



Crystal Structures

3

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.

Disclaimer

"Adventures of the Galaxy Rangers" and all characters, institutions, locations and/or situations therefrom are copyright 1986 Robert Mandell, Gaylord Productions, Transcom Media Inc., and ITF Enterprises Inc. No infringement is intended by their inclusion in this work. The author makes no claim of ownership to any of the characters, institutions, locations, and/or situations associated with "The Adventures of the Galaxy Rangers." This is a piece of non-profit fan fiction. All original characters, institutions, locations and situations are copyright Ann-Kathrin Kniggendorf and may not be used without permission.

Credits

Elizabeth "fatima" Bales, for her patience and criticism, her skills as an editor patient enough to sift through my initial writing, and her screams when I leave the possible ground too obviously.

Caro von Totth, for first criticism and discussions about the scenes while they were written. She helped a lot to improve the weirder paragraphs in this story.

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

A. Kniggenndorf

Crystal Structures 3

Vacancies and Interstitials are point defects, consisting of the absence of ions (or presence of extra ions). Such defects are entirely responsible for the observed electrical conductivity of ionic crystals, and can profoundly alter their optical properties (and, in particular, their color). Furthermore, their presence is a normal thermal equilibrium phenomenon, so they can be an intrinsic feature of real crystals.

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

The most obvious point defects consist of missing ions (vacancies), excess ions (interstitials), or the wrong kind of ions (substitutional impurities). A more subtle possibility is the case of an ion in a perfect crystal, that differs from its colleagues only by being in an excited electronic state.

[Ashcroft / Mermin: Solid State Physics p. 626]

2088-09-16

BetaLabs
13:48

“It is evidence of aggressive force used against uniformed Galaxy Rangers in the field, who identified themselves correctly to the suspect. I don’t give a shit what you call it as long as it nixes the scumbag’s chance to waltz away snot-free!”

Niko stopped at the irritated voice coming from the entrance. *Shane?* He was standing in front of the forensics reception, an orange plastic pan for evidence and a notepad with forms for documenting evidence on the counter in front of him.

“You can list it as shrapnel, but not as a projectile.” The forensics clerk held her ground. “This is clearly not ammunition.”

“Lady, I dug that piece outta my side. You can damn well believe it was shot at us!” Goose growled at the end of his tether.

Reaching the reception, Niko spotted a fist-sized hole in the side of his shirt, revealing suspiciously unblemished skin surrounded by dark-stained cloth. “Shane?” She met his eyes across the counter. “What happened?”

“One of the crooks used an old blunderbuss against us,” he answered. “I didn’t think such antiquities were even built in this millennium, much less carried into space. You know these wide muzzles that almost shoot around the corner?” He grinned. “This one literally did.”

“And hit you,” she concluded with a glance at his torn, blood-stained shirt. *No replacements on that flight. Interceptor?*

“Actually, the scumbag hit Zach.” Goose shrugged with a nod at the evidence. “That load ricocheted off the bionics and tagged me.”

“Is Zach alright?” Niko worried at the sight of a handful of bent, rusty nails and pins on the evidence tray.

“He’s over at Electronics and Med to have his synthoskin replaced and the circuitry checked, but he moved normal enough.” He gave her a crooked smile. “Better Zach and me than Doc and his progs. The CDU’s not that good at deflecting hardware.”

The receptionist, having overheard the story, looked uncomfortably at them. “I’ll enter it as ‘projectile,’” she stated, “with a ‘may require reclassification’ remark. Is that acceptable to you, Ranger Gooseman?”

Niko gave him a minuscule nod, knowing he wouldn’t get better conditions.

Goose signed the form and pushed it over the counter with a grunted “Whatever.” He looked at her. “How about a coffee before I fizzle that into a report?”

“You want to hit the cafeteria *like* this?” Niko looked pointedly at his torn shirt. “Didn’t Walsh say something about that?”

“Actually, he said something about showing my butt¹,” he corrected. “But last time I checked, the pants were still okay.” He patted himself down. “Yup, no additional holes.”

“I don’t think he meant it that specific, Goose,” Niko warned him, fighting a laugh.

“Ah shit!” He leaned over the counter and grabbed one of the spare lab coats, pulling it over his shirt. “Now it’s fine. Let’s go.”

Cafeteria

“Walsh and QBall want me to translate any and all technical or scientific information in the archive,” Niko told him, stirring whipped cream into her coffee, a change of taste she had ALMA to thank for.

¹ See “The Geist of the Goose” (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

“But I’m specialized in Xeryon history.” She sighed and sipped from her makeshift latte. “Besides, Xeryon and Tortuna are hardly one and the same.”

“That sucks.” Goose slurped on his second mug of coffee. “You really have to read that gazillion crystals?”

“Kind of. The commander worked out a deal with the Department of Corrections. Morron’s research assistants have been cleared to work here instead of at the assembly lines on Deltoid.”

Shane snorted. “So, they’re reunited with their findings. Charming.”

“I wish.” Niko snorted. “The device for reading the crystals is one of the artifacts they found, and QBall couldn’t reproduce it. So only three people can access one crystal at the same time. Guess who’s fixed on that list.”

“Saves money,” Goose commented. “Disciplinary transfer or not, you can still double as a guard for the crooks.” He pointed at the carafe with iced water beside her elbow. “You still drink that?”

She remembered his thirst after being shot. “No, you can have it.”

The seams of his borrowed lab coat creaked when he poured himself a glass. “So, who did they send?”

“Ayse and Sven.”

“Beachboy!? Man, the guy’s like headlice, when you think you’re rid of him—”

Niko sighed. “I’m relieved that Ayse is out of Deltoid. She helped me a lot when— It’s just that the professor and Katsumi would have been a lot more help with the scientific information.”

“As instigator of crime cruises, Morron’s out of the question, but what kept Nakawa?”

“Katsumi refused to be ‘chipped like a pet’ – her words,” Niko said with regret. “And without a subcutaneous implant², the DoC refused to let her go.”

“Makes sense,” Goose said wryly. “They’re a tad paranoid in that regard.”

Niko looked up. “Was something like that done to you, too?” she asked. “Did they chip you?”

He gave her a lopsided grin. “They would have, if there were a way to inject me with anything.” At her confused look, he explained, “The bio defenses do have some advantages, girl.” He tabbed against his temple. “For the implant to stay put, I had to be awake and fully focused during the operation. Anything injected without that much cooperation on my part would hit them in the arse even before they put away their toys.” He grew earnest, stirring more sugar into his cooled coffee. “But they can – and do – scan for the ST genome. That’s why the alarm in the administrative area sometimes hiccups when we’re there. My clearance registers slower than ‘Supertrooper on the premises’.”

“And I prefer you off the premises and registered at your desk ASAP,” Zach said good-humoredly behind them. “I need your report by the end of this shift.” He nodded at Niko. “How do you do?”

She winced at the formality, but there was true concern behind it. He was—had been her direct superior and she had yelled at him. She hadn’t forgotten that, and neither had Zach. “I’m better. Thank you for asking,” she said honestly. “Not well yet, but I’m working toward it.”

Zach studied her, seemed to consider saying more. “I expect you fit and back on the team by the end of your transfer, Lieutenant,” was all he finally said before patting Goose on the lab-coated shoulder. “Get going. I want that report of yours early enough for handing in prior off-shift, and you still have to clean up and return that lab coat before QBall accuses you of theft.”

Goose grinned. “Then I’ll keep it. No writing reports in arrest.”

“You wish,” Zach retorted dryly. “I’ll make sure pad and pen are waiting for you in the cell.”

“Ouch.” Gooseman stood, chuckling. “Be seeing you, Niko.”

“Yes.” She smiled. “Be seeing you.”

² Inspired by Donald E. Westlake’s short story *The Winner*; first published in *Nova 1* by Harry Harrison, ed., Delacorte Press, New York 1970, and reprinted with permission of Andrew Nurnberg Associates Ltd., London, in *Great Science Fiction Stories* by Peter Bruck, ed., Ernst Klett Verlag, Stuttgart 1991.

BetaMountain
BetaLabs, Sublevel 3, Hall 26
16:23

“In ancient times, the Empire of Xeryon, at first only our beautiful planet together with its sister world of Xerya, later on including worlds as far apart as Woggollong and Tarkon, and with allies such as the fascinating world of Andor, was a nation of prosperity and freedom, of widespread democratic rights and tolerance, ruled by a dynasty of kings and queens who were aware that they were nothing but the representatives of our beauty and power, the figures to express our – the people of Xeryon – decisions to our civilians and allies. After our first hundred years in space, we no longer needed to conquer other planets as we could convince them diplomatically of the fortunes of alliance. And the lack of wars brought prosperity as our internal system profited from both peace and contemplation. But during these years of contemplation, the ruling Xer-dynasty forgot whom they had to thank for their wealth and power. And most unfortunately, our current king is not only the heir of the Xer-dynasty, but also embodies their bad habits perfectly: during his reign, the popularity and winning of elections is no longer the primary aim of our representatives...”

Sven Masterson put down the data pad holding his translation and stretched. “You know,” he drawled, “I was really annoyed when they told us to stick to the most recent parts of the archive, but this—this is almost fun!” At Niko’s and Ayse’s disbelieving looks, he explained, “Remember Dimdim’s³ lecture about Xeryon being a direct democracy with a kingdom solely for representation?” He snickered. “Looks like our professor was pretty naïve about that. “According to this, the last king was a scalawag called Xerod DIVI and the most powerful person of state wasn’t some elected representative but his mistress Xully.” He shook his head, blond hair flying. “Really, you can’t make up those names! Ayse, we’ve got to publish this after we’re unchipped! It’ll make millions as a schmaltzy novel!”

“I’m sorry to curb your enthusiasm,” Niko cut in, “but these crystals and their data content are now property of BETA. Selling anything is out of the question, if you don’t want to get rechipped.” She nodded firmly at his left upper arm where the DoC’s subcutaneous implant listing ID, committed crime, sentence, restrictions, and conditions of movement sat. “Xerod’s mistress and their naming practices hardly qualify as recent technical data.”

“Depends, Nikki!” Sven laughed. “This Xully had real power and fostered quite a few popular tech projects. The text I just read to you ends abruptly with a short note written by the author’s daughter: *My honored father was arrested this morning on behalf of Her Highness Transient Xully, the most revered patron of the dream traveling arts. We were informed of his death in the subsequent questioning regarding his objections to the dream traveling arcades now being offered for free and have been warned to leave Xeryon as quickly and quietly as possible. This was written by Ariella, daughter of Sorad, in the 3726th year of the Xeryon Empire.*” Sven glanced at his notepad. “That makes it very recent and involves technology. Barring my usual sucktitude at math, XE 3726 equals AD 1920.”

“And Xully-transient would still be dead for 150 years,” Niko said dryly. “Focus on the technology. We don’t need any more trouble than we— than I already have.”

MPQ 219
21:17

The high room of Niko’s two-floor apartment was silent and dark save for a single thick candle lit on the floor of the lower level. Its flame flickered and danced in front of her, creating an ever-changing twilight. Ghosts of the flame wandered across Niko’s retinas, luring her away from the here and now and into the recesses of her mind...

³ Dimdim: nickname for Dorian Immanuel Morron, former professor for Xeryon astro archaeology.

...she returned to Tortuna, to the night in the derelict university ship, and studied the streaks of blood lining the sheets where she and Goose had lain together, before allowing his bleeding back to appear in her mind. Using the dreaded memory as a pivot, she studied the emotions wrapped around it. Yes. She wanted him, had wanted him for a long time, but her desire—her lust had been turned into something to be satisfied at all costs no matter the consequences – or him. She thought of Shane snatching a lab coat this morning to cover another blood-stained shirt for sharing a coffee and listening to her complains about work and knew he deserved better. Any sensate being deserved better.

With a deep breath, she focused, seeking the changes in her mental landscape. Where the exact boundaries of Ariel's teaching were supposed to be, she found a jumble of shards instead. An ever-shifting veil of fog swirling around them. A shadow of almost human shape lurked there, waiting for her. She approached, careful not to cross the shattered boundary, and saw...

...a face that was her own and yet not, staring at her while it shifted, changed, became androgynous, almost masculine in the end, with pale blue eyes under narrow, daringly curved brows studying her icily; smooth hair, now dark brown instead of auburn, floated on the spiritual power filling the place. Sensuous lips formed a single syllable⁴:

I.

She wanted to flee, and forced herself to stay while that foreign part of her continued.

I am all that matters.

She reeled, recognizing it. *Egoism*. A fundamental feature, ancient in spiritual evolution, necessary for survival, yet a fundamental bane in a mentally linked society like Xanadu, where it was barred from the very beginning. No wonder she hadn't recognized it. Years of meditation and exercise had firmly excluded it from her decision process. She swallowed. Shane had been right, it had happened on 17798⁵. Egoism had allowed her to kill that first gazelle; she didn't have to take just that tiny, innocent life, trusting enough to come close— *stupid enough*, the deceptively charming voice in her mind corrected, but she refused to be derailed by it. They had needed the meat or they would have starved eventually, but not immediately. The gazelle had been the first animal to be lured in by her powers, the first of many she had killed in the name of survival...

...and more. Convenience, ease, feeling helpful, feeling *powerful* even with a depleted implant that slowed Shane's self-healing process to a crawl. Recalling a night after their return, she remembered claws wandering over her skin, fangs teasing her lips. Her nails had scored his back even then⁶... but on Tortuna, she'd drawn blood *after* he gave in.

Niko drew a sharp breath and forced herself to admit it when she opened her eyes and extinguished the candle. She had killed, had taken an innocent life, had taken him...

...because she could. And she would do it again, all of it and more, if she didn't watch it.

⁴ If you are curious about the origin of this mental feature of Niko's and why it takes specifically this form, have a look at Ivan Dimitrievich Ilianov [b.: ~ 2037 – d.: 2065-06-08].

See "Victoria" (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf) for the story behind it.

See my "Original Characters Gallery" at <http://www.annkniggendorf.de/gr/origchar.html> for a portrait with a better resolution.



⁵ See "Lost" (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

⁶ See "Hot Summer Night" (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

BetaLabs

The labs were deserted at lunch time. Goose's steps almost echoed in the corridor after he'd cleared the reception. It was a rare event that he was on Earth *with* free time around midday. Today's lunch-break was owed to inflexible maneuver plans and a defect in the Apache's atmosphere sensors, and he planned to make the most of it. Deserted or not, the labs and the cafeteria were still public territory and disciplinary transfer or not, Niko was a colleague. He'd get away with eating together.

The door to hall 26 opened at his approach. "Niko?"

The smell stopped him dead. Guts. Excrement. Blood. *Death*.

His hand fell on his blaster, safety strap and catch released at the same time. He moved soundlessly deeper into the lab. The pungent odor was easy to follow, past the rows of cabinets and shelves to the round table holding the crystal reader and stacks of data pads. The body was on the floor behind it. Battle senses on high alert, Goose crossed the empty space between the last shelves and the table, cautious not to destroy possible evidence.

It was a man, partially naked. A fear the battle senses hadn't allowed to form fully disappeared from the back of his mind as he took in the details. The body was bound into an unnatural position with the arms tied to the lower legs and the hands resting in the hollows of the knees. The vic's clothes had been ripped down arms and legs, the exposed belly was covered in blood, the head hidden by a flap of the shirt.

Goose crouched, carefully avoiding the puddle of blood and excrement at the base of the victim's spine, and pushed the shirt aside to get a look at the face—

Masterson. *Fuck!*

Regular cuts in the belly from a combat knife or a large scalpel, Goose observed grimly upon closer examination. One of the cuts had opened the abdominal cavity. That was the reason for the stink of guts. *Beachboy was lucky*, Goose thought grimly, spotting the unintentionally severed artery. *Dying early in what can take hours*. Stun marks showed where a sleeve had been torn down. The correctional implant had been fried. *As if the thing would sound an alarm without the body leaving Masterson's permitted area*. Gooseman frowned. There was a second set of stun marks at the side of Masterson's throat—

Someone screamed.

MedoStat

A few minutes later

"Are you sure it's okay to be here?" Ayse asked, looking uneasily at the large 'military personnel only' sign on the wall opposite the plastic chairs she and Niko were occupying. "What if I get in trouble for trespassing—"

"This is the medical facility closest to your work place," Niko said firmly. "They won't turn you away in an emergency, and your arm—" She nodded firmly at the angry red swelling. "—sure looks like one. It's a disgrace that the DoC's certified physician gave you an appointment that late. You have to report her!"

Ayse shook her head. "To whom? I—"

"Report it to me," a male voice said beside them. "I'm Dr. Miyar." He glanced at his data pad and looked at Niko. "You specifically asked for me?"

"I wanted a known face," Niko confirmed. "My colleague isn't part of BETA's workforce or the personnel stationed here, but she's in pain and her arm doesn't look as if she can wait for an appointment in six days."

Miyar gave her an owlish look. "Let's have a look at that arm," he stated, waving them through towards the examination rooms. "We'll see about the formalities after—"

=Niko and Attalan, Ayse, immediately report to your place of work! = an electronic voice snarled out of the room speakers. =Failure to do so will result in—=

"Patient Attalan will continue to exam room 5," Miyar snapped, annoyed, "identify yourself and reduce your volume to one befitting a hospital."

=Correctional AI 46. Your suggestion is unacceptable, = the AI stated decidedly quieter now. =Niko and Attalan, Ayse, are required for—=

"Order revoked for patient Attalan," Miyar barked. "Clearance: Miyar, Roland, CMO BETA. Tell your superiors that a chief medical officer's suggestion is a command by default! Now get lost. I will release the patient once I'm convinced it won't be detrimental to her health." He snorted and told Niko, "You better go now. I'll take care of things here."

"Thank you." Niko gave Ayse an encouraging nod and hurried back towards the labs.

Holding Block 11

Gooseman sat on the narrow bunk, hands resting motionless on his knees, and waited. There wasn't much he could do that wouldn't make things worse. *Admit it, Shane*, he thought mockingly. *This time you won the cesspit. Or was that the jackpot? Doesn't matter. You're done for.*

"Don't make a fool of yourself, O'Leary!" Walsh's furious voice came from outside. "Damnation! He's a Galaxy Ranger!"

"Commander," the SecStaff Lieutenant cut in. "He was found squatting comfortably next to a still-warm corpse. And the witness said, it didn't look as if he was in a hurry to call authorities!"

"Because he *is* authority!" Walsh snapped. "He's a Galaxy Ranger! You know damn well that any Ranger would make a first assessment of the situation before calling anyone else to a scene of crime. And he's an S5!"

"I can see that, commander, but he's a supertr—"

"*He is a Galaxy Ranger, O'Leary!*" Walsh drowned him out. "Get that into your head or I'll hand you your skull on a platter together with your badge!" O'Leary valued either his head or his badge enough to reconsider his stance, because the locking mechanism clicked and the forcefield surrounding Goose's cell quieted at the same time the door to the corridor opened, admitting Walsh. "Get out of there, Gooseman. It's over."

He rose from the narrow bunk, mindful not to stretch or do anything else that might look threatening to O'Leary. The security officer was scared shitless just by him being here anyway. "Sir." Goose saluted briefly. "You know damn well that it isn't."

"My office, Gooseman."

"Yes, sir."

Cmdr. Walsh's office

"I'm sorry, Captain Fox. I don't know when the commander will return." Sheela's voice had taken on the slightly annoyed timbre of a parent repeatedly being asked 'are we there yet?'. "He said you should wait for him." She looked up from her work to zero in on Doc. "You can have Dr. Hartford confirm it via the security feeds if he prefers to admit he's got unapproved access to them."

"Me?" Doc's eyes widened to what Zach privately called 'dishes-of-innocence'. "Little innocent moi?" The hacker put his hands over his heart. "What makes you believe I'd be capable of such dastardly villainous—"

"This conversation," Sheela dead-panned, returning her attention back to her work.

Zach bit back an unprofessional laugh and covertly glanced at the time displayed on his wrist com. They'd been summoned forty-five minutes ago, and had been waiting since. Unusual, given the commander's efficiency. Zach sobered, remembering that Gooseman hadn't answered his summons at all. If this was related—

The door to the corridor opened, admitting Walsh with Goose in tow. A sharp nod sent the ST into the inner office. "Fox, Hartford, in there. Sheela, *no* disturbances."

"Yes, sir."

From what Zach knew of Walsh's secretary that meant she'd use live rounds to keep people from even using the buzzer. He saluted sharply the moment the door closed behind Walsh.

"At ease," the commander said gruffly, relaxing, now that the lock had clicked into place. He wearily sat down behind his desk. "Captain Fox, less than two hours ago, a man working with Niko on Tortunian artifacts was tortured and eventually killed in the labs. Ranger Gooseman was on location and there are reports of prior enmity between him and the victim, both facts rendering him prime suspect for the crime."

Torture and murder? Zach thought. *Yes, Gooseman had knowledge of the former, but—*

Next to him Doc blurted, "Sir, that's bull—"

"I don't believe for one moment that Gooseman's *stupid* enough for it," Walsh cut him off, "but SecStaff and the BWL are another matter." He looked pointedly at the ST who stood motionless as far away as protocol allowed. "Fox, I want you and Hartford to clear him before the Board gets wind of this. I don't give a damn about whose turf you'll have to break up to do so. The Board doesn't wait for trials when it comes to him."

"Understood, sir."

"Given the overall distrust of Ranger Gooseman, we will need irrefutable evidence that he wasn't on location."

"On it, sir." Doc whipped out his CDU, already powering up and shushing at the flitting program sparkles emerging from the holosphere.

"Gooseman, you're grounded until this mess is sorted out," the commander's order was sharp. "And with grounded I mean within my sight, got that?"

"Yes, sir."

Any less inflection and he'd be speaking in Morse code, Zach thought. "Sir." He took a step forward. "We also have to catch the killer, given that SecStaff wastes their efforts on Gooseman. I'd like to get his witness report before we head out."

"A good point, captain," Walsh conceded. "So, what were you doing next to a tortured corpse, Gooseman? And why were you in the labs at all?"

"I had unexpected downtime at midday. Since Niko's current assignment has regular working hours, I expected to find her for lunch break." At the commander's unspoken 'why?' he added, "Teaming up means the cafeteria doesn't have to clear two tables for the pariahs."

Walsh didn't react to the outburst. "So, you arrived at the labs and saw the corpse?"

"Smelled it," Gooseman corrected. "Right when the door opened. I thought it was—" he stopped. "The clothing obscured the identity. I didn't know it was Masterson until I crouched and removed the shirt from his face. The lab assistant screamed before I could call base security."

"But you did call them?" Zach asked immediately. If SecStaff had that call in their logs—

Gooseman shook his head. "I didn't get the chance, captain."

Doc beside him cursed, whether at Goose's admission or something on his CDU Zach didn't know. Walsh sighed. "So, what did you find out about the crime?" When Gooseman nodded questioningly at Zach and Doc, he added, "Forget the secrecy, Gooseman, that murder is already as public as they come."

"Masterson was interrogated not murdered."

"Doesn't matter." Walsh waved the remark aside. "Evidenced by?"

"The body was partially stripped and bound round with abdomen and genitals exposed for treatment. The RFID tracker in his arm was fried, likely with a heavy stunner. I didn't spot any indications for physical coercion, so the same weapon probably got his cooperation in the beginning." He snorted. "I counted three belly cuts in regular intervals. The lowest one was too deep, opening the abdominal cavity and severing a major artery. Masterson bled to death in a few minutes." The muscles in Goose's cheek worked as he added, "That's a rookie mistake, sir."

"So, we're searching an amateur torturer," Walsh summarized. Zach noticed that the commander didn't take his eyes off the ST as he said that.

Gooseman stared down at his boots. "No, sir. I don't think so."

"More precise, Gooseman."

"There's a detail that doesn't fit."

Walsh sighed audibly. "And that is?"

"Gooseman—" Zach stopped when the commander raised a hand, quietly shaking his head. They both waited for the ST to answer.

"Masterson's vocal cords were partially paralyzed."

Walsh swore, sitting back in his chair.

"What—?" Zach gave up on getting that.

"It's a technique to keep the victim from screaming," Walsh explained grimly. "Way outside the expertise of a self-trained sadist."

"It's the work of a pro," Gooseman added in a voice barren of emotion. "Like me."

No, Zach corrected mentally. *Not like you. You were freaked out when you staged that coffee party for Nimrod last year*⁷. But the knowledge would seal the case for the Board and SecStaff. *Seal and freeze.* "Any idea of how that fits with *an accident*?"

"Well taught but unfamiliar with the human anatomy," Gooseman answered without looking up. "Maybe alien. At least somebody who doesn't know humans inside out." Zach noticed that the ST didn't even try to say 'us'. "Or the scumbag's been just unlucky." Gooseman ran a hand through his hair. "I doubt that he got what he came for. Masterson died too early. Three cuts in—" He shook his head. "He wasn't past the initial shock when he died."

Walsh tapped his intercom. "Sheela. Have armed MPs stationed in the labs." He closed the line and told the rangers, "They won't better their technique for humans on our people."

"And what did Masterson know that's worth risking a bloody interrogation in public?" Goose asked no one in particular.

"Good question," Walsh said grimly. "You'll answer it once you're no longer considered knowing the answer."

BetaMountain
BetaLabs, Sublevel 3

"No, detective!" Niko stated, clipped, every word bitten off. This was probably the tenth time that she answered this specific set of questions. "I do not know why anyone would want Sven Masterson dead. We're translating archaeological texts from an alien archive last accessed over two-hundred years ago, there's no cutting edge with these data if you don't scribble on paper!"

"Yet your fellow 'translator'—" Detective Wang said 'translator' as if it were synonymous to 'drug dealer' "—was cut to pieces while his colleagues were *conveniently* absent and—"

"The implant in my colleague's arm caused an infection!" Niko flared. "She needed a doctor. We—"

"As I said: *convenient*," Wang drawled. "And where's that colleague of yours?"

⁷ See "Droidal Affairs" (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

Niko's "Ask at MedoStat!" mingled with Zachary's firm, "He's here. And I want to know what you learned about the case *besides* the confirmed alibi of the victim's co-workers."

Niko slumped, burying her head in her hands after the door had closed behind the angry detective. "I didn't know what it's like to be in a biased questioning," she said tiredly. "I—"

"Biased?" Zach asked, pulling out the chair Wang had eschewed in favor of towering over her. Zach sat. "How so?"

Niko sighed. "SecStaff seems fixed on me arranging for someone to kill Sven." She stopped, startled. "I didn't even realize he's dead. I..." She shook her head. "It doesn't make sense."

"Goose found the body," Zach told her. "They're trying to pin it to him."

"But that's nonsense! Shane would never—" She looked aside, tried to rebuild her composure. "I mean, why would Goose do that?"

"You tell me," Zach retorted. "He came here to see you."

Niko was spared an immediate answer when the door burst open, admitting Doc in flurry of program sparks. "Goose's off the hook!" he proclaimed. "ALMA provided me with a *really* good time frame for his lab trip, and either our Gooseman's not as keen about avoiding surveillance as he claims to be or he's getting lazy in his old age, but there's half a dozen cams marking his way down here before he enters the 'circle of malfunction' as I'd like to call it. The closest functioning cam is at the forensics counter, and it caught him less than eight minutes before the alarm."

"Good." Zach appeared satisfied. "Coroner's scan reports Masterson's death at least thirty minutes before the alarm. Prepare a time-frame report, three copies. I'll inform Walsh and then we can finally work on catching the killer. And Doc, have Ms. Attalan brought to our office. There's no need to question her on location."

"Aye, aye, Capt'n! And then I'll have an in-depth look at the surveillance feeds. If they caught Goose, they caught everyone. Let's see if big data can weed out the killer!"

"I don't want to know," Zach stated dryly. "And don't get caught."

"Me?" Doc looked aghast. "This is *The Doc* you're speaking with, remember?"

"I remember five days of adult Tri-D service on your hotel bill from Andor."

"You still owe me an answer," Zach said the moment the door had closed again. "What's going on between you and Gooseman?"

"We just have lunch together when his schedule permits it," Niko answered, exasperated. "The two of us aren't especially welcome among BETA's personnel these days." She squared her shoulders, meeting Zach inquiry head-on. "It makes being ostracized a less solitary affair."

Zach held her eyes for quite a while. "Since I'm obviously not getting the real story here," he said finally, allowing none of his annoyance to show in his voice, "What did Masterson work on that's worth risking murder in a public lab hall?"

Niko winced barely perceptible. "I don't know, Zach," she said tiredly. "Walsh wants us to search for technical and military information, but the archive wasn't built – or retrieved – with that goal in mind. Most of what Sven worked on was just social gossip. He joked about publishing it as schmaltzy novels after—" She stopped, wiping her eye.

"Hardly something to kill for, two-hundred years later," Zach concluded. "There really wasn't anything else?"

"There's quite a lot about what seems to have been a popular pastime for the Xeryons. It's called dream travelling, but the information is very fragmented and doesn't make sense to us yet."

Zach frowned. "Anything Masterson worked on exclusively?"

"No, translations were always teamwork. Between the three of us, we covered a wide range of Xeryon culture, necessary to make sense of the texts." Niko sighed. "And even if, how would the killer know that? Our work isn't top secret, but we don't publish scientific papers about our results, either."

"So, Masterson was likely a target of convenience," Zach concluded aloud, drawing her attention away from the fresh pain. "It could have been anyone being alone in the labs."

"Makes me wish my implant were charged," Niko muttered uncomfortably.

"I'll talk with the commander." Zach stood. "The MPs he sent should suffice till then." He stopped at the door, looking back. "Did anything happen between Gooseman and Masterson on Tortuna besides that slap in the cockpit?"

The look she gave him was clearly startled but her answer defiant. "Nothing of consequence."

Zach inclined his head and left. 'Nothing of consequence' wasn't the same as 'nothing at all'. He was getting closer.

GRS5 office

20 minutes later

"Where's Goose?" Zach asked at the sight of the empty desk beside Doc's.

"The commander keeps him until report and proofs are filed and confirmed," Doc told him without any of his usual cheerfulness. "When it comes to the establishment and our resident ST, he doesn't take chances." His hands continued whizzing over the keyboard. "The files will hit the net in a few minutes."

"Keep local copies."

"With me and my lawyer," Doc told him. "Ms. Attalan is waiting for you."

"Ms. Attalan," Zach began innocuously. "You knew Mr. Masterson even before your expedition to Tortuna, didn't you?"

"Yes." Ayse looked down at her hands, folded on the table in front of her. One of her overall's sleeves was rolled up to allow for a bandage around her biceps, the white material a stark contrast to her natural dark tan. "We both studied xeno-archaeology at the UE and worked as assistants for professor Morron." She swallowed. "Sven—Mr. Masterson," she corrected herself, "seldom worked with real artifacts. His interests are—were the social systems."

"Is that important for the work you're doing for BETA?"

"It provides context for interpreting the texts."

"So, his death will halt your work?" Zach inquired.

"No, sir, but it will slow us down. Context doesn't come as easily to Niko or me."

"I see. Do you know if anything happened to him during that expedition?"

She blinked. "What do you mean with 'happened'? He was our pilot. He stayed out of the library most of the time, but he made up for it with doing most of the cataloging. He—" She shrugged helplessly.

"Did he ever disappear from the camp?" Zach specified. If a previous involvement with the Crown was possible—

"Shouldn't you be hunting Sven's murderer, not him?"

"That's what I'm doing, Ms. Attalan. To deduce what lead to the crime, I must understand the victim. I need to know what happened before the crime. Did his behavior change? Did he do something out of character for him? Something like that."

"He sought quarrels with Ranger Gooseman after—" She fell silent, frowning.

Masterson did what!? Zach almost blurted that out, instead he prompted calmly, "After?"

"After he spotted Niko's bruises." She looked aside, clearly uncomfortable now. "Sven usually knew better than involving himself in matters he's been told aren't his business. And Niko said so in very certain terms, but Sven—" She shook her head. "It's good your Ranger didn't take the bait."

...didn't take the bait. Zach felt a muscle in his jaw twitch. On the flight to Andor, he'd asked 'Off the record, Gooseman. Did an ST hurt Niko?' and the answer had been a very reluctant 'Yes'. *What if—but an ST wouldn't get past BETA's security. No chance. Except one. And ALMA provided Goose's*

time frame for the labs— Zach suddenly felt cold. “Ms. Attalan,” he heard himself asking, “Did Gooseman hurt Niko?”

“I believe she hurt him first.”

Gooseman, entering the office stopped in his tracks. The cat was out of the bag, and it wasn't as harmless as Poss. Squaring his shoulders, he went straight past his desk toward Zach's office.

“He's still talking with Ms. Attalan,” Doc warned him.

“I know. There's no mistaking it for my ears,” Goose said grimly. This wasn't the time to pretend being normal. He knocked and entered without waiting for an acknowledgment. “Captain, we've got to talk. Now.” With a glance at Ayse, “Alone.”

Zach stared at him long and hard before asking Ms. Attalan to wait outside. “You better have a very good reason for interrupting an interrogation, Lieutenant,” he said after the door had closed behind her.

Goose felt the familiar stiffness enter his spine under scrutiny. Zach and Walsh both had the same effect on him in that regard. He met the disapproving stare head-on and said, “Niko and I violated paragraph 175d on Tortuna.”

175d – intercourse on duty. Zach froze. “Repeat that.”

“Niko and I violated paragraph—”

Zach lost it. “*What on Earth were you thinking?!*”

“I wasn't thinking much, Captain,” Gooseman said dryly. “And I know that's not okay, but regulations were probably the last thing on my mind once she made contact.”

“*She* made contact?” Zach narrowed his eyes. “Niko initiated it?”

“I don't think she was thinking either.”

I believe she hurt him first. Zach closed his eyes, trying to clear the maze. “Sit down. I'm getting a crick in my neck.” Goose sat stiffly on the edge of the chair Ms. Attalan had vacated earlier. “Do you know what that means for you?” Zach asked quietly.

“That I'm deep in the shit if it gets out.”

That was putting it mildly. “Tell me what happened.”

Fifteen minutes later

“I believe she'd have flipped sooner or later anyway. Me being there was probably the reason for the form it took, though.” Goose wiped his face. “I—won't deny there's attraction between us, but we wouldn't have acted on it. We—” He shook his head, apparently giving up trying to explain something that didn't make sense to him. “The two of you taught me better than that.”

“Who taught you what?” Zach asked at the non-sequitur.

“You and Walsh. You taught me better than to give up on a colleague having issues.”

“This is more than ‘issues’,” Zach corrected him calmly. “And Niko's more than a colleague to you, isn't she?”

“*Fuck!* This isn't about what she is to me, Zach,” Goose exploded. “This is all about that freezing dirtball of a planet we were stuck on all winter! – and no, I did *not* touch her there, ‘k? – but she's got to learn dealing with what surviving there taught her and she can't do that on Pluto or where she came from. If that worked, she'd know that shit already, and she clearly doesn't!”

Zach remained calm. “But you do?”

Gooseman sighed. “I know what I do for survival. I don't know about all the rest.”

Zach was silent. He'd gotten a glimpse past the iron façade and realized that the ST was navigating a minefield the man barely understood. “What did you tell the commander?” he asked quietly.

“Walsh got the same story as you.” Goose slumped. “And was equally happy about it, remember? Can't we leave it at that?”

"Leave it?" Zach shook his head. "Gooseman, I can't do that. I—"

"Don't forget what I am," Goose interrupted him coldly. "The Board doesn't give a damn about me. All they want is an excuse – any excuse – to put me on ice for good. Reveal the truth, especially now after that shit on Andor and it might be Niko's dismissal, but it *will* be me on the rocks!" He caught himself and added calmer, "And don't make me a saint, Zach. I didn't say no."

"You didn't say yes, either," Zach reminded him. When Goose replied nothing, he pressed on, "Could you have stopped it?"

"Not without hurting her more than I already had."

"Would you have stopped it if she hadn't been in your head?"

Silence.

Zach sighed. "I'll have to talk with Niko," he said finally. "I'll decide afterwards what to do about this mess."

"Captain—"

"Afterwards!" he snapped. "In the meantime, check Masterson's records, then get down to the labs. The commander didn't retract his order to review his work, right?"

"No, sir. I'm on my way."

=Niko. To my office.= Zach's summons had been sharp and concise. It made her hurry on her way up to the LEO area. She had to show her ID and her lab card, had the chip in the card checked against the list of clearances downloaded into the security port, confirming that she'd really been called in. Niko tried not to scowl at the stern reminder not to abscond from the direct path to her destination. If she knew where it was—

—broke the camel's back. "Yes, sergeant. I know exactly where Captain Fox's office is located. I worked there for the last three years."

"You aren't working there now," was the cold reply. "You may pass."

The Series-5 office was the usual organized chaos when she got there. The room smelled of weapon oil and Goose's acidic coffee. Doc's desk was covered in miniaturized or even holographic devices, Zach's in neatly arranged stacks of hard copy reports – she knew despite the appearance of meticulous order that he usually had to search five minutes or more for a specific file –, the emptiness of her own desk felt like a void in all the familiarity.

"Hi," she said with forced liveliness. "Zach asked for me."

Doc gave her a distracted wave amidst a multilayer holocube displaying who knew how many desktops simultaneously. "Zach's in the back office, playing boss-man."

"He's not playing boss-man, Doc. He *is* boss-man, remember?" Goose got up from his desk, heading for the door. Passing her by, he whispered, "Zach knows."

Niko swallowed, crossed the last meters, and knocked. "Zachary, I—"

"Close the door behind you," he interrupted her. "GV is recording this meeting encrypted to my private key in case I have an inexplicable change of mind in it."

She winced. "Zachary, I would never—"

"That's what I thought and was proven wrong about," he said coolly. "I wouldn't have believed you capable of such despicable behavior before." He sat back in his chair, watching her icily. Zachary had never avoided her eyes like so many others did for fear of her powers. He didn't do it now, either. "Sit down and tell me what happened," he ordered. "And don't restrict yourself to Tortuna."

BetaLabs, Sublevel 3, Hall 26

Goose made a step forward into the lab, allowing the automated door to close and cut off the disingenuous whispers behind him. "Engage lock!" The clicks of the bolts falling into place were almost a relief. Nobody would barge in, screaming.

Apparently, his hearing range wasn't part of the rumor mill, yet. He kind of wished it were. 'Should have been frozen' had been among the nicer comments he caught on the way down here. 'I warned my kids about that killer being given free rein' was among the more insidious – and ridiculous – ones. 'When I thought they finally had him—'

He shuddered and firmly turned his attention to the task at hand. What had Masterson known worth risking a bloody interrogation within BETA? He studied the once again deserted lab hall and sniffed. Forensics and the crime scene cleaners had been here already, removing the body and its effluents and adding bleach and disinfectant to the mix of smells. Shit and blood, the weak ozone stemming from UV sterilization, Tortunian sands, cargo bay, several people, *Niko*. He shook his head. *Masterson's. Work.* Slowly, he went over towards the work table and the crystal reader platform, remembering...

...Masterson's implant had been fried. Gooseman frowned. The things weren't visible, so whoever had cut up Beachboy must have known about it. But why fry it then? DoC chips checked only location and if they were still inside a body, not the condition of said body. So, it was somebody who knew about the implants, but not how they worked.

And why cutting in the first place? It was blunt and messy and not very reliable. Cutting was done for two reasons, either you were a sadist or you were short on time. The latter was probably a given, but was it only the location or also the information sought?

And civilian personnel or not, this was a security sensitive area. The was Sublevel 3, dammit. You couldn't get much deeper into BETA's bowels than here. Nobody with a visitor's badge would get this far. They were searching an insider. Somebody with a valid clearance. Goose looked back at the door he'd locked. What if that somebody also had locked the door for a more private bloodying? He tapped his wristcom to call Doc.

GRS5 office

"I didn't recognize it at first. I noticed a shift in my feelings but ascribed it to the stress of surviving on 17798." She swallowed. "It's not that telepaths don't dream of what we can't have, but we're taught from a very young age that we cannot obtain it with our abilities. Our abilities are the foundation of our society. Abusing our gifts for personal gain... is an unspeakable crime in that context." Niko drew a deep breath, admitting to that. "I have no excuse that I failed to spot the egoism taking root in my decision process after I hunted—*no, I killed innocent life*—selfishly using my gift to cloud my prey's judgment."

"For survival," Zach corrected her calmly. "That's a difference."

"Not in psionics," Niko said quietly. "I needed meat to survive. I used my gift to obtain it. I got what I wanted, no matter the alternatives. Think of it as breaking a dam. Hunting made the initial crack in the wall, the chaos of the archeological expedition weakened the structure, and Goose—" She wrapped her arms around herself. "I've been struggling to rebuild it ever since."

"What would Xanadu do about it?"

"I violated Goose's mental integrity by not giving him free choice," she swallowed. "I'm a dangerous aberration."

"You'd be banned?"

"No, Xanadu would never endanger others by expelling their criminals." She couldn't keep the disgust at herself out of her voice. "I'll be locked up, secured like the Megamind to protect the world from me."

"They wouldn't give you a chance to rehabilitate yourself?" he asked incredulously.

She looked down at her lap, consciously stopped hugging herself. "A broken dam offers no protection."

"A dam can be rebuilt knowing the waters," Zachary said firmly. "Do it." He leaned back in his seat, studying her. His face was a mask, she didn't know what was going on behind it, and knew that

she'd already struggle staying separated like this from Goose. The realization scared her. She nodded meekly. "Don't get me wrong," Zach continued. "You're on probation until further notice. Forget about getting your implant recharged. You're lethal in hand-to-hand combat, something Masterson never was. Don't believe I don't know about your training sessions with Goose. And speaking of Goose..." Zach's eyes grew icy. "I'm as much responsible for him as I am for you. If I get the impression that your self-control is slipping again, I *will* inform Lady Ariel that her ambassador to Earth mind-raped a comrade!"

"I didn't!" Niko jerked up at the verbal slap, staring at him, horrified. "Goose would have—"

"*Don't blame your victim!*" Zach snapped, disgust apparent in his tone. "You admitted to clouding his judgment to get what you wanted. What he might have done had he been free to make that decision is not relevant for your crime." He fixed her hard. "When it comes to your abilities, we have to trust you. You violated that trust. I'm risking my career here, because Goose made a very strong case. *For you*. Don't make me regret the decision that the two of you deserve better than a death sentence based on paragraph 175."

GRS5 office

Outside, Doc frowned at the displayed data, then called up a three-dimensional map of Beta Mountain. Marking the data sets to be used, he added the movements of all people registered in or near the lab during the three hours before Masterson's death. The schematic base filled up with a chaotic whirl of lines. He studied the chaos briefly, then eliminated anybody showing the same behavior on the day before. Still more than a hundred lines remained...

Not good enough.

He clucked his tongue, eliminated all people whose clearance wasn't high enough to lock doors in the lab, and saw the pool of candidates reduced to one.

"Goose-my-man," Doc muttered, "sometimes you're too smart for your own good."

He deleted the last step. And stopped...

It's a local voice command. It could have been recorded.

Out of BETA's 78,391 personnel, 247 people had a valid clearance to seal lab doors. How many of the folks abnormally around at Masterson's death had been close enough to one of those 247 to record their lock command?

With renewed zeal, Doc began frisking the data.

MPQ 217

19:27

The corridors in the military personnel tract weren't deserted this early in the evening, though they were suspiciously empty when Goose headed towards his quarters. His passing through the mountain was marked by an echoing shell of hastening footsteps and swiftly closed doors. Sounds that played in reverse once he'd crossed around the next corner. Base service had left the bag with the laundry in front of his door. A note fluttered to the floor when he picked it up. He caught it and unlocked his door. Poss wound around his boots while he read,

Ranger Gooseman. Base Laundry wants to provide the best possible service for you, therefore it is necessary for you to separate your red clothes strictly from your whites. Sincerely...

Goose crumpled the note and tossed it to the floor, watching Poss leaping at the ball of paper, sending it with a swift paw across the room and darting after it. Goose emptied the laundry bag onto his bed. Uniform shirts and pants looked okay. His underwear was black anyway. The socks... *Shit!* A red bandanna had slipped between the socks. Great. Just great.

He tossed the empty bag on top of the clothes, sat down on the single chair at his table, and – propping his elbows on the table – buried his face in his hands.

Should have been frozen...

I thought they finally had him...

I warned my kids about him...

What were you doing next to a tortured corpse?

From him ‘My job’ wasn’t a believable answer, despite his watertight alibi and filed reports declaring his innocence. He snorted mockingly at himself. When had innocence ever been a valid description for him? *Soldier. Murderer. Torturer.* He pressed his palms against his eyes. *Atrocity. ST.*

Poss meowed under the table, rubbing against his legs, demanding his dinner.

Intestines and blood. Shit, death, and fear.

Antiseptics, bleach, and disinfectant.

Torture... no, *information procurement*⁸. Goose leaned back to stare at the ceiling. *Of all the shit, it had to be that.*

The lights dimmed, unasked. He smelled a whiff of salt and a higher humidity in the air. ALMA subtly adjusted the climate controls to make him more comfortable. He ought to thank her for it, and knew that all he would get for it were a rough reprimand that ‘normals wouldn’t notice’.

Forlorn, he looked at the laundry pile on his bed. He was rather sure, even normals would notice pink socks.

MPQ 219

23:17

...mind-raped a comrade.

The memory of Zachary’s cold voice battered against Niko’s mind, filling the meditation circle, forcing her to see what she’d done from the physical perspective. It brought the reality of her actions into sync with the termini of her profession.

Don’t blame your victim!

The candle flames seemed to flicker. Molten wax dripped loudly onto the floor, each splash a reminder that she had failed to consider her actions in that context, too. Among her people, the psyche was all that matter, only the mental pain, the sensation of anguish and devastation was considered, and there had been nothing like that coming from Shane.

He didn’t perceive what had happened as abuse.

Didn’t. Couldn’t. He knew only the violence.

It made what she’d done so much worse. Like a real predator, she’d gone after the weakest, the least protected prey.

2088-09-19

Office of Cmdr. Walsh

09:02

“Your reasoning behind this?” Walsh studied the remaining S5s lined up in front of his desk. Fox was angry, but too experienced an officer to let that anger get in his way. Hartford focused on his tasks, likely avoided thinking about the details of the case at all.

⁸ See “IP” (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

Yet, it was Gooseman who answered, “The M.O., sir. Cutting is messy and not very reliable. It’s used because the interrogator is either a sadist or short on time.”

“In the labs, the latter is a given,” Walsh agreed grimly.

“Yes, sir.” Goose continued, “and cutting can’t be concealed. You can’t pretend it’s something else. If somebody walks in, you’re in for it. It makes sense to lock the door.”

“And not many people in BETA are high enough in the proverbial food chain to lock lab doors without triggering an alarm,” Hartford added. “It’s none of them directly, but a cross-check with the people registered near the scene of crime who are not normally in the labs returned only five who got into close enough contact with one of them for recording a door lock command.”

Walsh narrowed his eyes. “Five?”

“Five,” Fox confirmed. “External personnel. Civilian contractors.”

“You excluded military on purpose?” Walsh inquired.

“No, sir.” – Hartford.

“Good. Fox, Hartford. Question them.” Goose winced. “Verbally,” Walsh specified. “Gooseman, back to the labs. Take Niko and find out what’s in those crystals that’s worth a bloody interrogation on my base. Locked door or not.” Walsh watched him sharply. “And Gooseman. I do *not* want you anywhere near the practical side of this case, got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Dismissed.”

43 minutes later

“Really, Doc. An admissions officer, two janitors, a laundry clerk, and *a librarian?!?*” Zach looked up from checking the list Doc had sent him.

“The librarian was actually my top guess. She had contact with at least four people having a suitable clearance.”

“And that she’s responsible for tracking down missing documents didn’t enter in your equation?” Zach asked sardonically.

“It did. It made her position more useful for a possible spy. Besides—” Doc shuddered. “Did you *ever* face a librarian when your borrowed media is six months overdue?”

Zach rolled his eyes. “Well, you can take Mrs. Kwon off your list. Ditto officer McCarthy. His alibi is rock-solid. Buzzwang was on his heels for the whole time he was in the labs. Both, McCarthy *and* QBall complained about it.”

“That leaves the janitors and the laundry guy.” Doc sighed. “I’d say it’s the laundry.”

“Like you said it’s Mrs. Kwon?” Zach snorted. “How many cleared people did he come across?”

“One.” Doc shrugged. “But he’d know how to get the blood off his clothes.”

“Still, the janitors are first. GV, send a request to RHONDDA for pinpointing their current locations.”

BetaLabs, Sublevel 3, Hall 26

“So, what are we looking for?” Niko asked as the door opened in front of them. She drew a deep breath before going inside.

For Goose, the place still smelled of disinfectant, blood, guts, and Tortuna. It made him wonder just how well crime scene cleaners removed the gore. Or was that just him remembering things too well? “Don’t try to read here,” he warned her, “or me. Believe me, you don’t want *that* in your head.”

Niko said nothing, but the hurt on her face made him want to kick himself as they headed deeper into the room. “Beachboy had an ugly death,” he explained roughly. “One that can’t happen

by accident. Someone was desperate enough to do that down *here* and not at his place after work where being caught is a lot less likely. That doesn't make sense, unless what they want is here."

"All we have is an old archive," Niko said quietly. "The youngest information in these crystals is some hundred-fifty years old."

"But it was on Tortuna." Goose shrugged. "Let's start with that."

"Tortuna and Xeryon are totally different societies," she reminded him.

"But on the same planet. Maybe the Queen just moved in and raided the attic."

"I don't think it works that way," Niko answered dryly. "But let's see what we have."

Base Laundry

13:38

"—luckily the customer didn't complain—" the manager of BETA's outsourced laundry department stopped, her eyes darting uneasily from Zach to Doc and back. "Or is that why you're here?" she asked. "I know he's one of the rangers, but I assure you the pink socks were an accident. Phil's new on the job and didn't do that on purpose. He—"

"Pink socks?" Doc inquired. "As in *Barbie*—?"

"Mrs. Margiszaw," Zach said before Doc could derail them, "I'm afraid we aren't free to discuss the reason for our presence with anybody but Mr. Okalpa himself."

"Of course, of course. He's in the Whites room. If you follow me—" Mrs. Margiszaw dusted her hands and headed down the aisle between several two-level high washing machines. "Just be careful about the linens, please. We don't need another pink incident—" She almost walked into the door when it failed to open for her. She frowned and muttered. "That's weird. This door shouldn't be locked. The safety regulations—" She slammed her flat hand against the metal frame, shouting, "PHIL! IF YOU LOCKED THE BLEACH ROOM AGAIN, I HAVE YOUR SCRAWNY ASS FIRED IN NO TI—"

The distinct sound of a blaster firing had Zach push her behind a heavy laundry machine. "Door lock override," he ordered, signaling Doc who already covered the other side of the door way, blaster drawn. "Authorization: Galaxy Rangers, Captain Zachary Fox."

A blast of steamy air whooshed out as the door opened. The pungent odor of soap and bleach masked the underlying smell of blood only briefly. Inside, white stacks of linen were splattered with blood and brain. "I don't think we'll get our answers," Doc commented, blocking access – and sight – from the assembling laundry personnel and a pale-faced Mrs. Margiszaw.

Zach cautiously crossed into the room, studying the mess that had once been the head of Phil Okalpa more closely. A purple crystal stuck between the torn skin and the jawbone. "You're wrong," he said grimly. "Mr. Okalpa *is* our answer. Dim the lights to minimum and tell forensics there's a star-stone and a psychocrystal to secure here."

BetaLabs, Sublevel 3, Hall 26

"Beachboy's labeled a lot of stuff with 'D.T.'." Goose pushed back from the console and stretched. "Any idea what it is?"

"A popular pastime in the late Xeryon empire," Niko answered. "We call it dream traveling."

"Wait a sec," Goose asked in disbelief. "The guy filled *twenty-something* storage units with the Xeryon version of Tri-D?"

Niko shrugged. "It was a very popular pastime. Dream travels were realistic enough to tour other worlds without going there at all. Wouldn't you be tempted to explore places you'd never be able to visit in person?"

"Nope. Interstellar couch surfing sounds boring."

“It wasn’t exactly ‘couch surfing’, more like a mental cruise trip. People stayed at so-called dream travel agencies during their journeys in case something went wrong.”

Goose frowned at her. “What can go wrong on a dreamed tour? You can just call it a day when your avatar hits the Psychocrypt.”

Niko sighed. “Apparently, a rare malfunction occasionally trapped travelers in their dreams, requiring an operator to bring them back to reality.”

“Charming.” Goose returned to his keyboard. “Were there any serious applications? Something like remote reconnaissance, spying, stuff like that?”

“Not that I’d know.” Niko frowned. “Though, now that you said it... could be, but the library may not hold that type of data. It was for general audiences.” She hesitated. “Although, there’s fiction. The Xeryons weren’t that different from us in their reading habits.” She looked at Goose. “Think of those old James Bond and NSA spy novels—”

“—and the Konsortium⁹ thrillers published after the KTF took over in the thirties.”

“Exactly.” Niko nodded. “Overblown, but you could get an idea of available technologies – albeit with a grain of salt.”

“A grain?” Goose snorted. “A block’s more like it, but yeah, that’s better than nothing.”

“I look into it if our review doesn’t yield anything more promising.”

LongShot Laboratories

Cryocrypt

21:36

This late in the evening, LongShot’s corridors were deserted. Zachary’s steps echoed between the bare walls only bearing the level and section numbers painted on in regular intervals. Level 14, section 58, cryogenic containment, less formally called ‘the Cryocrypt’, but he refused to be informal here. Crypt was a word entirely too close to ‘grave’. Eliza wasn’t dead. He rigorously squelched the ‘yet’ his treacherous mind was about to add.

No guards down here, but the entrance was guarded 24/7, and the access to the various units was strictly limited. Zachary removed his right glove and placed his biological palm on the scanner, waiting for the unit to identify his hand- and fingerprints along with his DNA. It took time. The system scanned for modified DNA as well, now that some of the renegade supertroopers were here as well. Frozen. *On the rocks.*

Zachary suppressed a shiver, remembering Goose’s choice of words.

=Access granted,= the melodious voice of LSL’s new AI said as the door finally opened for him. =Welcome back, Captain Fox.= Politeness had never been so cruel.

The room lit up as he entered. A set of LEDs embedded in the seams of the hibernation unit illuminated Eliza as well. The light wasn’t stark white, yet she looked pale, ashen...

He’d come after their children went to bed, after he’d double-checked their apartment’s security systems. Their apartment—

—as if Eliza had ever lived there. He’d taken base quarters despite the hit to his paycheck, because he’d known with him as a single parent their children would be alone too often, and Tortuna had come too close to his family already. Threatening their children, taking their mother, and their father’s humanity. Sort of. His bionic hand balled into a fist against the glass. He’d sworn the Queen wouldn’t get another chance, and now a Tortunian spy had roamed BetaMountain, had collected and delivered laundry for weeks, also to their quarters while he’d been away on missions and his team was falling apart. A spy desperate enough to cut open a man in broad daylight. For answers, he didn’t get and the victim probably never had.

⁹ See “Revenge-2 – Jonathon” (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf, to be published)

His other, his biological hand, pressed against the glass next to her face, cramped into a fist as well. *Eliza, I need you.* He didn't say it out loud. Not here, not while that crystal sat on her chest, listening in. He'd become cautious after his experience in the Psychocrypt¹⁰. Wary. *Eliza...*

MPQ 219
23:35

=Niko.= She blinked sleepily, sitting up when ALMA's urgent voice coming from the flashing screen above her bed cut into her dreams. The ceiling lights had come on as well, albeit in a soft, non-blinding glow. =Goose needs your help. He's got a nightmare. One of the bad ones.=

One of— Niko caught herself staring at the screen.

=You have to come. I can't wake him.=

Niko's anger at the intrusion died. "I don't think that's a good idea," she cautioned. "I'm probably the last person—"

=The commander is at Phoenix MB. I called him, but he might be too late.= ALMA sounded desperate. =Masterson's death triggered this episode,= the AI hurried to explain. =The events on Andor may also play into the exacerbation. I expected it and was extra-careful, but he descended too fast for the counter-measures to grasp. Now go, please.=

The plea coming from the normally stern AI had Niko leap out of bed. She hastily threw on her uniform, closing the last snaps while she was already running up the stairs. Her door opened in front of her, the corridor outside was suspiciously empty. A commotion with knocks and calls around the next corner indicated a suspiciously convenient lift malfunction. Niko decided there and then not to piss off Goose's AI ever again.

The door to MPQ 217 opened soundlessly as well. The room inside was lit painfully bright. She knew the routine – ALMA had used it on her as well – but this time it had failed. Had to fail—

Niko stumbled under the wave of unconscious distress slamming into her. She tried to steel herself against what she'd face on the mental plane, but the moment she opened her eyes in Goose's reality, she knew how terribly naïve she'd been...

Goose's hands were covered in blood. Bright-red, it reached up to his elbows. Fingernails had transformed into claws, peeling the skin off a crying infants belly.

"No sign of active adaptation, sir."

"Discard. The next. And hurry, there are many children waiting to be tested—"

The telepath stumbled when Joseph pulled her away from the bed, out of reach of the claws. Disoriented, she held tight until she recognized him and straightened with a start. "Sir. I'm sorry, I—"

"What are you doing here, Niko?"

"ALMA called me. She believed you'd take too long and—"

"Phoenix MB has an Interceptor on stand-by," Walsh told her gruffly. "It's fifteen minutes via orbit if you skip the formalities. How is he?"

"I—" Niko looked over her shoulder at the boy. "Sir. I've never seen anything like that. It may have begun as a normal nightmare, composed of elements he saw mixed with fears, but by now it's self-fueling, taking its own features and twisting it further and further." She shuddered.

"A nightmare of a nightmare?" Joseph tried to make sense of her words.

"In a way, yes." She nodded. "Normal dreams have a certain quality separating them from reality, but that's fading fast. We have to disentangle him, but he's too far in for me to reach him without a charge, and—"

¹⁰ See "Psychocrypt" (TV episode) and "The Lie" (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

“ALMA. Use my personal key to give Niko access to the charging platform. Now.” Walsh ordered, to Niko he added, “Hurry. I’ll keep him while you’re gone.”

“There’s still some response to touch and voice.”

“I know,” Joseph said grimly. “Now go.”

She ran.

Joseph had discarded his uniform jacket and rolled up his sleeves by the time Niko returned. Sitting behind the boy’s head outside immediate striking range, he talked calmly, persistently. At her surprised stop, he gave her a wry smile. “I’ve had practice.” If she noticed the four parallel scars diagonally crossing his arm where the boy’s claws had once caught him¹¹, she didn’t let on. “Do you need contact?”

She shook her head. “Not with a full charge, but it will help if you continue talking to him. The connection to the here-and-now will make it easier, though even with that it will take time.”

“Understood. Proceed.”

Joseph watched Niko activating her implant. Purple veils filled her eyes and a golden glow emanated from her skin, connecting her with the boy. Goose’s forehead creased, turning away, he twisted in his sheets. Joseph knew better than trying to hold him in place. “Gooseman. This is no threat. We’re here to help you. You’re dreaming. It isn’t real. It’s like in the sims¹². Keep calm. Listen. We have you. You won’t be abandoned...”

Joseph was hoarse by the time the glow faded. He caught Niko’s arm, preventing her from stumbling into the bed while she reoriented herself. “Easy there,” he rasped. “Were you able to help him?”

“Yes,” she nodded, shivering from exhaustion. “He’s sleeping.” Now that it was safe, she sat down on the edge of the bed. “I don’t know what was memory and what imagination,” she said, “but whatever he’s seen, he saw too much of it.”

Joseph said nothing. There was nothing he could tell her that wouldn’t get them in trouble. Looking around the boy’s bare room, he spotted the coffee maker on the kitchenette. “I could use a coffee, Lieutenant. How about you?”

Niko blinked, surprised by the non-sequitur? “Yes, sir. I’d like one.” She managed a wan smile. “But I’m not too sure about using Goose’s coffee.”

Joseph snorted. “He sneaks it out of my office, he can damn well share it!”

The boy wasn’t equipped for guests, so he poured Niko’s coffee into a water glass and handed it to her with a hanky. She still looked worse for wear. He filled Goose’s iso-steel mug for himself and sat down at the table, studying the bare room while sipping his coffee. It looked solely functional to the inexperienced eye, but there was symmetry in the way the storage boxes were aligned, and harmony in the colors of the paperbacks as they were stacked on the shelf by the bed. The crystal beetle he’d slipped into the boy’s luggage¹³ sat on a black pocket book, but it was polished and the books were tattered. The boy seemed to read more than those manuals tagged to his account. And Joseph was sure that pile of military scifi novels hadn’t been among the books he’d forced the boy to take along, either. Very subtly, there was personality here.

This was Goose’s place, not just where he slept and his cat’s toys littered the floor. A cat that only now left his hiding spot under the bed to saunter over and demand a seat on his owner’s single chair that Joseph had just taken for himself. With a self-deprecating smile, he scooted over. Brushing over Possessor’s grey fur, he earned himself a faint purring as the cat snuggled against his thigh, driving deceptively tiny claws into upholstery that looked as if this wasn’t its first experience with cat claws.

“Remember, he’ll never do anything if you watch him.” Max had told him. *Was that really just six years ago?*¹⁴ Joseph had another sip of his coffee. Apparently, the warning still held.

¹¹ See “Beyond the Frontier” (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

¹² See “IP” (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

¹³ See “Hedgehog and Beetle” (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

¹⁴ See “Natural Selection” (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf). This is also the reason for the paper books instead of an electronic reading device. Reading them can’t be monitored.

Goose felt warmth against his cheek, and a calm, very regular vibration. Breathing. It's faint whispering accompanied by the rhythm of the beating heart his hearing was fixed on. The scents filling his perception were familiar. Niko ran her fingers through the hair at his temple. He still refused to wake, stretched to snuggle his morning-stubbed cheek against the cloth of her uniform. "I love waking up like this," he murmured sleepily.

The hand in his hair froze. A mug banged onto the table. He flew up at the unexpected noise. Battle reflexes prepared for the leap—

"Good morning," Walsh said. "Slept well?"

Niko's hand came to rest on Goose's arm. "It's okay, Shane. Everything's okay now."

Goose shook his head, pressing fingertips against his forehead and temple. "You did something." She winced at his wariness, but the commander— "Sir?"

"You had a nightmare," Walsh told him bluntly. "ALMA couldn't wake you. Ranger Niko will tell you the details." Getting up, he rolled down his sleeves and took his discarded jacket from the back of the chair. "ALMA. Is the corridor clear?"

=Tenant 218 is still waiting at the lift. A cabin will arrive in 90 seconds.=

Walsh nodded. "Any consequences of yesterday's transport malfunction?"

=A disgruntled lift tech filed a complaint about misfiring fire protection sensors,= the AI replied smugly as she opened the door. =I suggest to ignore it.=

"Looks like you're going to get your job back," Goose said after the door had closed after Walsh.

"What?" Niko asked, uncomprehending.

"Ranger Niko," Goose repeated, adding emphasis. "He doesn't make that kind of mistake."

She avoided his eyes, busying herself putting the mug and a used glass into the sink. "Any chance he'd missed that you— we—?" She quieted, embarrassed.

"No," Goose stated bluntly. "But he *decided* not to notice." His voice cooled over the last sentence. "And now tell me what's going on here. I'm not used to waking up and finding my room *littered* with people!"

BetaLabs, Sublevel 3, Hall 26

11:34

"You didn't get much sleep last night, did you?" Ayse asked after Niko suppressed yet another yawn and blinked rapidly to get the Xeryon characters filling her side of the crystal reader back into focus.

"What makes you think that?" Niko asked irritably.

"Aside from your constant yawning?" Ayse returned. "I'm quite sure D.T. crystals aren't 'hexapodous'. Or do they look like purple creepy-crawlies hopping onto people's chest to you?"

"Creepy-craw—" Niko stopped. "*Hexagonal*," she sighed, defeated. "I'm sorry, I—" She froze. "Say that again."

"What? The creepy-crawlies?"

"Not that. The other part." Niko fixed her, suddenly wide awake. "Why 'hopping on chests'?"

"I was joking," Ayse laughed defensively. "Dream travelers wore them on their chest during their trips. This text here is a visitor's account of the procedure." She pointed at her screen. "Look for yourself—"

But Niko was already running for the door.

to be continued in
Crystal Structures 4
