



# Crystal Structures

## 5

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

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

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

A. Kniggendorf

# Crystal Structures 5

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*Line and surface defects are, in all likelihood, metastable configurations of the crystal. However, thermal equilibrium may well be approached so slowly that for the practical purposes the defects may be considered to be frozen in. It is also easy to arrange non-equilibrium concentrations of point defects, which can have considerable permanence (for example, by quickly cooling a crystal that had been in equilibrium).*

[Ashcroft / Mermin: Solid State Physics p.621]

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“—committed an unspeakable act of aggression, trying to literally obliterate the origin of the human species!” The center-piece hologram of Senator Friederike Strauching pierced the air with a pointer finger stabbed upwards, slightly wavering in the hologram because of the rapid movement outside the focal area. “Aggressors such as these cannot be trusted not to try again once the attention of our forces is elsewhere, spread thin as they are in attempting to please every whim of the League.

“A League, I may add, my fellow senators,” – another finger stab – “which failed to even send a single ship in our time of need!” The senator’s hologram circled on its platform, as she sought the eyes of each of the other representatives of Earth assembled, directly or like herself in holographic form, for the emergency session immediately called after the Crown armada had begun to retreat. “In fact, in the face of this apparent cowardice from our so-called allies, Earth has to defend itself preemptively against an enemy *proven* to plan the elimination of Mankind!”

The rotund woman wearing the traditional garb of her hometown Linz drew a deep breath before her final statement. “I therefore call for a preemptive defense of Earth in the form of an immediate decisive strike with our armed forces against the Crown Empire to prevent any further aggression against Earth!”

She studied the other representatives once more. “And I urge the assembly to vote in its favor. Thank you.” Her hologram wavered slightly and was replaced by text floating in the milky cloud for a few seconds, announcing the next speaker as Senator Alphonse Djobenji, representative of the South Cape Trust. The SCT united corporations spanning the southern ends of both Africa and America, as well as several interest groups on behalf of the Antarctic mining operations, and was known for its more moderate politics in respect to Earth’s interstellar obligations.

“Dear colleagues,” he began, “with the utmost respect for my colleague from the Montalpine Agenturate, I have to disagree and remind the assembled gentlebeings that Earth’s part in the League, as stated in the first treaty and several additional agreements, is that of law enforcement and, yes, military force. Our obligation to our allies is providing strength and military might to protect us and them. In this case, the threat was directed against our own world, and our men and women in uniform had to struggle heroically to deflect it in time. Many of them made the ultimate sacrifice to save Earth. To demand military protection of our pacifistic allies, who provide us with sophisticated technology and agriculture in exchange for our protection is nothing short of disdain for the terms of the treaty from which we gained unprecedented benefits over the years.

“Moreover, sly rhetoric aside, a preemptive defense is an effective assault, explicitly forbidden by the treaty from which Earth, represented by this fine assembly of honorable beings, indubitably benefited! I therefore urge my fellow senators to vote nay on the proposed attack on the Crown Empire. Thank you.”

“Nevertheless, a defense it would be.” Senator Eric Wheiner took the stage. “However, I suggest that the assembly stops worrying about the would-have-beens of the past attack and instead starts thinking of the advantages it brought about. Ladies and gentlebeings, we’re overlooking the most important detail of the whole affair.” The stocky, brown-clad figure made a dramatic pause. “For the first time, Earth has the technological means to counter the atrocity that bereaves not only our ships and colonies, but those of our allies as well. I’m speaking of course, of the very power foundation of the Crown Empire: the Psychocrypt with its countless number of victims whose very life is used against their home worlds! For the first time, we are capable of freeing a cryptee independent from the corresponding psychocrystal being found. Using this technological break-through for freeing the hapless cryptees currently entombed in the Psychocrypt would be utmost humane and certainly be seen most favorably by our allies, who all lost loved ones to the Crown Empire’s nefarious practices!”

Wheiner studied the assembly briefly, allowing a small, satisfied smirk to appear on his face before he continued, "And any damage rendered upon the Crown's installations and forces during the process of rescuing the cryptees would surely be seen by all powers that matter as an acceptable price for their freedom. Thank you." He bowed to the rising applause following his words.

Senator Irya LeFebvre took the stage after him. "I think we all agree that Senator Wheiner's proposal is the most favorable," she said with a voice much stronger than would be expected from her dainty figure. "However, we ought to consider the condition of our forces in the matter. Our brave men and women in uniform deserve a day's rest after the restless exertions they took upon themselves to see us all safely through the past crisis—"

2088-09-26

Phoenix Military Base  
House of J. Walsh  
00:17

Joseph got out of the armored military glider, suppressing a wince when he had to put weight on his injured knee after way too long a day—week? It felt like it. Tiredly, he answered the snappy salute of the driver and opened his garden gate.

Normally, he drove himself, preferring the solitude of the dark between BETA and Phoenix MB, but tonight he would have risked dozing off behind the controls and he was too cautious to have an AI pilot him. 'Unfortunate malfunctions are too easily programmed', a lecture his father-in-law had been adamant about, just before insisting on Leana's AI<sup>1</sup>, pink and no-nonsense, to be installed in their house. The door opened in front of him, admitting him to well-aired rooms with dimmed lighting and a made bed on the first floor. As empty as the rest of the house.

He slowly bested the stairs, using the banister to ease the strain on his leg and decided for a pain patch before lying down. He checked his service weapon and put it under his pillow, then dropped the uniform on to the floor beside the bed, not caring about creases. After the last days, it was as worse for wear as its wearer. He padded into the bath for a quick shower to remove the worst grime, applied the patch, and fell into bed, into oblivion...

...he wished. *How on Earth had the boy known that Niko was going to collapse? He'd been on the other side of the room. A change in scent wouldn't have traveled that far through the chaos of full staff, and surely, she hadn't wasted her waning strength on sending him a message.* In the dark, Joseph pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to ward off what felt like a major reminder of his once cracked skull coming up<sup>2</sup>.

BetaMountain  
MedoStat – VIP med room 2  
7:47

Sunshine filtered through the fake window draped with white gauze curtains moving in an artificial, lime-scented breeze generated by expensive air conditioning. White medical furniture, white bed cloths... A delicate watercolor of snowdrops and forget-me-nots framed in linden green eased the sterility of the room on the wall the patient faced. Would face.

Eliza was still unconscious.

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<sup>1</sup> See "Grandson" (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

<sup>2</sup> See "Geese Bring Luck" (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

We can't tell when she'll wake up again, they'd said, carefully omitting the possibility that 'when' included 'never'. Since then Zachary was beside her, watching her breathe. Standing at first, because he knew from experience that hospital chairs didn't deal well with the weight of his bionics, then sitting after one of the medics thought to bring a metal chair that would carry his weight. He doubted that the commander's 'all costs covered' would include replacing broken chairs, which in this place likely cost the better part of their savings for Zachy's college tuition.

He tried to think of what to tell Zachy and Jessie, but Eliza's next breath involuntarily locked up his mind. Experiment. Untested. No choice but to comply or be forced. He closed his eyes in pain. He didn't want his children to grow up with that on their minds—

*You have a higher opinion of our government than me.*

Not anymore.

The com panel beside the door came to light. AESCULAPIUS bounced meditatively on its screen. =Captain Fox. You are expected at the reception desk. You have visitors.= The medical AI vanished before he could deny the request.

### MedoStat – Reception

"They were about to break down the door, I swear!" Doc's broad smile didn't hide his concern. "At least, GV would have suffered serious damage to his code if Jessie had another five minutes with him." He sobered, looking over to the view port where Jessie and her brother crowded to look at their mother. "Seriously, Zach. They caught the broadcast rerun on the morning news. GV called me when they prepared to search for her on their own."

"I should have told them." Zach sighed, inwardly torn. "I—"

"When?" Doc asked dryly. "Gag order beforehand, full mayhem afterwards. By the way, you missed one helluva victory party! Didn't know dead-tired militaries could riot that much! But nobody sane would have kids out in *that!*"

"Goose? Niko?"

"Not part of the party," Doc told him. "The lady was out cold after the show, and Goose isn't a party person to begin with." With a glance towards Zachy and Jessie, he added, "they don't know that detail, though, and Walsh hasn't lifted the gag order, probably never will, given the circumstances, so you better keep it that way." He smirked. "There's only so much I can sneak past the censors."

"I didn't hear that," Zach snapped, and quieter, "thank you."

"Don't sweat it. I need a hangover cure anyway." Doc snickered. "There are places on this base with enough party fumes to light a fire!"

"I didn't hear that either."

"Maybe you should have your acoustics module checked while you're here, captain. Be seeing you. And if you need anything... just give me a call, okay?"

### MedoStat – VIP med room 2

Awareness came suddenly, from one heartbeat to the next. The purple lid of the alien machinery closed over her head and a white-and-chrome robotic arm raised a blue crystal from her chest. In between had been the dreams, nightmares. At first, she'd thought of them as attempts at communication, but the nonsensical content soon taught her otherwise. The events were bizarre, featuring Zachary, an altered, hardened apparition of Zachary with robotic weapon limbs, and a group of...

Eliza had no name for what they were. A blond baby-hulk of a shapeshifter complete with the proverbial attitude, a green-eyed red-haired mindreader – talked about witch stereotypes much, did you? – and a techno-mage with flying programs. It didn't make sense. Not even if the aliens caught way too many 20<sup>th</sup> century entertainment broadcasts during their observation of Earth.

Eliza shivered and sat up, frowning at the white medical bracelet spanning her left wrist. A quick examination yielded antimicrobial plastics and no less than five velvety sensor-spots brushing against her skin underneath. Her waking wouldn't go unnoticed for long. She'd have to be fast. A swift scan of the room yielded a pen, clipped to a pad for medical notes within reach on the bedside table. A sharp twist neatly separated the metal clip from the pen, readying it to be repurposed as a miniature cutting tool. She positioned the broken clip and deftly cut along the edge of the antibacterial plastic band revealing standard circuitry. Now, that wouldn't be too difficult.

Leaving the dysfunctional bracelet underneath the cover, Eliza pushed herself out of bed, hoping its malfunction would give her enough time to get herself out of this. The floor was cold under her bare feet. No slippers. But at least she wasn't wearing one of those half-open hospital gowns. If she moved inconspicuous enough, pants and tunic might pass as very unimaginative leisure wear. If the outside was anything like Earth, that was. No choice. She drew a deep breath. She'd have only one try in any case; the opening of the door wouldn't go undetected.

She checked the contact field, listened to the footfalls of lifeforms passing by. Nobody hurried in either direction. No preferences. She'd have to decide spontaneously. Another deep breath. She slammed her hand against the sensor and ran—

#### MedoStat – Visitor's Lounge

“—asleep. The doctors don't know when—” Zach was explaining to his anxious children when the doors behind him closed with a bang and sealed. His hand went for his service weapon, then the blue flashing lights registered and he relaxed. The lounge seal would protect them better than any weapon from the reason for a medical alarm. They'd just have to wait.

“Jessie.” His daughter was busy pressing her nose flat against the clear pane of the door, trying to see what was going on outside and his son wasn't much better. “Junior, you're old enough to know better than—

“There's mom!” Jessie shrieked, banging against the door. “Mom!”

*Eli?* Zach rushed to the door in time to see Eliza, hurrying bare-footed in pastel-colored patients wear towards the exit. *What—?*

“Door lock override! Authorization Galaxy Rangers, Captain Zachary Fox!”

=Sir, a medical emergency lock-down surpasses your auth—= the AI ended in a squeak when Zach made short work of the door seal.

“Eliza!”

She stopped at his call, threw a panicked look back over her shoulder. For a moment, she relaxed, relief washing over her face, only to be replaced by dread when she saw his hand still buried in the torn door mechanism. “No...”

“Eli, please.” Zach reached out to her and she made a step back, desperately seeking an escape path when Jessie darted past him.

“Mommy!”

“Don't,” Zach called out, but Eliza already stumbled under the impact of their teen-aged daughter, hugging her tightly. Her panicked expression cut to the bone. *She doesn't recognize her*, he realized, startled. “Eliza.” He forced himself to stay calm. “Love, that's Jessie. You slept for three years.”

“Dad?” Zachy asked at his side, but Zach shook his head. He didn't have time for him.

“Three years?” Eliza repeated in clear disbelief. “I didn't sleep and—”

“The psychocrystal entrapped your mind. Your body was frozen to minimize the damage.”

“So, now I'm damaged?” she flared, lowering Jessie's arms from her waist and pushing her behind her.

*Protecting her*, Zach thought with a short-lived pang of relief, *from me*.



"You and your mistress—" she spat the word at him, "—tearing through way more than just doors and I'm damaged?!" Eliza pressed forward, challenging yet making sure she stayed between him and Jessie. "And now you dare to bring my children into this—*this atrocity!*?" Her gesture covered him, the wrecked door, Zachy, the medical personnel gathering at the far end of the hallway, everything.

"Eliza, we—"

She cut him off. "What are you doing with my children!?"

"I took care of them while you were a Crown captive," he told her, struggling not to panic and covertly signaling CMO Miyar not to interfere. "I'm their father, do you remember?"

"You're not!" Eliza snapped, glaring at the torn door seal. "My Zach isn't some *Terminator!*"

"Dad isn't—" Zachy protested.

Zach shook his head slightly, compelling his son not to get involved. "I was wounded," he told Eliza. The short sentence seemed to rattle her. "BETA didn't want to lose a qualified field officer, so I got medical bionics."

"What you have isn't medical!" she growled.

"No, it's not," he conceded, the muscles in his cheek working as he squelched the pain of her rejection. "It's military grade weaponry. You were a captive of the Crown Empire and I wanted you back. I volunteered to lead a team of specialists to defend Earth and our allies against it." Zach drew a deep breath, balling his fist at his side when the words seemed to choke him. "I wanted you back," he repeated. "Standard prosthetics wouldn't have sufficed!"

He saw her mulling that over, tilting her head in that painfully familiar gesture. "You *volunteered?*"

Leave it to Eliza to question the one detail he'd never questioned himself. "Yes," he affirmed grimly. "And I didn't regret that decision."

"Until now," she asked sardonically.

"No," he said wearily, "not even now." And quietly, aware that they were in a public corridor, in front of assembled medical personnel and their scared children, "because whatever you do, you are here—" He laid his bionic hand on Zachy's arm, reached for Jessie behind her. "—with us."

"So, I can go home?" she asked, expecting to be denied.

"Just let me talk to the commander," Zach conceded, "and then we leave."

Jessie whooped at the prospect, while CMO Miyar protested, "*Fox! You can't possibly—*"

"I can and I will," Zach told him curtly and wished Eliza hadn't snorted in disbelief. No, this was far from over. "Please stay," he begged her and tapped his wristcom.

Phoenix Military Base  
House of J. Walsh

The wristcom on the counter next to the coffee machine vibrated. By the time Joseph had taken the pan with the frying bacon off the stove, it had switched to audio alarm, filling the kitchen – and his ears – with increasingly infernal beeps. *We should throw those things at the enemy instead of shooting*, he grumbled, *but that's likely a war crime*. He tapped the screen. "Walsh here."

=Eliza has no recollection of the hibernation, sir, but she seems to remember the events in which the slaverlord connected to her was involved. She likely figured that to be an attempt to break her.= There was a pause, then Fox added, =Sir, if we continue to keep her locked up and deny her basic rights, she'll never consider us any differently.=

"So, why do you call?"

=Because CMO Miyar objects to me taking her home.=

"Why?"

A deep breath was audible even through the tiny wristcom speakers. =Eliza's been trained as a TacOp.=

A tactical operative considering them part of an enemy scheme. No wonder Miyar was up in arms. Now it was Joseph's turn to draw a deep breath, smelling burned bacon – so much for his breakfast. "What's her rank, Fox?"

=Corporal, sir. She's worked in astrography and communication since my son's birth.=

He considered that, also considered the risks of an enemy TacOp free on his base, and what he'd promised Fox for the public decrystallization. Joseph sighed. "Tell Miyar his protest is noted and take her home. And Fox—" He put the pan with the burned bacon in the sink. "Keep her out of trouble. There's nothing I can do if she disrupts base operations and it goes on file."

=Understood, sir. And... Thank you.=

"Dismissed." Joseph disconnected the call and glared at his burned breakfast.

BetaMountain  
GRS5 office

Her badge brightly polished on her belt, Niko tried not to feel smug when she swished past the very guard sergeant who'd stopped her the last time she'd been to the LEO floor. She also tried not to wince remembering the – deserved – reprimand Zach had dealt her that day. Squaring her shoulders, she stepped into the detection range of the door sensor. She was early. The others weren't in yet. Zach's desk was still orderly to a fault, Doc's cluttered, Goose's—

She knew she owed it to him that she was already back on her feet today, and reasonably sane. If he hadn't given up the privacy of his mind when her shields collapsed yesterday... Niko preferred not to think of the alternative. Still, she was acutely aware of him now. It was probably not a good thing that he was just passing the checkpoint. She went to her desk and took stock of the heap of case records and hard copy forms that had materialized there since her last visit. She frowned at the top-most. *Purdue?*

"Morning." Goose strolled in, coffee in hand. He arched a brow at her desk. "Backlogged?" He pulled his chair out and leaped back when Niko dropped the heap of hard copies, data sticks, and memory crystals telekinetically onto his desk.

"Nice try, but I haven't been to Purdue in over a year. So, back to sender. Write your own reports!"

He snorted, fished a data stick out of the pile, and read the label. "Tarkon risk assessment is yours." He tossed it at her.

She stopped the data stick effortlessly, hovering it in the middle of the room between their desks, rotating it slowly. "What makes you think so?"

"Mine already came back. No idea what's not to get in 'What risk?'"

She laughed and plucked the stick out of the empty air. "Thank you," she said quietly, meaning so much more than the easy banter just now.

"Don't sweat it." The laughter died. She knew he wanted to say more, knew also why she knew that and that she shouldn't be aware of it in the first place. And then the door hissed open and Goose's wristcom shrilled, and everything remained unsaid.

By the time the door had closed after admitting Doc, Goose already stood, face unreadable. "Yes, sir. Understood. I'm on my way. Gooseman end."

"Good morning, everybody," Doc beamed, somehow managing to unload another bag of clutter onto his overflowing desk without spilling anything to the floor. "Zach just called. He's not coming in today. His wife was released early."

"I know," Goose said on his way out. "I'm back in twenty."

The apartment was believable, Eliza decided, after having been dragged through all rooms by two enthusiastic – and in Jessie’s case – chatty children. She recognized most of the furniture, except for several chairs, the couch, and the double bed in the parents’ bedroom. The place was even the familiar mix of kids’ chaos and Zachary’s neatness, the latter as usual in retreat.

Eliza observed, listened, and watched ‘Zachary’ watching her, assessing her as much as she assessed him. The proclaimed three years of hibernation were a smart move, she gave them that. It allowed for a lot of leeway in impersonations they had to have retrieved from her mind during those nonsensical nightmares of combat and torture—

The door chime interrupted with the same cadence like in their old home. And the same chronically nervous AI, now announced a ‘Ranger Gooseman’, who turned out to be the shapeshifter, even taller than Eliza recalled him. Or had the slaverlord just been taller than she? The kids swarmed toward him, only to be stopped with a “Sorry, this is official.” before he saluted and held a clipboard with pen out to ‘Zach’. “The commander wants you to sign these, sir.” He nodded politely at her. “Ma’am.”

‘Zach’ frowned, skimming over the content. “You could have sent these to my home console.”

“No, I could not, sir,” Gooseman corrected and, turning briskly, addressed Eliza directly. “Commander Walsh wants me to have your scent. If you run, I bring you back.”

She refused to make a step back, a reminder about her situation in this farce was only to be expected. ‘Zach’ immediately blocked Gooseman’s path to her, staying within his role, but she remembered the shapeshifter in combat. No deceit there, but probably capable to take out bionic ‘Zach’.

“Finding,” he stressed towards his captain, “not hunting. You know that I’m the best bet to track her fast and keep it off the books.”

Because anybody from security would be obliged to report it. *Consistent*, the observant part of her mind decided. Where did the Crown gather enough information to pull that off?

“Were you supposed to tell me that?” ‘Zach’ asked without relaxing.

“Yes.” And after a glance at Eliza over ‘Zach’s’ shoulder, “all of it.”

Interesting.

“I’ve never been here,” Eliza stated with finality, after the supertrooper had left and the children were finally occupied with their delayed schoolwork. “We’re on a base.” She shuddered, looking around the unfamiliar living room with the familiar furniture. “And underground.”

“Family quarters are in the most secure part of the mountain,” Zach explained. “Listed as shelters.” At her doubtful look, he added, “Parents may be on duty during an alarm.”

“We didn’t want to live on base again,” she reminded him coolly, “not after Hiiumaa<sup>3</sup>.”

“I was a single parent,” he explained tiredly. “And after what happened on our flight—” He shook his head. “It was the safest solution I could think of.”

“You could have brought them to their grandparents!”

*You could have brought them to their grandparents.* The sentence rattled him.

As if any of their parents had been an option. Eliza’s family had eventually accepted him... as long as he did well by her – and in Zach’s books, that didn’t include losing their daughter in space and dropping their grandchildren off on their doorstep afterwards. And even if he’d been on speaking terms with his own parents after he put Karl Schiesser’s<sup>4</sup> name on a police file for attempted murder, he’d never risk sending his kids to Chicago for that very reason. He shivered. Eliza had to know that. Was she—?

“Give me some credit,” he said. “I’d never give up our children.” His voice caught. “Or you.” *Three years. Three years of watching her through the glass. Three years of—* He closed his eyes, struggled not to break down there and then.

<sup>3</sup> See “An Officer with a Past” (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf; to be published)

<sup>4</sup> ‘Schiesser Feinripp’ is a well-known line of men’s underwear, (in)famous for “looking comfortable”.

Her hand came to rest on his sleeve. "Give me time," she said. "I—" She shook her head. "I don't know you. This. Them. There's so much that doesn't make sense."

*Begged?* The idea of her begging startled him. "It's okay," he heard himself saying. "I'm going to sleep on the couch."

Late that night

The room was dim, but not fully dark. He couldn't stand sleeping in full darkness outside his own bed since—

Zach sighed. It was a weakness he'd kind of given up on correcting. Full darkness allowed too much of what he'd left unreported about the Psychocrypt<sup>5</sup> to reappear in front of his mind's eye. Even here in his own living room. Even now with Eliza back, sound asleep next door in their bed. He shivered. How much did she know? Would that stand between them as much as the bionics?

*Terminator.*

He closed his eyes in pain, only to open them again and stare at their graduation certificates that begun what they'd dubbed "the Fox family's achievements wall" next to the Tri-D set. Eliza's was stamped for excellent technical aptitude, while his held the red band marking the top ten per cent of the graduation class, despite having been sent there as part of a court deal.

He wouldn't have made it without Eliza. The Ranger Academy was an elite school, its cadets handpicked from the best military schools across the world. And him. He'd been nicknamed him 'the Reso' within hours of his arrival; Reso, short for "resocialization whack", and his fellow cadets had craned their necks at their first swim training to see if he really had the 'Romulan Warbird' tattooed across his pecs, marking him a full member of the by then notorious Chicago Romulans.

He had. And the rest of the school had known before he'd completed the lane. What they hadn't known was that he had to graduate among the top ten percent of his class, or the original sentence would take effect: ten years in state penitentiary without the option for parole, because he and a dozen others of Schiesser's gang had mugged a pedestrian at the fashionable Chicago docks. After taking cash cards and jewelry, Karl had tossed their victim into the harbor. Zach had pulled the drowning man out of the freezing water. Half-frozen himself, he'd been the only gang member still at the scene of crime when the police arrived. He'd accepted the offered deal, mostly because Phoenix seemed a world away from Chicago – a major selling point after putting Karl's name on a police file! – and anything was better than ten years in prison when you were eighteen, but being an ex-gang member at a prestigious military academy had come close to teaching him otherwise.

He didn't want to think about what would have happened had Eliza not recognized him coming up the stairs with that fierce 'don't you dare mess with me'-look on his face. At least that was what she'd called it before reminding him about their time in Chicago. They'd attended the same kindergarten, had even proceeded to the same elementary school<sup>6</sup> in a middle-class neighborhood, but then Zach's father had lost his job forcing them to move to a seedier part of town and her mother had scored a position in engineering on the Moon base, and—

She hadn't stopped talking until the next class had been underway and the instructor on their case for disturbing his class about quasar navigation<sup>7</sup>. Not that the hazing had stopped afterwards, but it paled in comparison to the gift she made him. By trusting – and believing – in him, despite all the remarks about 'that thug not being good for her', she made him struggle for a chance, a future. With her. Only with her.

In the dimmed room, Zach's shaky breath at the memory sounded suspiciously like a sob to his ears.

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<sup>5</sup> See "The Lie" (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

<sup>6</sup> See "That Was a Close Shave!" (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

<sup>7</sup> See [http://www.esa.int/Our\\_Activities/Operations/Highlights/Brightest\\_beacons](http://www.esa.int/Our_Activities/Operations/Highlights/Brightest_beacons)

2088-09-27

BetaMountain  
Office of Cmdr. Walsh  
09:17

"They found what on the flight deck?!" Walsh asked incredulously.

"You heard correctly, sir. O'Malley's up in arms about it. She personally brought the incriminating evidence to forensics." Sheela kept a straight face as she handed him the important forms to sign and continued, "For fingerprinting."

"Confetti." He shook his head, signing off the report of the repair crew responsible for Gooseman's interceptor. "One day out of office and my chief engineer is fingerprinting confetti. Let's hope there's not enough evidence to incriminate one of her usual suspects or we have a full-blown war down there."

"Not yet," a grim voice said from the door. Admiral Frederic Subadar, back into proper uniform, strolled in and tossed his admiral's hat onto Walsh's desk. "Grim news."

Walsh straightened. "The Crown?"

"Worse. The Board."

Walsh signaled for Sheela to leave the room and seal the office. "BELVA, keep this private."

=Yes, sir.= The AI rotated briefly. =Privacy mode engaged. Scanning for eavesdroppers.=

"We're going to strike the Psychocrypt three days from now," Subadar said after the AI disappeared from the now green-framed screen. "I want your specialists to lead the assault teams."

MPQ 206

"Dad, my shuttle leaves in twenty minutes and I can't eat stirred eggs on the go!" Jessie reached for a pail with orange juice. "Mr. Haversham always has a fit when we take lose foodstuffs on the flight."

"Jess," her brother said, grinning, "you shouldn't rush him, or it ends up in smoke again and we don't get any breakfast at all."

"Phrbbb." Jessie showed him her tongue.

"Junior, it's considered impolite to speak about someone being around as if he isn't there," Zach reminded his son while standing at the stove with the sleeves of his uniform shirt rolled up. "And wasn't it your turn to make breakfast?"

"Uh, Dad... I was that happy about mom's return that it slipped my mind."

"That's the best you can think of?" Zach shook his head. "You'll do the dishes tonight in return for me scrambling these eggs."

"Okay." His son shrugged.

"Don't believe we'll forget that until then, brother dear!" Jess giggled. "I'm sure we'll get something *really* sticky for lunch."

Zach threw his daughter a dark look. "It's veggie day, Jessica, don't you forget that."

"Ugh." She drew a face. "I think I'll eat at school then."

Her brother laughed. "What about vegetable pizza?" he suggested.

"It can be raw, baked, steamed, cooked, and used for soup," Zach listed, "why do you want to put everything you hear of on a pizza?"

"I like pizza!"

"Yes, Dad." Jessie laughed. "Zachy would like even pizza with toothpaste—"

"Don't call me Zachy!"

Zach frowned at the first black spots appearing in the pan and hurried to take it off the heat. "Stop it, kids. The eggs are done. Hand me your dishes."

Eliza observed the scene in the kitchen with a mix of dread and curiosity. It looked so normal. It even *smelled* normal. Zach had never managed anything in a pan without burning something. Yellow sunlight fell through the kitchen window, highlighting the freckles on Zachy's arms and Jessie's blond hair. Her daughter was the only family member inheriting Eliza's mother's pale hair—

Only that was no kitchen window. It was a man-sized light panel giving the illusion of daylight to those being stuck underground. *Family quarters are shelters*, 'Zach' had told her yesterday. But she wasn't sheltered, she was trapped in an illusion with one of the Queen's machinations posing as her husband feeding her children with over-fried eggs and—

In the kitchen, Jessie leaped up from her chair. "My shuttle! Sorry, Dad, gotta run."

"Wait for me. I take the same—" Zach Junior followed. Their schoolbags were stacked beside the kitchen door, just as it had been in their old flat, just like—

"Mom!" Jessie had spotted her and Eliza found herself squeezed in a rush, her elbow connecting painfully with the kitchen door.

"Careful!" Her son kept her from falling. "Jess, stop flattening mom or you have a cardboard cutout again."

"What—?" Eliza started to say.

"My shuttle!" Jessie squeaked. "I'm going to miss Ms. Fairchild's QED<sup>8</sup>!" She and her brother darted for the door.

"Dad! There's an officer for you!" Zachy called from the door. "Gotta go! Bye."

Eliza straightened and rubbed her elbow.

"You okay?" 'Zach' asked, appearing relieved when she nodded. "I better go get that," he said with a nod towards the kitchen screen where GV showed a young officer in crisp Navy uniform.

"Yes," she told him, "you better do." And blocked GV from deactivating the screen.

On it, the Navy officer at their door saluted sharply even before 'Zach' entered the view. "Captain Zachary Fox, Galaxy Rangers?" he inquired.

"Yes," 'Zach' answered gruffly. "What's the matter?"

"You are expected at 2200 on Navy dock IV for boarding the LSS Comanche." A document pad was presented for 'Zach'. "Your orders in writing, sir."

Watching it all on the kitchen screen, Eliza felt herself frowning. It made sense for the enemy to remove 'Zach' from her immediate vicinity, if she'd gotten too close to topics about which they didn't have enough information. If—

Still, the horrified expression on 'Zach's face was believable. She heard him in the hallway, using his wristcom to call his commander, begging— She almost forgot to deactivate the screen in time. Almost.

BETA Space Station  
Space Navy Dock IV  
LSS Comanche

Embarkation was proceeding fast. Apparently, the troops commissioned to Subadar knew better than to cause trouble under the admiral's command. That, or the memory of the Queen's assault was still too fresh.

"There might be a whiff of leftover-hangover involved, too," Doc mumbled beside him, making Zach realize that he'd said that last thought aloud.

"After three days!?"

---

<sup>8</sup> Quantum Electro-Dynamics

"That was one hell of a party!" Doc grinned, but Zach's thoughts were already elsewhere. He knew that the admiral had requested his whole team, yet the transfer orders had covered only him, Doc, and Niko. Gooseman hadn't been listed. And Niko was late.

Zach caught himself looking back. Eliza hadn't come to say farewell. Zachy had wanted to go, but he'd convinced his son to stay with his mother instead...

"Watch over her," he'd told the boy. "She's still not well. You know she's halfway convinced we're not we." It was too much of a responsibility for a fifteen-year-old, but there'd been no other way safe of confining her, and he wouldn't do that. He—

"Your orders, sir," a stern voice cut into his thoughts with the obnoxious tone that indicated he hadn't been asked the first time. Zach hurried to produce ID and papers. Doc behind him was already waving his flamboyantly. Running steps approached from behind, Zach glanced back, saw annoyed personnel moving aside to let Niko cut in line behind them.

"Sorry for being late," she panted, out of breath from running full-out with her space bag over her shoulder. "I got a message from Goose and had to rush it." She held up ID and papers for the embarkation officer.

"Where is he?" Zach asked after they'd entered the shuttle. "Did you speak with him?"

"No." Niko held up her wristcom. The message was still on the display: DISPATCHED. POSS 2 OMALLEY. SG.

"Dispatched?" Doc blinked. "Not deployed?"

"No, Doc. Dispatched," Zach said grimly, staring at the tiny screen, then asked Niko outright what she shouldn't know. "*Where is he?*"

She swallowed, and nodded in the direction of their flight. "On the Comanche."

LSS Comanche

23:07 LST

Goose stared at the blank steel sheet less than half an arms' length above his face. The still empty troop quarters smelled faintly of new metal, disinfectant, and recently applied anti-corrosive lacquer. The faint hum of engines providing the basic functions required on a ship still in grav dock vibrated through his bones. It had been habit that had him close the safety net securing him in his bunk.

Comanche had standard troop quarters. Narrow tunnels along the ship's axis with bunks in stacks of four along the outer wall, the inner wall formed by the smooth duranium of the ship's stability core. Safety locks cut the place into bunk-length sections of four beds.

The faint clunk of a shuttle docking aft reverberated through the hull. Goose's ears twitched. It would get much noisier soon. And crowded. He had been sent to report to Subadar in person, and hadn't been allowed to return to BETA to settle his affairs. The request had been flat-out denied. At least, he'd managed to send a message; and even that had cost him.

He shifted on his bunk, trying to find a position in which he didn't want to punch a hole into the bed above him. Subadar had dealt him one hell of a reminder: This was a military operation. Unlike Zach, Doc, and Niko, he wasn't deployed as personnel. He'd been dispatched as property.

*Package content:*

*1 ST, type BDC, ID 1643453, self-ambulatory, armed.*

*Ammunition and spare pants not included.*

Gooseman snorted.

*Consider yourself warned,* Subadar had told him at his breach of radio silence over Angelina.

If he didn't know better, he'd say the admiral was holding a grudge.

2088-09-28

LSS Comanche

Temporary troop quarters

“No officer quarters for you, Captain?” Doc raised his brows. “Certainly, at least you qualify for some comfort.”

Zach snorted. “No getting rid of me, Doc.” He studied the stack of four bunk beds. “I take the bottom shelf, better not risk crushing somebody if the things aren’t as sturdy as the rest of the ship. Doc, you take second, Niko, third.”

“Who’s got the top?” Niko asked, putting her bag in the cabinet belonging to her bunk.

“It’s not assigned,” Zach answered after a glance at the screen by the door. “Briefing is in two hours on the flight deck.”

Doc sighed. “Too long not to get bored, too short to get some zees. What is it with these military types and reasonable schedules?”

“Our problem,” Niko told him. “They *can* get usable sleep in under two hours. Goose can nap fifteen minutes and be alert afterwards.”

Doc snorted. “He’s a supertrooper, that doesn’t count.”

“Major Carmichael isn’t and it goes for her, too.” Niko shrugged. “Any chance to get the forth bunk assigned to Goose?”

“No.” Zach shook his head. “We’re not even supposed to contact him.”

Niko froze. “Why on Earth—”

“I don’t know,” Zach said grimly, “but I plan to find out.”

LSS Comanche

Briefing

“Live feed of each suit will be monitored at the command center. Command will alert critical personnel about changed situations as required. Squad leaders will be able to tap into the feed on demand. Audio, video, and vitals will be recorded for evidence. In case of interrupted bridge link proceed as the situation demands.”

Admiral Subadar stood in brisk posture in front of the assembled troops on the main flight deck of the Comanche. A bluish hologram of the asteroid holding the Psychocrypt was slowly rotating behind and above him. His white admiral’s uniform almost blinded in the stark lights of the cavernous hall holding freight and the rows of sleek interceptors. Six squadrons were ready to defend the carrier against Crown fighters while the ground troops would storm the Psychocrypt.

Zach suppressed a shiver, forcing his attention back to the admiral.

“—five squads in gecko suits<sup>9</sup> in four teams, each led by a specialist with knowledge of the terrain will proceed fast into the interior along the axis corridors and seize control of the installation, including main control and the crypt itself. Further space marine contingents will secure the access points and locks. You will spend the next 18 hours informing yourself about the installation and the additional safety gear.”

---

<sup>9</sup> Gecko suits were inspired by gecko gloves: see “Human climbing with efficiently scaled gecko-inspired dry adhesives” by Elliot W. Hawkes, Eric V. Eason, David L. Christensen, and Mark R. Cutkosky (DOI: 10.1098/rsif.2014.0675) published 2014.

A more accessible article including a youtube movie (<http://youtu.be/Mw-tol5ur84>) can be found at Popular Mechanics: <http://www.popularmechanics.com/how-to/blog/scientists-have-created-gecko-inspired-spider-man-gloves-17448448>



Having his team separated didn't sit well with Zach, but he accepted that Subadar made the best use of their knowledge about the Psychocrypt, covering four of the six direct access corridors leading to the crypt and the main control room underneath. Doc would take two squads to the main control room, hopefully deactivating base defense systems targeting the Comanche and the pitfalls. Zach, Niko, and Goose would each lead a squad through the other axis corridors, providing at first a distraction to Doc's operation and then continue to secure the actual crypt for the medics to proceed and free the cryptees.

However, the timing was crucial and the approach would be coordinated by command, not by the individual units, not by them. And while Doc and Niko stood beside him, Goose was a shadow in an unmarked, dark gray Navy coverall behind the admiral. The supertrooper either hadn't received his gear or hadn't had time to change into his proper uniform. Secret orders and legal status notwithstanding, Goose was one of his people and had a right to the white-and-blues! Zach didn't like the implications one little bit, but if he were to do anything about it, he had to be fast. "Doc," he hissed under his breath, looking pointedly at the spot right at his side to make the hacker inch closer as if not quite standing still at attention. "Can you get us access to our team's feeds?"

Doc tilted his head, appearing to listen even more attentively to the admiral while obscuring his, "and an OTR com link bypassing the bridge?"

Zach nodded grimly.

Doc waited for another statement from the admiral before nodding. "I'll need access to the suits, including Goose's."

"k."

"Suit 381. Tell Doc to use the collar systems in case I discard the helmet," Goose said without looking up from adjusting the heavy assault rifle to his specifications. Loud thuds in the access tube outside indicated the training of the squad assigned to the ST. Expansion sticks<sup>10</sup>?

"Understood," Zach confirmed. "You don't rely on gecko suits for your squad?"

"Gecko works well enough." The ST snorted. "Except when it doesn't. They can't claw into the walls like me, so they damn well carry a work-around in case the Queen uses ultrasound on her walls." He snapped the bayonet on, clipped the recharger back into the rifle, and stood. "Anything else, Captain?"

"You're a Galaxy Ranger, Lieutenant." Zach used Goose's rank on purpose. "No matter the insignia on your uniform. Keep that in mind."

Goose's jaw clenched before he answered, "This is what I was made for. You might not like the difference."

LSS Comanche  
Crown Space  
15 hours later

The deck of the boarding hangar bucked and bumped under their feet. Zach attached the adhesive glove of his gecko-enabled spacesuit tighter around the safety pillar. The Comanche groaned under the strain of heavy fire. Alarm sirens indicated a hull break closer to the rear of the carrier.

Two squads of space marines were waiting to board the heavily armored landers, once the interceptors had cleared the immediate vicinity of the Psychocrypt enough for the landers to depart. Afterwards, it was their job to conquer the Psychocrypt and the admiral's to keep the Crown fighters at bay, ensuring there was a carrier to bring the freed cryptees back to Earth.

Given the screaming of steel and the whine of strained shields audible even here in the hangar with already fastened helmet and damped external audios, Zach wasn't sure about either part of the

---

<sup>10</sup> Mechanical expansion sticks powered by gas cartridge for anchoring from wall-to-wall. Imagine them somewhat like Minbari battle sticks from Babylon-5.

plan being feasible. Niko and Doc's teams would depart from the second hangar. A brief glance at their feeds showed the signal strong, the vital signs calm. Still onboard. Goose and his team would depart from this hangar in the other lander. Zach didn't need the feed to know the supertrooper was waiting in the front row, helmet still pushed back. Goose's expression was almost bored as he balanced the blows of the deck with springy knees while surveying the soldiers assigned to him.

*This is what I was made for, Goose had warned him. You might not like the difference.*

=Captain,= Goose said over the private link Doc had established. =Keep your mind on the battle or you'll lose your head in it.= A faint crackle indicated that the supertrooper had disconnected the channel without waiting for his reply.

The bumps of the deck ceased. Goose had closed and sealed his helmet even before Subadar's voice said, =Landing area cleared. Ground troops to the landers. Good luck, people! =

### Psychocrypt asteroid base

The whine of energy shields being brought to their limits was deafening. The defense systems of the Psychocrypt lay heavily into the armored lander. Inside the battered vessel, safety harnesses attached to the walls kept the troops from being thrown around as it tossed and turned under the heavy fire. Zach inconspicuously checked the straps holding him. The additional weight of the bionics was an issue on this assignment. It put additional strain on the gear and he knew better than to trust the gecko suit with it. He'd spent hours training with the expansion sticks instead. And trying to call Eliza, ending up recording a message GV was to deliver in case the mission went south and—

Something solid collided with the hull, making even the most jaded soldiers eyeing the featureless grey walls around them with suspicion.

*Keep your mind on the battle or you'll lose your head in it.*

Zach recalled what he knew of the Psychocrypt base. It was a nearly symmetrical structure drilled into a natural asteroid as far as they knew. The inner facility with the psychochambers for the slavelord feeders had the shape of a flat torus around the vast hall at the core with a control interface built directly into the Queen's throne. He himself could account for further rooms above and below the core, holding the psychocrystallization machinery and other... facilities, including the Queen's 'personal amenities'<sup>11</sup>. He ground his teeth at that. He'd waste a grenade on that room if he got the chance. Or two. Still, before that they had first to succeed with the planned invasion. Doc's team was the most important player in the first phase. They had to secure the computer in the main control room underneath the great hall and seize control of the base, hopefully disarming the automated defense systems, while the other three teams advanced rapidly on the Psychocrypt itself. Their objective was to bring the Crown forces stationed in the crypt itself under control to allow for safe passage of the med techs, who'd finally free the cryptees kept in rows upon rows of glass coffins in the very walls of the crypt. Psychochambers, sometimes lit as macabre pieces of art for the Queen to gloat at from her throne. As she had gloated at Eliza, at him—

*Keep your mind on the battle or you'll lose your head in it.* Zach balled his bionic fist.

The lander came to an abrupt halt. Engines screamed. Something hissed. =CONTACT. SEALING IN PROGRESS.= The gear projected the text right onto Zach's retinas, making sure the information wasn't distorted. Outside, yellow sealing foam formed a buffer around the clamps and the lock. The whine of the shields died down, now that they were too close to the asteroid for the heavy batteries to hit them. Zach's helmet dimmed as magnesium flares began cutting through the locks. It took less than a minute. It felt like eons. A thermal sealed ramp extended, forming a bridge across the still red-hot gleaming steal. =PRESSURE ESTABLISHED. GO! =

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<sup>11</sup> See "The Lie" (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

Blaster fire rang out the moment they passed the lock, scattered off combat armor and the still glowing steel of the airlock. The room beyond was small, but the four Crown troopers inside took a heavy toll out of them. Two fired, two recharged, and they could cross the lock only in single file.

Emergency sensors screamed. Two bolts hit Zach in rapid succession as he passed through, luckily on his bionic side. The systems absorbed the energy, reported the impact as thermal damage. He turned, shot twice fast, was rewarded with two screams and the clamor of rifles hitting the floor. The space marine behind him took on the third trooper, fell, was replaced by a comrade—

Sudden silence, as the last opponent was taken down.

=ACCESS A CLEAR. TRANSPORT SYSTEM DEACTIVATED.=

Zach checked the small chart of the base in his display. Doc's team was about to enter access C closest to the control room, while Niko's was just passing the lock at B, and Goose's was already on their way to the core along tunnel D. They'd draw the most fire.

"Follow!" Zach ordered, and – switching to the private link – called the ST to slow down for the other teams to catch up.

Psychocrypt asteroid base  
access to main control room

"Proceed." The leader of Zeta squad signaled the next tunnel segment to be clear. Smoke was wafting from a set of grenades providing cover for their advance in an otherwise bare tunnel only interrupted by pressure locks in regular intervals. Pressure locks that had been suspiciously open and unlocked so far. Not that Doc minded that. Much. He didn't see much of it anyways, stuck behind the backs of no less than six space marines of Goose's size. *Where did they find that many of them?* He mused as they advanced toward what hopefully was the last lock between them and the computer core. *Growth hormones?* He snorted. At least, it was obvious that he admiral wanted him to get to that core in one piece and 'healthy to hack'.

This time, the lock did not open in front of them.

"Anything you can tell us about the other side of those doors, Ranger?" Sergeant Michaels asked, while her teams secured the tunnel behind them and took position left and right of the lock.

"Gimme a sec." Doc tapped his CDU. "Pathfinder, Lifeline. Squeeze yourself in there and find out where the precious stuff and the unfriendlies are."

=Okay-dokay, Docco,= Pathfinder's green manifestation chirped and flitted with the white one towards the lock panel. =Believe me. He's just shitting his pants. Again!=

=Seems that way—= The lock control panel lit up briefly as the sparkles disappeared into it.

"Don't make me deactivate your voice outputs," Doc growled as the marines surrounding him sniggered.

Pathfinder popped back out. =Are we on the authoritarian channel again, Docco? Do you remember what happened last time?=  
=

"I cut your memory allocation in half and fed it to the coffee automaton," Doc warned the sparkle, to the sniggering of the surrounding marines.

"Stay alert," sergeant Michaels ordered them. "I don't like this. It's been way too easy so far."

=Eight crown troopers, Doc!= Pathfinder and Lifeline whizzed out of the door panel. =No slaverlords.=

"No slaverlords?" Doc frowned. "Are you sure?"

=Sure, I'm sure.= Lifeline re-rendered its holographic manifestation. =I'm perfectly programmed. Sometimes I really wonder how you managed to do that.=

"Shut up and give us the room schematics!" Doc waved with the CDU, already turning for sergeant Michaels. "You heard yourself," he told her and held up the holographic plan for the marines to see. A group of three consoles in the center of the room was highlighted. A swarm of eight red dots

surrounded it. "That's the main interface and the crown troopers inside. We need those consoles intact at any cost, ok?"

"Understood, Ranger," Michaels said grimly, while Zeta squad was already moving into position. "Ready to open those doors?"

"I'm just waiting for you, dearest lady!" Doc placed his fingers with flourish on the CDU contact. The prepared trigger had the doors haul back into the walls at top speed and half a dozen blinding grenades followed by combat squad Zeta exploded into the Psychocrypt's main control room.

At the same time

Impressions of impending doom slammed into Niko's mind. Yelling "Attach to the walls!" aloud, over the com, over their private channel, and along her link to Goose, she pressed her badge and levitated herself while closing a protective shield around her squad, scrambling onto the walls in their gecko gear. A solid block crashed down from the ceiling, barely missing her people and sealing the tunnel ahead of them just as the floor fell away. Someone cursed. A canteen fell into the void and disintegrated in a menacingly red flash and a cloud of steam.

Niko took it all in, felt the massiveness of the stone ahead, the adrenaline rushing through Goose. She forcefully cut the impression. "We're blocked," she reported over the com. "Massive stone ahead and the Queen equipped the pitfalls with incineration lasers. No upward fire so far. Proceeding with explosives."

"Copy that," Zach answered grimly, omitting that two of his squad hadn't been fast enough and had learned about the incinerators the hard way. "Same here." He set a second expansion stick to secure his weight and ordered the explosives brought forward.

=Regroup,= Subadar's command scrolled through his sight, =proceed with caution.= Zach checked the position of the teams on the helmet display. Niko's team was about as far ahead as his. Same situation. Doc had just entered the control room. *Likely the trigger.* Goose—

Goose drove iridium claws through his gloves into the wall beside him and hauled himself halfway up the wall and forward, ordering the soldiers behind him to get their asses up and glued to the walls as well. By the time Niko's voice over the com followed her wordless warning in his head, he and the rest of the squad were safely anchored halfway up towards the ceiling.

Behind him, a wall of rock crashed down, followed by the screams of the troops in its path. *Three.* Goose noted grimly. Their medic scrambled down the wall towards them. Two were trapped with legs that were now pulp, yet might make it, the third was flattened to the pelvis. *Alive now, but dead soon.*

=We're blocked,= Niko said on the com. =Massive stone ahead—= *A trap on all corridors,* Goose concluded. =—pitfalls with incineration lasers—=

*Augmented traps barring access, but the floor's solid on this side. The Queen waited for us, but didn't think we'd get this far.*

=Copy that.= The captain replied. =Same here.=

*Correction. Just this team's fucked!*

=Regroup.= Command ordered in text. =Proceed with caution.=

Goose's eyes narrowed. Half his squad was on this side, the entrance to the crypt ahead was still open. Bare walls. No cover before that. Caution would kill them!

"Charge!" he barked. Retracting his claws and pushing off the wall, he tossed off his helmet in favor of unhindered senses, and did as he ordered.

## Main control room

“Get down!” somebody yelled, “You’re in my line of fire!” A heavy body slammed into Doc, throwing him against the console. Without the armor, his spine would have been dust. Armored hands clamped around his throat. The largest crown trooper in existence used him as a shield and tried to cut off his air supply even through the combat suit. Doc struggled, kicked, clawed for the CDU clipped to his belt, gasped. “All progs active—”

=Where’s your politeness, Doc?= Firefly whizzed around his head from the console tormenting his spine.

=In his pants – as usual.= Tripwire emerged from around his belt.

=No one uses the word ‘please’ nowadays...= – Pathfinder.

=Brp – Blip – Brp – Blip – Brp...=

=Pixel, stop behaving like a BASIC-DOS compilation!= – Firefly.

“*Retina sca—!!!*” The crown trooper had found the angle to compress his windpipe through the suit. Doc saw a marine running towards him in slow motion.

=Retina scan? But we aren’t hardware— *YIKES!*= Pathfinder squeaked.

=Into that ugly face, people!= Firefly blipped and four rainbow-colored holographic sparkles whizzed towards the openings in the crown troopers helmet. The fifth— =This one, Pixel! Not the marine!= Lifeline beeped, annoyed.

Dark spots were dancing in front of Doc’s eyes, together with =Proceed with caution.= projected on his retinas. Two of his neck vertebrae would be unaligned soon, and— The pressure around his neck was gone. He coughed. The crown soldier in front of him was still beating at the rainbow-colored cloud filling his vision when Doc shot him point blank. Twice. Just to be sure.

“Thank you, pals,” he rasped, waving at the marines that he was all right. Mostly. “You earned a memory upgrade.”

=As if you hadn’t planned that anyway!= Firefly squeaked indignantly, vanishing back into the CDU. =By the way, that console your butt’s hugging is cleaner than your pants now.=

=Nope!= Pathfinder zipped through between Doc’s legs. =He didn’t wet himself this time.=

=Hey, Life!= Tripwire rotated, sparkling. =You lost. When do I get my ten Gigs of your allocated memory?=  
=You just can’t rely on programmers,= the green sparkle beeped sadly and disappeared together with Tripwire into the CDU.

With a satisfied *blrrrp* Doc caught the last one – Pixel – with the holographic trapezoid of the CDU without any commentary, patted imaginary dust off his battered combat suit, and nodded at the stunned marines. “I’m fine, ladies and gents. Please relocate the spectators to the outside before they become any smellier than they already are.” He indicated the dead crown trooper in front of him. “Thank you.”

=–are blocked,= Zach’s voice came over the com. =Explosives were ineffective. Doc, we need the lock-down lifted ASAP or we’re toast! Goose’s team is the only one on the other side.=

“Working on it,” Doc rasped and hastened to confirm Firefly’s report of the central console being clean, before focusing on getting past the Queen’s password parameters, various lurking crown viruses, and a hundred-strong contingent of rather nasty deletion programs. The security lacking in the tunnel was sure-fire installed here instead! But they hadn’t counted on *‘The Doc’* – with a capital-T – operating! He got past them all, found the command sequence for the pitfalls. Most of the lock indicators immediately changed to green. Most.

Doc cursed and tapped his com. “Pitfalls deactivated. Tunnel seals are manually controlled,” he drew a deep breath, “from inside the Psychocrypt.”

## Psychocrypt

*Senses, even under normal conditions of crystalline sharpness and almost painful intensity, were readjusted. Information sorted for relevance – position, movement, armor, insignia since others were behind him – when fifteen years of training took over, resetting the objective with unquestioned clarity: Success. Survival.*

*He left the access tunnel at top speed, breaking through the front row of enemy soldiers before the first return shot was even fired. Five bolts cleared the path to the enemy commander. Extensive scattering armor. He didn't slow down, used his momentum for the bayonet, driving it through armor and intestines underneath. A turn. The butt of the assault rifle connected with the prime target's helmet, shattering the plate and the skull underneath. A gash of hot, steaming blood hit his face. He dismissed it. His senses were clear. His body was functioning.*

*The next target approached. Eliminated.*

*The next...*

*Ozone. Blood. Guts. The hiss of energy weapons. The moaning of the dying. The stink of fear.*

*Known field. Hated field. Familiar field.*

*Certainty.*

*Next target. A somersault over the rifle ending at ground level. The bayonet struck upwards at the opening between the legs, the armor there weaker for better agility. The blade circled, cutting the body inside its hardened shell.*

*He rolled onto his feet, claws providing traction despite blood and slime.*

*Proceed.*

## Tunnel B

in front of the blockade

=Gooseman?= Niko heard Zach asking over the com, then even on the private channel Doc had established just for their team, =Goose! =

No reply.

She knew instinctively that he was physically sound, yet... something was wrong. She felt the satisfaction of a predator, almost feral reflexes taking life without thought. That wasn't their comrade in the Psychocrypt, but a supertrooper in battle. She didn't dare to reach out, didn't know how to tell Zach what she sensed, only—

"We have to get to him," she urged over the private channel, "fast, or we'll lose him. He's—" She shook her head, didn't know how to put it in words.

=I try to burn through,= Zach replied grimly, =if he doesn't open the seals. Circle back and— =

"He won't," Niko cut in, "and the thunderbolt will fry everyone on the other side." Not to speak of the attack that would follow if Goose reacted to Zach's beam. She swallowed. She'd seen Goose in combat once. Zach wouldn't leave that battlefield alive. She had to prevent that. "Let me try—"

She focused along the link, shivered at the cold predator on the other end, the sensation of blood and carnage and death, ignored it, turned her attention for the inanimate substance beyond the gore. She had to get in there. Now. Or—

'Or' wasn't bearable. She scattered her attention even wider, searched along the walls, painstakingly ignored the flickering life signals of those trapped behind the glass, and those being ripped apart in the hall the glass surrounded. There was the Queen's throne overseeing coffins and carnage. Her badge vibrated. A warning that her charge was about to run out. She ignored it, centered on the throne, focused on the symbols engraved on keys over two hundred meters away behind massive walls of steel and worse, the continuously waning lives of the cryptees. There were the controls for the weaponry and the mechanical defenses. She didn't know the codes, but the system underneath knew its settings. On and off. Closed and—

*Open.*

In front of her, the massive stone slab vibrated and began moving back up towards the ceiling. The gap at the floor was barely hip-wide, when Niko ignored all warnings of her suit and squad and squeezed through it.

## Psychocrypt

*Gas hissed. Ears twitched, locating the points of release. He fired in rapid succession, melted and sealed valves around the hall faster than the rifle could recharge. The barrel grew hot, its muzzle glowing dark red when it shut down. Discard.*

*A target took aim, too slow. He leaped. Iridium claws pierced the carotid. He used the rifle of the dead target to seal the remaining valves.*

*A target approached. He drew the battle knife from his left sleeve.*

*The target stopped. Insignia identical to his own.*

*No other movement. The blade stilled.*

*Assessing.*

## Tunnel A

With the grating sound of crushed stone, the stone slab crawled at glacial speed back into the ceiling. Zach forced himself not to use his bionics to give it 'a helping hand' so to speak. When the gap was finally wide enough for him to squeeze through, his suit systems reported elevated levels of ozone and... biological matter? in the airflow. What the—

"Niko?" he inquired OTR.

=Stay back!= came the sharp reply, followed by the distinct click of her closing the channel.

In front of him, the tunnel opened into the Psychocrypt covered in—

Blood. The floor was slick with it. A crown trooper lay on the ground near the tunnel entrance. Armor and body underneath slashed open, guts spilling onto the ground beside the body. More bodies beyond it, some torn apart, some strangely unharmed aside from blood pooling beside their throats. Scorch marks from rapid blaster fire marked most helmets. The troopers had been blinded before being cut down.

A group of grey uniformed soldiers huddled at the opposite tunnel. The remnants of the squad trapped on this side of the barrier, all staring towards the central dais where Gooseman, untransformed in a blood-soaked combat suit, was pointing a knife at Niko.

Blasters and knives. Zach felt bile in his throat as he entered the eerily silent hall. He'd been warned about Goose's bio defenses<sup>12</sup>. He hadn't realized what the man could do just with standard weaponry. *This is what I was made for. You might not like the difference.* He held his breath when Niko slowly unfastened her helmet despite the carnage—

## LSS Comanche

16 hours later

A short tap froze the image on screen, giving time to observe details. The combat suit, torn and blood-stained at sleeves and boots. A single red splash of dark-red blood crossed one cheek of an otherwise unmarked, *unmarred* face. Cold perfection, an archangel, with eyes as grey as the combat knife he'd

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<sup>12</sup> see "A Difficult Beginning" (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

raised at his comrade. A knife too sharp to hold the blood of its victims covering the floor around him. Yet...

Subadar laid a finger against his cheek, considered what he'd observed. The first kills had been messy, inflicting as much damage as possible, but with each enemy the strikes had become more precise. The ST had learned in combat what worked best, what was efficient. The last trooper had died from a single stab between armored torso and helmet. The rapid fire at the gas emitters...

The admiral considered that as well as he allowed the recordings from several soldiers to proceed simultaneously, showing the events from multiple angles.

Ranger Niko running into the blood-splattered hall, then slowly approaching a weapon with the face of her teammate pointing a knife at her.

Subadar noticed that none of the soldiers around called out. Neither did the captain who'd arrived only seconds after her. The silence in the hall had been absolute, to the point where the squishy sound of her boot finding a bloody spot on the floor was audible.

Despite gas and blood, she'd opened her helmet.

=Shane.= A quiet voice, no threat, no gesture. =It's over.= She hadn't reached for the weapon, had waited for recognition.

More than one of the recordings wobbled when it had come, a collective slump of relieve at a roughened "Seal up. There's gas." And a deadly blade being sheathed?

Probably. Although, they hadn't lost anybody in the Psychocrypt itself. In fact, Gamma squad had lost only one, the soldier severed by the falling stone. Two more had been injured in the same incident and would make it. An incident, that couldn't be construed as the ST's fault. On the contrary.

Subadar sighed, rubbed eyes that he knew were red from too much tension and serious lack of sleep now that the reports were coming in.

*Casualties in combat. Civilian casualties. Severely – as in irreversibly – injured personnel. Injured – as in 'will heal' eventually – personnel. Injured – either case – civilian within combat operations. Injured civilians outside combat operations.* That last one was the biggest number, because being a cryptee counted as injured, and by default every cryptee was a civilian during this operation.

In total, they'd lost sixteen soldiers in the operation. A ridiculously low number in absolute terms, given the layout of the enemy stronghold and the time the Queen has had to prepare for them. But it amounted to 15 per cent of the troops sent in, and that was the number the BWL would see. That – and the loss of a third of the cryptees due to the cyanide gas released when the blockade had been forced open. *A third.* It would have been all and the soldiers in the hall had the ST not melted most of the gas emitters.

Subadar knew he had to tread carefully there, very carefully. Frowning, he studied the various body camera recordings of the operation again, screening through them, mentally preparing his report for the BWL. It had to be done by the time they reached Earth. His troops' battle was over, his own was about to begin. He snorted, watching the events unfurl again on the screen in several perspectives, finally focusing on the record from the female Ranger and allowed it to fill the whole screen.

Stopping the record abruptly, Subadar studied the haunted green eyes filling his screen. "So that's what you're protecting, Joe," he said quietly.

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to be continued in  
Crystal Structures 6

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