right," Doc said from the copilot's seat after Zach closed the com link to Earth Orbit Station 4, monitoring their vector through Earth's busy space. GV rotated slowly on the small screen in the console between them, calculating their hyperspace transit to Andor.

"Context?" Zach inquired dryly, "Or do you concede to my wisdom in general?"

"Niko. I passed by the labs yesterday. Did you know that QBall has her working on the stuff they brought back from Tortuna?" Doc shook his head. "Now, if there's a ridiculous assignment—"

"I'm not worried about her work, Doc," Zach said quietly. "I'm worried about her."

"I got that, Zach, but whatever's wrong with her, she doesn't want to talk about it, emphatically so." Doc checked his displays as he spoke. "The way she growled at me for asking about her wrists, she'd win any Goose impersonator contest hands down."

"Something happened on that mission," Zachary said grimly. "Something she doesn't know how to cope with and that report isn't worth the storage chip holding its copy. I know for a fact that Goose wasn't assigned to her mission when she took off."

"Maybe Walsh attached him later when it became obvious she wouldn't get the archaeologists back on her own." Doc shrugged. "You know what it takes to get the okay for Tortuna these days."

"Probably. But the report doesn't even hold *that*."

GV beeped. =Course to Andor set, sir.=

Zach opened a com channel. "EOS 4. This is Galaxy Rangers ship Ranger-1 bound for Andor. We're leaving standard continuum in ten. Good bye." He cut the connection and told the ship's AI to proceed.

=Yes, sir.= GV switched to intercom. =All hands. Leaving standard continuum in five, four—=

Goose's all clear from the rear bay was a plain green light, flashing up mere seconds before the ship shivered around them and the red streaks of hyperspace replaced the stars on the main screen.

"GV, how long till Andor?" Zach inquired.

=14 hours 26 minutes, sir.= GV bounced slightly on the small console screen.

Doc unbuckled his safety harness and stood. "I'm going to have another look at the case file. The Andorians attached a lot of auxiliary data."

"Prepare a summary for us," Zach told him. "The Andorians are up in arms about this. You know the League's policy regarding AILs¹. And Doc—" Zach's mouth set in a stubborn line. "Send Gooseman to me when you head aft."

When the hatch had closed behind Doc, Zach stared out into the emptiness of hyperspace displayed on the main screen. Gooseman being on this mission had been set before they'd even been given the case file detailing a possible rape² involving at least one augmented human.

Given the undercurrents in his disrupted unit right now, Zach seriously wished to have had a say in the matter. Something was wrong with Niko and — less obviously — with Gooseman. The ST just covered it better.

Zach pressed his head against the headrest. *I'm trying to solve a puzzle with too many pieces missing*, he thought. *Way too many pieces missing. Niko's mission to Tortuna, her disciplinary transfer, her injuries—*

What happened on a straightforward S&R mission that had one of his most conscientious officers end up in long term disciplinary transfer? A university professor and his students were hardly the kind of villains to get the better of Niko. And Gooseman—

¹ AIL: augmented intelligent life form

² see: "Rape" (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

How did he become part of that mission anyway? Or would 'why' be the better question? What happened on Tortuna that called for Goose to be sent there under the BWL's radar? And what got that much to Niko? There's nothing in their report that explained her injured wrists. Both wrists. As if she'd been tied up. By academics!? Zach raised his brows at that thought. *And even if, embarrassment was no reason not to report it. So back to the first question: What happened on Tortuna?* As usual the red streaks of hyperspace provided no answer.

The cockpit hatch cycled, the steps in between too long, too balanced to be Doc's. Sound enhancers confirmed that Goose had come alone. Zachary didn't wait for the salute. "Why were you sent to Tortuna, Gooseman?" There was a short freeze in the ST's movements as he headed towards copilot. "And no, 'you got the report' is not an acceptable answer."

Goose did not attempt to sit down. "Niko and the Morron expedition were six days overdue when I returned from Purdue. Walsh expected... slaverlords and an Andorian hyperdrive in Crown possession by then."

Damage control. Zachary thought grimly. *Not an easy order after surviving five months in the wilderness with her.* "Go on."

"Walsh's expectation... proved incorrect, but the situation was not under control. I— We needed a day to make what Earth University calls a ship ready for takeoff, after I convinced the expedition that further delays were not an option. We returned to Earth as soon as we reached shunt velocity."

"Gooseman." Zach met the green eyes as their dull reflections in the main screen. "Sit down." There was tension, a lot of tension, but Gooseman did as he was told. "That was the long version of 'you got the report'," Zach told him calmly. "And it still doesn't answer my question."

"I was sent to bring them back if possible," Goose replied flatly. "I did."

And now you're giving me the short version! Zach clamped down on his temper. "That doesn't account for Niko's injuries, or the extent of her punishment—" He glanced at Goose, who'd become dead-still at the first sentence. "—or yours." *Which you take way too composed for your temper.* "We are on a diplomatically difficult mission and my most diplomatic officer was transferred for disciplinary reasons that amount to an empty screen. I need to know what's going on here, and that report isn't cutting it."

"It is as much as I can tell you." Goose's reply was flat, overly controlled. "Do you *want* to know more?"

The emphasis had Zach pause. *One of his—* He stopped. The ST beside him said nothing, waited, obviously wishing very much to be elsewhere. *If one of the renegades is responsible for...*

Zach wiped his face with his hand, struggling with the implications. He drew a deep breath and threw the switch of the cockpit monitoring. "Gooseman, off the record, did a Supertrooper hurt Niko?"

It took a very long time before Goose finally answered. "Yes."

2088-08-07

"I already said too much." Goose's inflectionless statement replayed in Zach's head long after they'd set down on Andor. *"If they ever learn that I told you—"* The ST hadn't finished the sentence.

Lying in bed in a darkened hotel room, Zach rubbed his eyes with his natural hand, recalling Goose's expression; no face that young should look so haunted. *And all he did was confirming that an ST was involved.* Zachary sighed, thinking of the immediate briefing the Andorian authorities had arranged for them after landing...

"...the human woman, Miss Denise O'Rourke, claims that the fetus is the child of a friend, a non-League resident, recently deceased." The Andorian forensic expert, Dr. Pelkar, consulted her notes. "However, the standardized tests required in cases of premature abort revealed extended genetic modifications

in the paternal components of the fetal DNA; augmenting modifications based on the human genome,” she added pointedly. “In addition, the admission scans of the patient show scars indicating extensive vaginal and oral injuries that date back to around the calculated date of conception.”

“Oral?” Doc frowned. “You mean—?”

“Someone cut open her lips. Here and here.” The physician indicated two vertical lines near the eyeteeth. “The injury had time to heal over, but was ruptured again during the strain of the abort. The ER meds initially assumed she’d bit herself when the cramps set in, but the tissue was punctured above the labium superius oris, indicating a foreign set of canines responsible for the initial injury.” She glanced suspiciously at Gooseman. “A set of canines not matching any known species.”

“Can you confirm that the injuries and the pregnancy occurred at the same time?” Zachary asked. “Without the victim’s testimony?”

“Only by temporal coincidence, Captain,” Dr. Pelkar admitted. “On its own, the evidence won’t hold in court, but we hoped to reduce the number of suspects. That fetus was fully viable.”

Gooseman flinched. “Canines aren’t sufficient for reliable identification,” he stated hoarsely. “Even some of the minors have them. The size excludes two or three from the list of those still at large, but that’s it.”

“Do you have a suggestion, *Lieutenant*?” Zach asked him sternly, reminding Goose as much as the Andorians that his Ranger wasn’t the culprit here.

“Are you sure those mods weren’t a new experiment?” Gooseman asked.

“Absolutely!” The Andorian confirmed icily. “We’re looking at a fecundation involving post-meiotic *unnatural* DNA.”

“Then send a digital copy of the gen code to BETA. If Negata can tell which type it was, it narrows the list down to four or five suspects, probably less depending on the which code it is.” At the surprised looks around the conference table, Gooseman snorted. “What? The renegades are a rather varied bunch. Some are even unique—” Zach saw his hand curling into a tight fist beneath the table. “—*by now*.”

“My team will prepare the digicopy overnight,” Dr. Pelkar said briskly. “It is in our own interest that you get it as soon as possible. If not for the substance induced abort, that fetus would have developed into a healthy child. If we don’t put a stop to this now, we’re going to look at uncontrolled proliferation soon.”

Gooseman looked positively sick in that briefing, Zach thought, pinching the bridge of his nose in the dark. Not that he himself was comfortable with the topic, but this case got way deeper under the ST’s skin than he’d anticipated. *Probably too deep*. He was missing something...

“Off the record, did a Supertrooper hurt Niko?”

“Yes.” And “I already said too much.”

What if—? Zach just hoped he was wrong and that Niko’s injuries were truly limited to her wrists and not— He thought of the tattered booklet Gooseman had left at his place after the Queen³— *What if he did the same for Niko? Told her how to hide—?* But he’d seen her the day after their return and she’d been upset, yes; traumatized, maybe; but not devastated like that. *He should know...*

Keep it together, Zachary, he berated himself. *It will be difficult enough to keep Gooseman in check through this without you worrying yourself sick*. This case was entirely too close to home, not only for Goose.

Zach gave up on sleeping when the bedside chrono showed 04:30 local time. In less than three hours, they would meet their Andorian colleagues and Dr. Pelkar at the Medical Center to receive the digitized DNA code for transmission to BETA and make a first assessment of the victim.

Regulations demanded that always two officers were present at the questioning of a sexual assault victim, and the Andorian jurisdiction required the presence of the victim’s physician, who had

³ see: "Psychocrypt" (TV-E) and "The Lie" (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

the power to stop the process at any given time. Gooseman was always a wild card when it came to interrogations — special or not, so that left him and Doc for that task.

Still, having Goose, being an ST himself, solely responsible for evidence of augmented DNA wasn't an ideal choice, either. Not with the BWL's recent attitude towards the ST. On the other hand, a digital copy was basically a program for the 3D molecular printing system at BETA to make an exact duplicate of the sample. Surely not even the most paranoid Board member would accuse *Goose* to have that skill for hacking...

Coming into the breakfast lounge, Zach wasn't really surprised to see the ST already there at one of the small tables pushed against the window front overlooking the space port. "Where's Doc?" he asked, pulling the second chair out.

"Spent the remainder of the night hacking into the hotel's adult tri-D service." Goose didn't bother to look at him.

"Adult Tri—?" Zach felt not fully awake yet. "We are on duty. We don't have—"

Gooseman snorted. "Doc does. Now." He took a gulp from what looked to be a rather often refilled coffee cup. "I preferred not to share it."

Zach sat, ignoring the ominous creak of the furniture, and contemplated giving Doc an infusion about proper conduct on duty and common sense — though the latter was probably a hopeless case. *I wouldn't wonder if Miss Abercrombie's Charm School is a Letterbox company in Sorry End—*

The sound of cracking china interrupted his thoughts. Startled, he saw the cup in Gooseman's hand sporting cracks. Black coffee mingled with blood sloshed onto the tablecloth. The ST showed no sign that he'd even noticed the injury.

"Gooseman!" Zach stood and used their combined napkins to soak up the spreading stain. "Get a grip on yourself. This case—"

"This case?" The ST's voice was very quiet. "This is no case. This is— *uncontrolled proliferation.*" His fingers tightened around the cracked cup. More blood dripped onto the napkins. "Don't you understand? One of Negata's safety catches failed. For real." He studied the coffee and blood-stained cup in his cut hand as if he saw it for the first time and very pointedly put it down onto the soaked napkins. "They don't want that code out there; not in the renegades, not in their k—" His voice caught. "Can you imagine what they'll order me to do next?" He stilled, staring down at his bloodied hand. "And what will happen if— *when* I can't do it?"

Zach stared at him, shaken at the hopelessness. "Nobody would have you hunt children, Gooseman," he assured him softly, in a voice normally reserved for easing bad dreams at home. "And now heal your hand before our hosts insist on hospitalizing you."

The ST's answering look spoke volumes. "You have a higher opinion of our government than I." But he tapped his badge.

Zach didn't know what to say. "I'm going to the buffet. Do you want something, too?"

"Not hungry." Goose turned back to the window, an elbow resting on the stained tablecloth. A first gleam of dawn lit the sky above the far end of the landing field.

"Eat something," Zach insisted. "It takes the edge off things." When Goose didn't move, he added, "That's an order, Lieutenant." The ST glanced up at him. *Amused?!* "Is something the matter?"

"Nothing." Goose shook his head, unfolding his large frame from the chair. Somehow his crumpled uniform had escaped most of the stains. "You just reminded me of someone."

BetaMountain
MPQ 219

=You failed to consume your daily amount of necessary nutrients.= ALMA's pink eyeball appeared on the small screen of the door panel after the door locked. =Again.=

"I had lunch at the cafeteria," Niko told her off-handedly, kicking off her shoes.

=The only substance you consumed since you left here at 08:47 was water, at 11:39, 14:51, and 16:04,= the AI corrected. =Shall I make a neurologist appointment regarding your memory lapses?=
=A neuro—” Niko found herself gaping when ALMA’s words caught up with her. “You tracked me?!” she flared. “How dare you to—?”

=I did not,= the AI huffed. =I merely told the mainframe. It’s much more efficient to have RHONDDA contact the sub-AIs responsible for nutrient donations on base.=

“It didn’t occur to you that I might have eaten something they didn’t provide?” Niko asked, exasperated, as she headed down the stairs.

=You didn’t leave the base to get it,= ALMA replied, unperturbed, changing location from the door panel to the wide screen of the com unit above her bed. =You still require 747 calories to reach the minimum amount of nutrients for a person of your weight and current profession.= There was an electronic sizzle that suspiciously sounded like a derisive snort. =And next time, document your snacks of potted palms if you want me to consider them in your diet plan.=

“Stars!” Niko threw up her hands. “I should delete you!”

=You don’t have administrator rights for my files.=

The screen went dark with a blip, leaving her staring at blank glass. Her wrists itched. Resigned, Niko went into the bathroom, undid the elastic bandages she’d worn all day, and had a look at the bruises they hid: Still visible, though by now they were more pale brown and green than dark-red and blue. They’d be gone by the time her unit returned from Andor...

...by the time *her former unit* returned from Andor, while she’d directed a hyperactive worker crew installing laboratory equipment in a sub-surface hall that never saw the sun so that she could unpack dusty crates she wished wouldn’t exist. It hurt. It hurt more than she dared to admit.

Niko stared, disillusioned, into the mirror, seeing a harrowed face with deep shadowed eyes and, superimposed, another face, strong, with bleeding gashes in the cheek. She swallowed. *Shane is right*, she thought wearily. *Hell, ALMA is right. I have to find out what’s wrong with me.* She shuddered, thinking of the AI’s warning. *I have to find out fast.*

2088-08-08

Andor
Medical Center

Two liaison officers from Andorian law enforcement drove them downtown through dense but perfectly regulated morning traffic. The Medical Center was a vast building complex of several interconnected high-rises interspersed with meticulously arranged gardens and walkways. Zach couldn’t help but wonder if there had been a joint venture with the Kiwis about geometrically perfected park plants. Seeing these gardens, he wouldn’t put it past them. They entered the central building, passing directly through a busy lobby towards a row of lift cabins. Their LEO escorts stayed behind when they entered the waiting cabin, which immediately started upwards, a colorful display of racing fractals playing on its walls.

Zach blinked. No, the psychedelic color swirls were not fancy projections on the interior walls of the lift cabin but part of the transport tube walls illuminated by the light from the see-through cabin rushing past. Even with his extensive deep space experience, the realization was slightly dizzying. He concentrated on what little they knew about their case and the victim so far...

Miss Denise O’Rourke, a human woman in her late twenties or early thirties, a licensed trader in out-of-League goods, had been brought in with severe complications of what the Andorian doctors assumed to be an accidental abortion due to impurities in her diet. From what he’d read about the

topic in his sleepless night, he at least doubted the ‘accidental’ in that sentence. Luckily, that wasn’t his responsibility. He and his team had been called in, because...

...the aborted fetus tested positive for artificial DNA on the paternal side, proving the father to be an augmented human. However, Ms. O’Rourke stated his identity as a deceased non-League-citizen and the Andorians found scarring on her body that indicated she suffered a severe physical trauma around the projected time of conception. Yet, she made no mention of an assault whatsoever. Why? Zach frowned, wondering how to put these questions to a traumatized woman—

“Really, have a look at these things, Zach,” Doc said dreamily beside him. “It’s amazing what a nicely filled Julia set can do for your relaxation when paired off with a well-endowed Mandelbrot—”

“Doc,” Goose cut in, annoyed. “A Mandelbrot set⁴ has no noticeable dong on any fractal plane. It looks like an ass. So, shut up!”

“Gentlemen,” Zach snapped. “Recall the nature of this case and adjust your topic, right now.” The lift doors opened into a wide lobby and he answered the greeting nod of the waiting Andorians.

The delegation was larger than Zach had expected. Besides Dr. Pelkar as the responsible forensics expert, there were several high-ranking law enforcement officers, someone clearly belonging to the Andorian fleet who took pains not to declare her actual rank, two representatives of the Andorian planetary council, and several physicians, among them a trauma specialist, a xeno-biologist, and Ms. O’Rourke’s clinician, who appeared to be very nervous about being part of this group. Zach had sympathy for the man. Twenty minutes later, he was tempted to kill him.

“We are very sorry to touch such hurtful memories of your patient,” Doc in the seat beside him was saying at his most serious. “But if we want to accost the ALL responsible for fathering Ms. O’Rourke’s aborted child, we need information about the assault. Where it happened, when, what—” Doc’s forehead creased into sad wrinkles. “Almost anything about the circumstances will help us with tracking him down, but right now we have nothing, doctor.”

The clinician huffed and looked with distaste at the assembled Andorian dignitaries. “You already violated my patient’s rights by extracting fetal DNA samples without her consent. Something I only agreed upon because you—” This time he singled out Zach. “—said that it would lead to the arrest of the creature who did that to her. Now, you insist that’s not enough and you still have to aggravate her mental trauma by interrogating her. I will not stand for that! My patient declined being questioned about her indignity and I will respect her wishes, even if I — as a reasonable person — would do otherwise to make sure the perpetrator sees justice.”

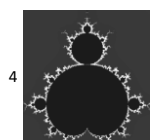
At least Goose had already left with the digicopy for Ranger-1. Zach doubted he’d be successful in keeping the ST from strangling O’Rourke’s clinicians otherwise. In fact, he doubted he would *want* to be successful...

Andorian capital space port

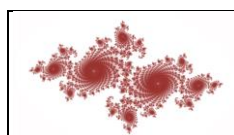
Landing Zone 2, reserved for diplomatic and law enforcement vessels

Gooseman left the pair of Andorian law enforcement officers behind as he crossed the open landing field towards Ranger-1, the data crystal with the digicopy of the incriminating DNA weighing heavily in his shirt pocket. *They are only doing their job*, he berated himself. *Hell, they do you a favor by making sure you couldn’t have your paws on the sample during transport.* He snorted. *As if I had anything to gain by adding augmented code to the evidence!*

He tapped his wrist com. “Open the lock, GV. Entry code: Gooseman, Shane. Voice ident: sufficient rubbish.” He didn’t wait for the landing platform to lower down and instead leaped smoothly



4 << this is a Mandelbrot set.



<< this is a Julia set. Now *do* the math!

onboard in mid-stride. *Should give them something to fret about.* “Seal the ship, GV. Initialize maximum security,” he ordered, already on the way to the bridge.

His enhanced hearing immediately picked up the changes in the engine and power patterns as the system moved from idle to alert and the hiss with which the main lock and the escape pod holds were sealed. By the time he reached the bridge, Ranger-1 was completely independent from the planet on which it parked.

The cockpit hatch opened in front of him. Communications, pilot and weapon controls glowed in bright activity, waiting for his input. Communications... He contemplated sending a piggy back signal to ask how Niko was doing, but there was the Andorian monitoring phalanx, the EOS network at home, BETA command and communications... Way too many interim stations as that even ALMA could guarantee a safe line, at least not without being the one to initialize it and if he was caught *asking* for a secured line— Gooseman suppressed a sigh as he sat down in the pilot’s seat. “GV. Initialize ship-wide security check class A.”

=Understood. Security check in progress.= The green-and-blue eyeball bopped slowly on the main screen.

Goose watched the results of the ship-wide scan trailing over the screen. A few flying insects were reported in the immediate vicinity of the lock. Ignoring Andorian pacifist sensitivities, he flooded the area with hard UV until the life signs vanished and waited for the repeat scan to complete. All clear.

Gooseman drew a deep breath and flipped the com switch. “GV, initialize top security communication with BETA, limited to Commander Joseph Walsh in verified person, flag the security classification flag as classified and set the actual security classification to UVP.” He felt the muscles along his jaw tighten. “Prepare for simultaneous data transmission under the same conditions.”

=Say that again!= Walsh stared at him.

“We have evidence of successful sexual reproduction of Supertroopers, sir,” Gooseman repeated very formally. “I am transmitting a digital copy of the fetal DNA for identification as we speak.”

=Any chance that it’s a rogue geneticist running amok?=-

“According to the Andorian forensics experts, no sir. — I already asked that.”

=Gods, boy,= Walsh was clearly rattled. =Do you know what that means?=-

That the shit hit the fan so high, we’re going to need a shovel before we even enter Solar Sys, Goose thought grimly. Aloud he said, “That we can’t cover this up, sir. The Andorians have the data and I doubt we can discredit their expertise. We need Prof. Negata’s input about the extent of the breach as soon as possible. The number of suspects at large is still too high to go after them simultaneously. We have to prioritize.”

=I meant for you,= the commander said quietly.

Goose forcefully suppressed a shiver. “I won’t go after second generations, sir.” He glanced at the indicator for the data transmission. Completed. *Finally.* “Gooseman end.”

BetaMountain

BetaLabs, Sublevel 3, Hall 26

“—xual activity isn’t the problem! Reproductive ability is! They weren’t supposed to be fertile—”

Professor Negata? Niko, wiping down the last lab closet, stilled.

“Owen!” The commander’s sharp voice cut in. “This is a public corridor!”

“You don’t get it, do you?” Negata’s electronic voice shrilled. Slightly irregular steps passed by the door. “If the Andorians are right — and tell me, when were they *ever* wrong?! — They escaped four years ago, *four years!* Even if we assume their fertility to be significantly lower than standard homo sapiens—” Voice and steps receded in the distance, out of Niko’s hearing range just as the door slid back into the wall and QBall blinked owlshly into the transformed hall.

"Impressive," BETA's chief scientist commented at the transparent fronted laboratory cabinets now forming impeccable rows along the walls. A large examination table, complete with a protective force field and robotic arms for heavy lifting took up the hall's center, and smaller work places with computer terminals were set left and right of the entrance to the side room where Niko had decided to set up the holographic display of the excavation site. "How did you get that installed in less than three days?"

"I don't know, QBall." Niko shrugged. "I just filed a request for a standard laboratory fitting and this was what showed up. The work crew was really dedicated, too."

QBall glanced at his data pad. "Dedicated is one way to put it. They spent two nightshifts on this. Let me guess, you even got a functional network access for these terminals?"

"Only extensions from the wall console, I'm afraid," she smiled apologetically. "Thought network maintenance told me they'd be working on getting a T-00 line down to the sublevels."

QBall shook his head. "Do you have any idea how often I applied for a fast line down here?" When Niko said nothing, he grunted. "Let's hope the installation is complete before they notice what's going on there." He plopped his data pad down on the exam table. "And now let's have a look at these ominous findings of theirs. Any idea where to start?"

Niko nodded. "Professor Morron's team was very organized. The crates are numbered in order of expected relevance and ID tagged." She called the correspondent data onto her pad as she spoke and proceeded to enter the respective code into the transportation service of the work table. The panel in the front socket folded back and a rotund robot trundled out. A small antenna on its flat head expanded, rotated, and locked visibly vibrating on a stack of crates. With a happy beep the robot whizzed towards the crates and began attaching agrav pads around the biggest one.

"An integrated Brownie?" QBall queried, watching the crate rise ten centimeters off the ground as the droid activated the pads.

"Lab Tech Incorporated cooperates with SHoD⁵," Niko answered, while the bot directed the crate within reach of the robotic arms of the work table. "Apparently, someone called and told them, a lab certified Brownie would be a great help here."

They both observed the hydraulic steel arms latch onto the crate and carefully lift it up towards the work tabletop. "It will spare quite some personnel hours," QBall commented. "With this system, you'll manage the unpacking on your own." He studied the crate now resting in the middle of the table. The robotic arms had returned to their waiting position, the Brownie bot was back in the table socket. "The material comes from Tortuna, so it's the strict security protocol."

"Weren't the crates examined before being stored here?" Niko frowned.

"They were, but unpacking might spring traps missed in the previous scans. We—"

=Dr. QBall. Report to S4 genetics laboratory immediately.= RHONDDA's efficient voice came out of the wall-mounted console. =Dr. QBall. Report to S4 genetics laboratory immediately.=

"The protocol is LS4-subsection Tortuna. It's on the lab pad," QBall said hurriedly, before almost running for the door. "Excuse me."

=Dr. QBall,= RHONDDA started again. =Report to—=

"I'm on my way!" he shouted just as the door closed behind him, leaving Niko alone with the crate and the protocols.

Four hours and a missed lunch later, Niko stared at the content of the now dismantled crate no. 1. Hidden in layers of shock absorbing foam and extra padding had been a pyramidal device, which now rested on the polished surface of the work table. The bluish glow of the protective force field still at full strength made it difficult to be sure, but it seemed to be made of black glass engraved with tightly set Xeryon symbols along the edges. Of the three hexagonal openings near its base, the middle one was large enough for one of the blue crystals to fit snugly, while the two left and right of it were about half that size.

⁵ see: "Droidal Affairs" (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

A note pad, packed into the crate together with the device, was what held Niko's attention, though. Ayse and Sven had done a rough field translation of the writing flowing down the frame of the device, identifying it as a Xeryon crystal reader.

Once they managed to power it up, they would be able to read the library.

Once...

A second note on the pad was from Katsumi, Morron's specialist in Xeryon technology. She had estimated the type and amount of power required to operate it. The numbers didn't tell Niko much, but it seemed to be operated with light rather than electricity. Katsumi had even noted the required wavelength: 697.4 ± 0.2 nanometers. *QBall's got to see this! If we can get this to work—*

2088-08-09

Andor

=Contrary to the Andorian assumptions,= the synthesized voice of Prof. Negata, further distorted by a heavily scrambled connection through deep space, reverberated in the secured communications room currently occupied by the S5. =The sexual proliferation of Supertrooper code is limited to alpha-BDC. No other gene set contains the components responsible for bypassing the reproductive restrictions of the code. Negata end.=

The connected ended with a smooth blip as the large screen went dark.

"So, not all the Supertroopers at large are spreading their seeds," Doc commented at last into the following silence. "But— phew..." He glanced at Goose. "Does that mean you can't—?"

"To the case, gentlemen!" Zach cut in. "Gooseman, what does alpha-BDC mean with respect to the number of suspects at large. How many troopers are we speaking about?"

The ST was still staring at the empty screen. "Only two alpha-BDC made it through the project until the very end," he said flatly. "We're searching Killbane."

"You said there were two."

"Yes." Doc frowned. "What about the other? How can you be sure it's Killbane when—"

"The other is me." Goose fixed Doc squarely. "I guess being stuck shipless on a dirt ball for five months qualifies as an alibi even for me."

Doc gaped and slowly started to beam. "Now that's what I'm calling good news, Goose-my-man! You're shooting live rounds like the rest of us. Congratulations!" He fumbled something out of his pocket. "Here. And if you have any questions, go ahead. Ask the Doc!" He patted Goose's shoulder. "Now, where to find Kill—" He stopped when Gooseman very slowly crumpled the small plastic package he'd been given into a tight ball and let it pointedly fall to the floor before turning on his heel to leave the room without as much as a "By your leave" for Zach.

"Doc," Zachary snapped after confirming that the com was indeed turned off. "Please tell me that you didn't just try to give him condoms."

"What? You want him to get in trouble that young? He—" Doc stopped, seeing Zach's face.

"Are you really unaware about the restrictions the Board put on him for being allowed to serve as a Ranger?" Zach asked very quietly. "Do you know that I have a standing order from the Board to report — and I quote verbatim — 'any indication that Gooseman encourages the other sex to associate'?"

"Encourages...?" Doc gaped. "Did nobody send the Board a decent holo of him? He doesn't have to encourage them! If looks removed clothes, we'd need the Laredo to carry replacement pants! That's my point!"

"And it's exactly why I didn't see anything to report so far," Zach told him. "Now, do you think he should carry items that if found in his possession will be considered 'preparatory'?" He stood. "I'm going to find out what we'll do about Killbane."

The communication room's door closed with the usual Andorian efficiency behind Gooseman as he strode through the anteroom and out into the wider conference hall. Battle reflexes noted several Andorians turning for him, one starting to speak as he passed, but he didn't bother to stop and answer.

"Alpha-BDC bypasses the reproductive restrictions," Negata's electronically distorted voice kept saying in his thoughts as he headed out the hall. *Damn!* He hadn't even considered the possibility! It made sense, though. BDC was designed to overcome limitations, physical boundaries... Apparently, Negata had done that last part a little too well, and now— *Proceeding from bounty-hunting to baby-killing, Gooseman?* He shuddered. *Children—* He stopped dead.

Niko. Tortuna. What if—!?

He hadn't even considered it.

"Gooseman?" He winced at Zachary's voice coming from behind and pulled himself together, dragged anger and hate for Killbane fucking up his life even from the other side of the galaxy over his fears before turning around to face a probably rightfully irate captain. "Yes?"

Zach mustered him from head to boots. "Care to explain your behavior?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I—" He managed to look contrite. "Keeping professional distance in a case that's literally inside my skin—" He shook his head and fervently wished that to be the only place where 'it' was, while waiting for the reprimand to come.

Apparently, he'd hit the right tone, though. Zach's expression softened a little. "I won't pretend to understand what this mess means for you, Gooseman, but I need you to do your job. This case upsets everyone, not the least the authorities here and on Earth. When it comes down to it, we still have to bring in the suspect—"

"—of a rape the victim denies even happened," Goose returned bluntly. "And for the record: No, Killbane is *not* adaptable enough to pull off Mr. Perfect Boyfriend. That story's a piece of crap!"

"That story is what we have to accept while operating under Andorian jurisdiction," Zach returned firmly, but he added in a low voice, "though we don't have to like it."

"Can't we separate it?"

Zach frowned. "Meaning, lieutenant?"

"The Andorians forbid us to query a rape victim, right, but that woman says she isn't one. So why do we treat the case as if she is?"

"Because the Andorians treat it as a rape and that defines our M.O. on Andor."

"And if you ask only about the assault, about where it happened? She was bitten⁶, Zach. She wouldn't ascribe that to her boyfriend." Goose drew quotation marks in the air around 'boyfriend'. "Killbane's a wanted criminal. He'll be on ice before you even get to open the arrest form. Hell! If the lady says anything that leads to his arrest, I sign for her to get the reward just to have the scumbag be worth something!"

"You're serious about that, aren't you?" his captain asked dryly.

Goose shrugged. "You gotta be pragmatic when it comes to STs."

Zachary sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I'll think about it. And now move. We have to inform the Andorians about Prof. Negata's results and what we plan to do about it."

"Zach." Goose stopped him again in a low voice. "We better keep the wraps over the details on this one. Killbane works on and off for the Queen. We don't want the old bitch to get ideas about breeding him."

"Noted," his captain said grimly, looking every bit as nauseated as Goose felt.

⁶ Yes, Goose is a tad naïve here.

The lighting was dimmed to a soft glow. Com screen and door were locked. ALMA would handle any incoming messages. Niko placed the last of the meditation balls, fist-sized crystal spheres to reflect the flame of the candle and her face, completing the circle on her living room carpet.

It had been a long time since she'd set up a full meditation circle. Normally, focusing came naturally to her, allowing her to reach the clarity of thought and purity of mind required of her without any paraphernalia, but maybe that had been arrogance.

Breathing deeply, she lit the candle in front of her crossed legs. The scents of burning wick and warming beeswax arose and she strived to calm her mind like the flame calmed from the ignition. Ignited was very much like she felt, burning, disquieted, flickering on resources consumed by her heat...

...be it her body — *she had skipped meals again, prompting ALMA to seal her door and double the size of her breakfast dish* — or her soul. *Shane's blood shone on pale skin and paler sheets, marking a body made for a different kind of heat—*

Niko shuddered, shrank back from the thought and the candle flame flickered, mimicking her unease, melting more wax, blocking her way...

...like the MPs in front of the S4 lab when QBall hadn't answered her calls. Armed guards denying her entry, until the commander had had enough of the commotion and reminded her that she was "*—not cleared for this area! Get back to your station or face trial for insubordination. QBall will come over once he is done here.*" The cold words had been like a slap to the face. "*Dismissed!*"

A slap she'd deserved. *You are not cleared any more. You are not— You—*

—have to fill out every single permit ever invented if you want to get that crystal reader of yours powered up!" A hollow-eyed QBall had said as much the next morning when he threw a single glance at Katsumi's notes and mumbled, "*Starstones,*" before leaving her with a to do list that took two minutes just to scroll down.

It would be only her and QBall in that lab. Together, they worked out most of the regulations for safely operating star stone devices, and yet she had to fill out the clearance request for hazardous materials in a scientific facility (FL-48.H-3/BA), the request for a permit regarding the storage, handling, and operation of a possibly explosive device on base (BMB-D75-SHO/E), the application to base engineering for certification of the facility to operate a device listed under D75-SHO/E (BME-CFL/C), the form for informing the chief medical officer and obtaining a medical clearance for all personnel who might come in contact with the device (CMO-A35C/psi), the request for personnel safety instructions regarding the handling of psycho-active and/or explosive devices (BME-A35C/psi), and a set of no less than five forms required for transporting hazardous goods type A35C/psi—

The candle flame hissed. Her twisted face reflected, distorted, among the crystal balls around her. Horrified, she noticed that her meditation had gone off-topic.

Again.

2088-08-10

Andor

"Captain," Dr. Pelkar said with utmost politeness and as much frost. "It is not the Andorian way to interpret the evidence and statements against the interests of the victim. Ms. O'Rourke already declined being questioned. We will not allow you to split cases so that you can question her by the — how's this saying of yours? — *backside.*" The two representatives of the Andorian planetary council and the still unnamed fleet representative beside her nodded solemnly.

"Dr. Pelkar, honored deputies," Zachary said cautiously. "We don't intend to question Ms. O'Rourke on anything regarding her ordeal — or ordeals. However, we do believe that it is in her best interest to have her assailant brought to justice. Based on the genetic evidence you collected, we were able to narrow the list of suspects down to a single individual—"

The announcement caused a stir around the conference table and Zachary hurried to continue before any questions could be voiced. "—who also matches the physical parameters you deduced from the scarring on Ms. O'Rourke's face." Dr. Pelkar frowned and Zach raised his hand to keep her from interrupting. "Since he is already among the League's Most Wanted, we will not require her statement or appearance in court to bring him to justice. However, we do need information about his whereabouts. If you—" He steadfastly looked at the Andorian clinician. "—would ask Ms. O'Rourke about the coordinates where she was assaulted, it would be an invaluable help to bring him to justice."

"If it is too painful for her," Doc said quietly on the other side of the table. "Granting us limited access to her navigational records for the respective timeframe also suffices."

"Frankly," Gooseman added grimly, tapping his light pen against the data pad in front of him. "This is the first time in almost a year that he shows up on the radar. It would be a shame not to—"

The holo cube above the center of the conference table lit up, showing a rather young Andorian face in communications gear. "Please excuse this interruption," he said. "We're receiving an urgent transmission from the Board of World Leaders. Senator Eric Wheiner of Earth wants to speak with the Galaxy Rangers. Right now."

The Andorian fleet representative raised her brows at that. "Do you wish us to leave, Captain?" she asked perfunctory.

"Thank you for asking," Zach answered with a polite nod, "but I do not wish to add to your inconvenience. Please stay." He glanced briefly at Doc who busied himself with the CDU before signaling him subtly to 'go on'. Zach nodded grimly at the com tech in the holo cube. "Put him through, please."

The embarrassed com tech was immediately replaced by Wheiner's red-faced visage filling most of the holo cube. "Fox," he snarled without any preamble. "Is it true that the Supertroopers are breeding!?"

Zachary stood. "Senator, with all due respect, this is an ongoing investigation—"

"Are they breeding or not, Fox?" the senator cut him off and, zeroing in on Gooseman, "Are you?!"

Zachary felt his face grow hot. "We have confirmed evidence that only one of the escaped Supertroopers is fertile, senator," he stated coldly. "I do not see how that concerns Gooseman except that he'll be the one to bring him in at the earliest possible time." He recalled a bloodied coffee cup and a promise of not having to hunt children. "The individual in question currently resides on Tortuna. We require unlimited clearance for Tortuna to bring him in."

Wheiner gaped. "Out of the question!"

The holo cube changed abruptly back to the nervous com tech. Zach released a slow breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Gooseman stirred, slowly putting the light pen he'd been holding down onto the tabletop. "Thank you," he breathed.

"I do not provide information about my people outside the proper chain of command on principle, Gooseman," Zach retorted, thinking of 'You have a higher opinion of our government than I'. He signaled the Andorian com tech in the holo cube. "I need to contact my superior officer immediately. Please establish a secure connection from this location to BetaMountain, office of Cmdr. Walsh."

"Sir," Zach stated the moment the image cleared less than thirty seconds later. "I have to report a violation of the chain of command regarding my unit's ongoing case on Andor. A member of the Board of World Leaders called me directly to demand information about ST fertility."

"Noted," Walsh replied grimly. "What did you tell him?"

"The truth, sir. We have irrefutable proof that only one escaped trooper is fertile." Zach held Walsh's gaze steadily. "I requested unlimited clearance for Tortuna in order to bring him in."

Walsh arched a brow at that. =Was it granted?=-

“No, sir.” Zach allowed a tiny smile to escape onto his stony expression. “But I have a CDU recording of the vid call and four Andorian dignitaries as witnesses.”

Walsh nodded gravely. =I expect your full report upon your return. And Fox— Good work.=

“Thank you, sir.” He saluted and signaled to end the call.

BetaMountain

BetaLabs, Sublevel 3, Hall 26

Maximum force fields shielded the reinforced duranium steel box in the middle of the agrav platform, secured by armed MPs in heavy protection gear. Warning lights flashed — on the agrav and above each door — as the platform slowly moved down the corridors of sublevel 3 towards hall 26.

“They’re really going over the top with this,” Niko commented under her breath. “Those star stones have only half a charge and their combined mass won’t do more than yellow the paint should they blast.”

“Starstones are explosive, psionically active devices, Niko,” QBall reminded her. “Exposed to the ceiling lights, the half-charge would soon turn into a full charge and that would do a lot more than ‘yellow the paint’ as you so aptly put it.”

She sighed, exasperated. “And it would still be a flash I can contain easily.”

“If you were an S5 Ranger and not a mere lab assistant.” QBall shrugged and waved at the MPs to speed things up. They needed those starstones installed and the room lighting back to normal, or BetaLabs’ schedule would be in chaos for days.

2088-08-11

Andor

The call came while he was preparing a dossier for the Andorian law enforcers regarding the identified subject, the quality of the evidence, and the actions their unit would take to bring him in. *It warrants one of Goose’s one-word-reports*, Zach thought sourly. *‘Nothing!’ sums it up nicely.* He sighed. No, diplomatic relations weren’t strained between the Rangers and Andor, though he wouldn’t dare saying the same about Andorian authorities and Earths. He—

The melodious tune of the hotel com doubtlessly signified an important mathematical theorem totally eluding him. He tapped the screen. “Fox here.” He recognized the woman immediately, though Denise O’Rourke had suffered since the holograms for her trader’s license included in the victim’s dossier had been taken. “Ms. O’Rourke. How may I help you?”

“I released myself from hospital, Captain,” she stated brusquely. “Andorian sensibilities do not prevent me from speaking to you any longer. Let’s meet.”

But ‘Andorian sensibilities’ will keep us from questioning you, Zach amended in his thoughts and acknowledged, *Smart move.* “We’re leaving Andor in four hours.”

“Your hotel has an acceptable restaurant. I’ll be there in two hours. Bring your team.”

She cut the line without waiting for his reply.

The restaurant of a space port hotel — even an expensive one like that serving the diplomat landing field in the Andorian capital — was never empty. Though the wide hall with views of either the space port or Andoran’s illuminated skyline wasn’t crowded, there certainly were enough guests and waiting droids around to ensure that nothing happening here would go unnoticed or unrecorded, even if the widely-spaced tables allowed private conversations...

...at least for normal hearing, Goose decided as he followed Zach and Doc towards a table shielded by a potted plant and a glittering partition made of multiple layers of fractal filigree in glass. Zach had briefed them both on proper behavior towards traumatized victims, including an *'I expect you in uniform, Gooseman, not your black casuals, clear?'*, but Goose was determined to leave this talk to Zach and Doc. He was better at extorting information from suspects not victims.

She's taller than the license holo makes her look, Goose thought when Denise O'Rourke stood at their approach. He tensed when her hand moved to her belt as if she expected a weapon there. She obviously struggled to relax from the posture, but the handshake she exchanged with Zach appeared firm. "Thank you for coming," she said.

Zachary took the seat opposite her when they sat, leaving him and Doc the places to either side. *Something in her face doesn't fit*, Gooseman noticed as he pulled out his chair to sit down. He knew Denise O'Rourke's dossier: Caucasian, black hair, dark brown eyes, skin type I... vague descriptions and a holo made for normal sight usually didn't mean shit for him. There was coloring in her hair, but a lot of women did that for whatever reason. The iris coloring was unusual though. *What color do you hide with that dull brown, Lady?* he thought, while Zach covered the legalities and summed up what little they could share with her.

Oddly, she shifted closer to him than to Doc. Gooseman frowned. Something in her scent seemed oddly familiar, but he couldn't place it. The acidity of antibiotics permeated everything. Whatever she'd been given had been damn strong stuff.

She demanded explanations, asked for details, her lips straining against the double scars trisecting them, the result of fangs *not* in check.

Goose remembered Killbane's fangs, digging into his neck when he'd been a kid, grinding down on his vertebrae as claws shredded his uniform and the skin underneath to— He stopped that thought. There were memories better left untouched. And it had cost Killbane his eye⁷. For good.

There. That was better than thinking about what those claws had done to the woman's body elsewhere. Goose swallowed. What *his* claws could have done to Niko, if—

Denise O'Rourke's hands slammed down onto the tabletop, making the cups dance on the saucers. "You're telling me, *Ryker Killbane* isn't your business?!"

Goose froze. He recognized the voice, the anger in it, the temper, and they hadn't identified Killbane by name to the Andorians.

"The League's safety from the Crown comes first," Zach was saying.

"So you won't do anything, is that it?" She glared at them, brown eyes flashing green. "I'm not working for the League," she declared, jaw set in a stubborn line. "Tell me how to kill him!"

Zach was caught cold by that statement. "You aren't serious, are you?"

No, Zach, she is serious, Goose corrected mentally. *Denise O'Rourke might be frightened, but Daisy O'Mega will go after Killbane, if we don't arrest her. I ought to tell—*

"You can't assault a Supertrooper!" his captain argued, oblivious.

"He was a goddamn man when he—" Daisy cut herself off, looked aside unable to meet their eyes and Goose kept silent. He knew what being prey meant, feeling like prey was crippling. The Daisy O'Mega he knew from the Cheyenne would survive a roundtrip to Deltoid and back, would come out kicking in the end, but this one—

"Ms. O'Rourke," Zach was saying. "You have no idea what an ST can do. What you have to expect."

—in her profession, if she doesn't fight back and wins, she's dead. He didn't want that. He wouldn't stand for that. *You're getting yourself in trouble, Gooseman*, he thought in mocked self-observation and interrupted his captain, "Expect someone who's able to jump fifteen meters from a resting position, make the hundred meters from stand-still in less than thirty seconds." He spoke fast, just loud enough that any interruption would have to be shouted. He didn't think Zach would do that in a busy restaurant given the topic.

⁷ see: "Shattered Souls: For an Eye" (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

“Killbane’s got a reaction time of under .2 seconds and adapts instantaneously to any weapon that doesn’t take out his head and half his spinal marrow at the first shot. If you don’t eliminate at least half his body, including head and spinal marrow, within his reaction time, you’ll be dead.” *Okay, time for the hanging.* “If you are lucky.”

“Gooseman!” Zach snapped the moment Goose closed his mouth. “That information is—”

Classified, I know. “I want to deter Ms. O’Rourke from her plan, Captain,” he looked at his pissed commanding officer with as much innocence as he could muster while hoping that Daisy would put the information he’d given her to good use. “Is something wrong with that?”

Is there? he asked himself, playing with the menu card, waiting for the rebuke. *You’ve got to be pragmatic when it comes to STs.* His own words, mocking him.

“Not wrong, Gooseman, but the wrong method.” Surprised, Goose realized that Zach sounded more resigned than angry. Somehow that made it worse.

BetaMountain

BetaLabs, Sublevel 3, Hall 26

The starstones sat snugly in the socket of the alien device, though it had taken some careful polishing in inconveniently dim light to make them fit. Relieved, QBall fastened the protective caps over them, making sure the room lighting couldn’t add to their charge. Once the crystal reader worked and they determined its energy consumption, he’d exchange the black caps for dark filters, allowing just enough light through to keep the charge constant. “Lights,” he demanded once the last cap was fixed in place. Beside him, Niko blinked in the sudden brightness. “Do you know how it’s turned on?” he asked her.

She shook her head. “No. It’ll have to be trial and error.” At QBall’s frown, she added, “It’s a reading device for a public library. Professor Morron’s studies showed clearly that it was open to the public, not all of them Xeryon natives.”

QBall nodded slowly. “So, either it’s very simple or intended to be handled by skilled personnel on demand.” He studied that black pyramid on the table, its smooth lines partially broken by the protruding caps shielding the inserted starstones. “Anything in those notes Morron’s people sent along with it?”

“I’m afraid not,” Niko tapped onto the read pad. “Katsumi Nakawa’s the technician among them and she focused on the power supply.”

QBall looked at the inactive crystal reader again. “Let’s try the obvious and if it doesn’t work, I’ll send one of the techs over to x-ray it.” He adjusted his glasses, squinted at the glass pyramid, at the symbols engraved along its edges. “There are no obvious switches or contact fields,” he noted. “I assume, asking for a psionic reading would be futile?”

Niko sighed. “The sensations of the archaeologists finding and studying it will have erased any imprint dating back to its last regular use.”

“Anything in that writing?” QBall pointed at the symbols in the glass.

“The usual praises of universal knowledge,” Niko told him, recognizing the set of symbols along the first edge of the pyramid immediately. “They’re a universal header on almost any written Xeryon missive. The next—” she frowned. “It seems to be a name plaque.” She blinked. “Somebody sponsored this device for public use.” She went around the table to look at the remaining two edges. One was blank, the other— “I’m sorry, but that’s a reminder to return the crystal afterwards.”

QBall raised his head. “That means the crystals *were* handled by the customers!” He tapped against his reading aid. “Making extra personnel a lot less likely. Could it be as simple as—?” He mumbled. “Give me one of those crystals.”

Putting on lab gloves, Niko fetched one of the crystals from the first box and handed it to him. QBall turned it around thoughtfully. It was carved irregularly, its facets not fully symmetrical. If it really fit into the crystal reader, there would only be one way to do so.

"If it explodes we deny we did anything!" QBall declared with a grin as he pushed the blue crystal into the opening between the two capped starstones. "If it doesn't—" The four sides of the device lit up. Pale blue symbols began flowing down from the top, forming a menu of sorts and a densely-set text underneath. "*Eureka's dog on speed*," QBall whispered. "It really works."

Niko beside him just stared.

2088-08-12

BetaMountain hangars

Ranger-1 entered the hangar tunnel precisely on their assigned vector, after EOS-3 had handed their signal over to BMC — not without a friendly "Welcome home". In times of increased space traffic, the computerized directional and communications systems provided by the six Earth Orbit Stations were a welcome service, though Zach still wondered why all their computer voices had to be distinctly feminine, soft, and slightly sultry. In contrast, the voice of BetaMountain Control was male, scratchy as a chain smoker with chronic bronchitis, and about as welcoming as a pissed off dock hand on third shift. Maybe Goose had ignored BMC's orders one time too often for even an AI to remain friendly.

=Landing performed. Clear the vicinity after shutting down ship.= BMC rasped out. =Ranger Gooseman, report to commander Walsh ASAP.=

An expression of utter dread rushed over the ST's face at that order.

Zach unstrapped and got out of his seat, tapping briefly on the back of Goose's chair. "Your turn to shut down, Lieutenant."

Goose threw him a look of surprise, but wisely said only, "Aye, sir."

"What was that for?" Doc asked after he and Zach had cleared the landing platform. "I was scheduled to power her down, since Niko's no longer on the roster."

"I know, Doc," Zach looked back at the ship. Goose was visible as a dark shadow in the lit cockpit. "But it'll give him a few minutes to sort his thoughts before he has to face Walsh. I don't think that's going to be an easy talk."

Doc snorted. "Hell, yeah. Spilling classifieds in a restaurant..." he shook his head. "I mean, it sucks to sit around and do nothing and I got the impression that Killy's a rather personal enemy of his."

"Killy?" Zach frowned but let it go. "I don't know. He's been in a strange mood ever since that mission to Tortuna."

"Goose's always strange," Doc reminded him. "That's his style."

"I mean 'strange' for Goose's way of strangeness," Zach specified and winced slightly at the sentence he'd come up with. "And this case certainly didn't help. Or would you feel comfortable discussing with your chief commanding officer what he learned about himself during a case of rape committed by his genetic twin?"

"You think Walsh will bring that up?"

The transport cabin set down and Zach entered his clearance before answering grimly, "I think that's a given." He started the cabin. "And Goose knows that." He sighed, watching the cavernous underground hangar slip by as the transport cabin rose and accelerated towards the inner areas holding offices and quarters. God, he wanted to see his children, wanted to face problems like scraped knees or too much ice cream, something he had a fighting chance to solve. It would be such a nice change.

Office of Cmdr. Walsh
30 minutes later

“The BWL won’t lessen my restrictions any time soon,” Goose stated matter-of-factly. “As long as they don’t, it will be of no concern regarding my person, and as for my duties—” He met Walsh’s eyes on this. “Tortuna lacks a functional crime registry. There’s no workable solution for finding...” He swallowed. “...possible results of Killbane’s behavior — or lack thereof,” he added uncomfortably.

“Except if you apprehend and question him,” Walsh reminded him. “And he is top priority, now more than ever.”

“Apparently not top enough, sir,” Goose returned. “I have no clearance for Tortuna.”

“A fact for which you should thank Captain Fox,” Walsh told him. “And for preventing the Board to inquire about any more details regarding ST—” He stopped, obviously reconsidered his words. “—regarding *your* fertility.”

Gooseman winced.

“It will affect you, do you realize that?” Walsh tented his hands. “Right now, we know that alpha-BDC bypasses the restrictions on gametes production, but there are no data regarding the efficacy of the gametes at fecundation. Frankly, we don’t know if that fetus was an aberration—” This time Walsh waited for him to look up, “—or the rule,” and waited for that to sink in.

It took several moments. “What kind of tests?” was all Goose asked hoarsely.

Walsh sighed. “No tests, Gooseman, but I want you to be careful. There are too many unknowns here.”

“Understood.” No relief. The boy didn’t trust him that much.

“There’s a difference between ability and permission. Don’t learn that the hard way.” Walsh studied him calmly, for once allowed some of his concern to show on his face. “We can’t afford that.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Before you leave,” Walsh glanced at the screen set into his desk. “The Andorians already forwarded the diplomatic costs of your unit’s stay on Andor. There’s an item on the hotel bill concerning your and Dr. Hartford’s room, which I would like to discuss.” He arched a brow at Goose. “Five days of adult Tri-D service?”

GRS5 office

It was almost three hours after landing when Goose finally reported back from Walsh, entering their office in what could almost be considered a weary slouch. “Doc,” he said, indicating the way he’d come with a nod. “He wants to talk to you, too.”

Doc gaped. “With me? Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” Goose flopped down at his console. “You better hurry,” he added. “He’s *not* in a good mood.”

“Do you know what’s wrong?” Zach asked after Doc had left. Doc had kept a rather low profile on Andor, so what—?

“I guess he’s got to explain the billing of five days adult Tri-D service for our room.” Goose shrugged. “He’ll survive that.”

“The Andorians caught him?” Zachary asked surprised.

“Na. I told the concierge that the service was somehow accessible in our room.” Gooseman corrected with a grin showing fangs. “And since it was used, it better be billed properly to avoid diplomatic hassles, isn’t it?”

Zach frowned. “You *tattled* on Doc?”

“Nope, but he’s been so keen on teaching me how to ‘move in his world’, as he put it—” The ST snorted. “—that I decided to return the favor. Explaining private matters to the commander is unavoidable in mine.” Goose smiled grimly. “And from experience: ‘It was a misunderstanding’, ‘it wasn’t my fault’, ‘it just happened’, ‘it wasn’t me’, and ‘who, me?’ won’t get him out of there.”

2088-08-13

MPQ 219

It was after midnight by the time the corridors had quieted enough for Goose to leave his flat unseen. ALMA sent the surveillance cams outside in a jittered loop, making sure not even the random noise speckles showed any treacherous repetition. Even breathing and an occasional rustle of bed clothes would cover his absence for the listening devices placed in his walls.

Advantage of late night adventures, Gooseman, he mocked himself in his thoughts. *Your AI doesn’t pretend you’re watching 7th Heaven reruns to cover your absence.*

Also courtesy of ALMA, Niko’s door opened just wide enough for him to slip through. No tell-tale light to emerge into the corridor, not even the unexpected scent of warm beeswax wafting up from her living room area. He stopped halfway down the stairs, spotting the source of the scent. Niko sat on the floor of her living room, a thick candle standing before her. The flame reflected in a ring of large glass balls set around her, but the golden light surrounding her wasn’t from the candle. Her hair seemed to float in it, as if following the reflections of the flame. She looked serene, at peace with herself. Silently he sat down on the stairs. He didn’t want to destroy that, if he hadn’t already...

“There’s a difference between ability and permission. Don’t learn that the hard way,” Walsh’s voice said in his thoughts, and, *“It will affect you.”* Goose desperately hoped it would be only him it affected. The Board wouldn’t accept an *‘I didn’t know’* any more than Walsh did...

The candle flame flickered and danced, as did its reflections in the crystals balls, as did the ghost flames on Niko’s retinas and the thoughts in her mind. It was late, but she had to find out what was going on within her. She could no longer pretend that it would heal on its own, that it was only because she hadn’t had time to cope with her experiences on 17798...

“You’ve got a problem, girl, but I’m not it.”

He’d told her that after... She shrank away from the image, from the moment of—

She drove her nails into her palms, used the physical pain to remind herself of her violence.

“You’d never been a hunter, yet you killed. Hunting is taking what you need,” she heard his voice in his thoughts, faint, tender and cruel, *“taking what you want. I should know.”*

She remembered the pain in that last statement. His pain, not hers, though she’d failed to grasp that back then. She had no right to feel that close to him. Not now, not after Tortuna, and yet, it was as if he was right behind—

—she leaped to her feet, startled. “It’s me,” Shane said, staying motionless where he was.

“Why are you—” She frowned. “—sitting on my stairs?”

“I didn’t want to interrupt,” he said sheepishly. “ALMA let me in.”

Niko huffed, exasperated. “This electronic crit—”

=Please watch your manners!= The AI cut in, setting the ambient lights to half-bright now that the meditation was over.

“—electronic *critic* better stops letting people into my apartment without asking me first!” Niko finished.

=I believed it in your and Goose’s best interest. Releasing Somnia-3 in the corridors to give him time for ringing the bell causes too much attention.=

Niko groaned, hearing Goose echoing the sound. “Why are you here?” she asked, realizing the mentioned sleeping gas was also a reminder that his time here was limited. It was past midnight, by four AM, the corridors would become lively with the early shift.

“I don’t want to hurt you, but—” He was radiating distress. It didn’t take a lapse in her psionic shielding to detect that. “Maybe I already have.”

“You didn’t hurt me,” she reassured him. “You just startled me. I—” She stopped when he shook his head.

“On Tortuna,” he specified. “We were lucky on Granna, but maybe there’s a time window or the gen code needs to be triggered and if it’s the latter then Granna definitely did that and—”

Niko gave up trying to follow that. “What are you talking about?” she cut in. “I don’t get you.” Silence. She waited.

“Are you pregnant?” he blurted.

“What?” The question was out before she even realized it.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know. It—”

“That pregnancy is a possible side-effect of sex?” she asked, exasperated.

“It shouldn’t be with me,” he looked aside.

She froze. *‘They weren’t supposed to be fertile.’* Negata had raved outside her lab. *Stars! That was about...? And it’s been days ago! No wonder, he’s freaked out.* “I’m not pregnant,” she told him calmly.

“Are you sure?” he asked. “I mean... how can you know—?”

“I’m a telepath,” she reminded him, heading up the stairs. “Believe me, I would know. And I took precautions.” She sat down on the step below him and gave him a crooked smile. “I didn’t know you were supposed to be sterile.” He slumped in relief. “You were that worried?” she asked quietly. “You shouldn’t have been. Even without the protection... my kind doesn’t conceive easily.”

“We don’t know what *my kind*” —the expression was a curse in his tone — “is in that regard, Niko. I—” He drew a deep, shaky breath, resting his elbows on his knees before pushing himself to his feet. “I better get going.” *I don’t want to see you wounded like that.*

She shouldn’t have caught that thought. She was glad, she had. *Like that*, unspecific as it was, indicated something specific, something known. *Shane, what did you see on that mission?* She wondered, knowing she — being no longer part of his unit — couldn’t ask him about it. And so she watched him leaving and worried about... herself. Horrified, she hid her face in her hands.

Herself. And she’d thought she made progress.

Office of Cmdr. Walsh
09:15

“Earth University will not continue Morron’s research, QBall,” Walsh said bluntly. “They closed his institute, sold the equipment, and won’t touch whatever he brought back from Tortuna even with a very long pole.”

“Morons.” QBall thrummed an annoyed rhythm on his folder. “Commander, we have to continue this project. Those crystals contain the equivalent of several yotta⁸-bytes of information on a culture that as far as we know existed on the home world of our most dangerous enemy. With access to Tortuna being denied, it might well be our sole resource for information at the moment.”

“Information that’s at least two hundred years old, if not older.” Walsh snorted. “Do you know what was cutting edge technology two hundred years ago? The first car running on gasoline, coca cola, and—”

⁸ Yotta denotes a factor of 1024 or 1.000.000.000.000.000.000.000. Its SI unit symbol is Y.

“—Heinrich Hertz’s discovery of electromagnetic waves⁹,” QBall finished dryly. “I know. But we’re a young civilization. The speed of fundamental innovation decreases with increasing complexity. Do you know the cutting edge of Andorian technology at that time?”

“Care to enlighten me?” Walsh raised a brow, daring him to continue.

“The first crystal-based hyperdrive and initial calculations about planetary shields.” QBall cocked his head. “Sounds interesting, doesn’t it?”

Walsh tapped on his desk. “That’s still assuming Tortuna to be an old civilization.”

“I know,” QBall admitted. “But can we afford not to assume it? Right now, it costs us a lab hall and three chairs for the translators, hardly an expensive project considering the gain if I’m right.”

“You want three people translating several yottabytes?” Walsh asked, bemused. “Just for how long do you intend to chain them there?”

QBall sighed. “The operational crystal reader allows for three people to work simultaneously. Not more. I already made a precision scan of the device and ordered one of my best technicians to build a duplicate, preferably one not powered by starstones. But I want those translations started. Those people don’t have to read everything. You don’t read scientific texts like a novel when you’re searching for information. You’re scanning through, only slowing down when something seems promising.”

Walsh nodded. “You’ll need fluent readers for that. The average student won’t do.”

“Indeed,” QBall agreed. “And that’s the second reason why I’m here. Currently all people but one fluent enough for that task are at Deltoid.”

“So, you want military base clearance for convicted criminals?”

“I want two chipped minor offenders working off their debts to the general public here in a highly-secured laboratory,” QBall confirmed.

“A laboratory containing starstones,” Walsh challenged.

“Sealed and covered starstones in a protected reading device.”

“A device which they have to use.”

“Together with a highly trained former Galaxy Ranger.”

“Who failed to contain them before.”

“Commander!” QBall threw up his hands, exasperated. “You’re difficult on purpose!”

Walsh smirked. “I’m doing my best, Q.”

to be continued in
Crystal Structures 3

⁹ In 1886 Karl Benz patents Benz Patent Motorwagen as the first successful gasoline-driven automobile on January 29 and unveils it on July 3, pharmacist Dr. John Pemberton invents the carbonated drink later named coca-cola on May 8 of the same year, and the experiment of Herrn Hertz took place on November 11 at the University of Karlsruhe, Germany.