



Crystal Structures

6

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

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

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It took only about fifteen years.

A. Kniggenndorf

Crystal Structures 6

A magnetic field (provided that it is not too strong) cannot penetrate into the interior of a superconductor. If a normal metal in a magnetic field is cooled below its superconducting transition temperature, the magnetic flux is abruptly expelled. Thus the transition, when it occurs in a magnetic field, is accompanied by the appearance of whatever surface currents are required to cancel the magnetic field in the interior of the specimen.

[Ashcroft / Mermin: Solid State Physics p.731]

LSS Comanche
returning to Earth

A combat knife above a sea of blood. White hands reaching, grabbing, tearing at boots. Screams reverberated in an empty hall and empty eyes. The blade didn't waver as its victims rose beside them, circling them, pressing in on them. No recognition and the knife struck, was torn free, struck again, was thrown, and buried to the hilt in Zachary's chest—

Niko jerked awake and stared at the blank steel of the bunk above hers, waiting for her racing pulse to calm down. The room was dimly lit from the green light on the communication panel beside the door, indicating normal ship function in transit, and the magnetic night light that Zach had attached to a corner of his bunk. The captain never slept in the dark, but the silence likely meant he was sound asleep now, despite how close that nightmare of hers had come to reality.

Niko drew a deep breath, struggling to keep her tattered shields closed tight against the memories. Blood on the ground. Bodies... body parts lying around. Goose's sleeves soaked with blood, the toe caps of his combat boots pierced. Claws for traction – the only transformation apparent. Grey eyes above a black combat knife—

She'd seen before what Goose could do in combat¹, but against other super troopers it had been almost innocuous compared to the Psychocrypt. The contingent of Crown troopers had been 'sheep for the wolf' – Zach's thought in its acidity had pierced her shields even then. The captain had covered his outward reaction well, but she knew that Goose had picked it up. In the debriefing, he'd been a silent shadow at the admiral's back, hadn't said anything, hadn't been asked anything, either. A feeling of tired resignation had flooded her when she'd tried to make contact.

In the semi-darkness of her bunk Niko thought of Goose holding on to her after the skirmish on Scarred². 'I wasn't trained to kill. I was trained to kill efficiently. There's a difference.'

There were no names for him on a battle field. No faces. Only insignia to tell friend from foe with 'foe' being the default, so that a mistake didn't destroy the living weapon that had cost Earth a fortune to raise. Desolation. A weapon had no place outside combat. A useful weapon wouldn't be send home—

Niko pushed the blanket back and, using a fraction of her telekinetic power, lowered herself silently to the ground. Like the men, she slept in her board uniform. All she had to grab was her jacket, badge, and boots—

"Where are you going?" The captain's voice stopped her in her tracks. Zach sat up. The blue eyes studying her coolly were alert and wide-awake. Obviously, he hadn't slept at all. Niko stood still under scrutiny. "I asked you something, lieutenant."

She swallowed. "Please don't. I don't want to lie to you."

"Then don't," he said, matter-of-fact. "What are you up to?"

"Setting the record straight." Niko answered. "Goose is here without papers. He knows that."

"And you don't trust me and the admiral to do right by him?" Zach asked her grimly.

"This isn't about do's and don'ts, Zach," Niko said desperately. "This is about Goose and today's consequences for him."

Zach considered that. "You've seen such a fight before?"

"Yes. And I know what it does to him." She met his eyes, imploring. "I won't let him face that alone."

¹ See "Weaknesses Are to Be Erased" (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

² See "Weaknesses Are to Be Erased" (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

"You should have given her curfew." Doc stuck his head over the edge of the bunk above Zach's after the door had closed behind Niko.

"And she would break it." Zach sighed. "This way, I can pretend not to know."

Doc arched a brow at that. "What made you that lenient, oh-captain-mine?"

Right, Doc hadn't been in the Psychocrypt, hadn't seen Niko walk through blood and intestines to call Goose back from... wherever he'd been in that battle. "Not lenient," he said finally. "Realistic."

BetaMountain
BMQ 206

Eliza studied the sun-filled kitchen with a mixture of dread and curiosity. It looked so normal. Even smelled normal of slightly burned eggs – apparently, their son had Zach's talent for cooking. Yellow sunlight fell through the kitchen window onto the remnants of a hastily made and even more hastily devoured breakfast of toast, scrambled eggs, and orange juice. Left behind by two teenagers, who'd run for the school shuttle only a minute ago.

"Sorry, Mom! We're so going to be late—" A circumspect GV had closed the apartment door after them before the sentence had been complete.

This was the second day that Eliza was left 'on her own', if she discounted GV. She'd come to accept the AI as either being the nervous, fastidious original or a direct copy thereof. As she'd begun to think of the children as Zachy and Jessie...

She startled. She shouldn't do that. And that wasn't a 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 before he'd left. But she wasn't sheltered. She was trapped in an illusion with one of the Queen's machinations posing as her husband being sent off to destroy the Psychocrypt as if—

"GV," she ordered. "Tri-D broadcast. Find me some news about the ongoing fleet campaign." *Let's see, how far they intend to take this charade!*

LSS Comanche
returning to Earth

Booted steps echoed in the hallway outside. Gooseman recognized the gait long before Niko stopped in front of the door to the four-bunk section he had – as expected – all for himself. A faint scratch on steel rather than an audible knock or electronic buzz that could be recorded and she slipped inside. "You shouldn't be here," he said once the door had closed. "I am *not* safe."

"I know. You pointed a blade at me." She shrugged.

The small movement brought her scents to him. "You're afraid," he stated, sitting up, putting his bare feet on the floor.

"I can't sleep," she said with a nonchalance her scent didn't support, "and I don't want to lose you."

"Lose me?" he laughed out without mirth. "You never had me. I'm military property, *useful* property. They won't let me go back."

"And you think that I will accept that?"

Still sitting on the lowest bunk, it was his time to shrug. "There's only so much you can do against an admiral's orders."

"I don't care about admirals." Violet sparkles ran over her skin. "I care about you."

"Care about yourself." His senses were still acute, geared for combat. He smelled her fear, heard her heart racing underneath her bravado. He stood abruptly, felt his spine stiffen as his body went on high alert. The predator was too close to the surface for this. "Niko, for your own sake," he warned her again. "I am *not* safe."

"Neither am I." She snapped, angrily pushing in on him. "Yes, I've seen what you can do. And I've seen the people you protected with it. Your squad. The cryptees. *Me*. I saw it on Scarred and still took the skin off your back on Tortuna!" Her powers flared. Violet sparkles, no longer confined to her skin, danced around her. "Admit it!" He found himself retreating. The edges of the bunk stack suddenly pressed against his back. "*I'm as much a freak as you!*" She got right into his face with it. "*And I won't give you up!*"

"So, what?!" he growled, bared fangs a mere breath from her face. "You want to get scraped off the deck plates?"

"You can *try!*" she shot back, sparkles intensifying, closing around him. "But do you *want* that?"

"Scraping off? No. Screwing to? Damn yes, but—" He broke off, reeling. "*Fuck!*"

"Exactly," Niko snapped. "We're both capable of atrocities!" ...*Mine just don't leave visible traces...*

He couldn't care less that he didn't hear that last sentence with his ears, or felt her guilt along his own. He consciously sniffed now, tracking, assessing... Her. And him. *Them*.

"Last chance," he growled. "Go."

...*No chance...* Her fingers clawed into his shirt. He stopped caring. She was long past his skin. His mouth came down hard.

BetaMountain
BMQ 206

...DESPITE HORRIBLE LOSSES OF ALMOST 25 PER CENT OF DEPLOYED PERSONNEL, OUR TROOPS WERE VICTORIOUS IN FREEING A MAJORITY OF THE CAPTIVES HELD IN THE PSYCHOCRYPT, RENDERING THE NEFARIOUS INSTALLATION UNUSABLE IN THE PROCESS.
THE FLAGSHIP COMANCHE UNDER FLEET-ADMIRAL FREDERIC SUBADAR WILL ARRIVE AT BETA SPACE STATION WITHIN THE DAY...

Eliza manually switched off the receiver, causing a startled blink from GV bobbing on the kitchen display. She wiped her hands on her comfortably worn sweatpants. *Within the day*. She swallowed. She'd been complacent too long. If she were to do anything, she had to act now.

LSS Comanche
BETA Space Station
Space Navy Dock IV

The top bunk. Niko reached up, pressed her flat hand against the cold metal above her head. The clamor of debarking troops reverberated through the corridors outside. Shane's quiet breath fanned over her shoulder. *Zach will have me deported*, she thought and, *Zach isn't here*. Goose was, a silent source of warmth between her, the edge of the bunk, and a three-meters-fall to the deck. For him, the top bunk was a vantage point above the plane of sight to curl up with her. Not that they'd reached it fast. Or had stopped afterwards. Niko smiled at the memory of what they'd done in a space so low she'd bumped her hip against the ceiling when turning over.

She hadn't known how he hungered for contact and had been shocked when she realized even his thoughts couldn't tell her what he liked, because he himself hadn't known. It hadn't been an issue on Granna³ and she hadn't cared after 17798⁴, now she did. For him it was touch and scent. Skin on skin. There was a spot right beneath his shoulder blades that nearly sent him over the edge when she

³ See "Initiation" (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

⁴ See "Lost" and "Hot Summer Night" (fan fictions by A. Kniggendorf)

ran her fingers over it, and a faint web of scar tissue in his nape⁵ that when touched raised memories nobody would want in their bed. She would do her utmost not to trigger that ever again. She remembered him consciously breathing her in, repeatedly brushing his cheek over her shoulder like a cat marking what's his with his scent, anchoring himself with her. Even now their legs were entangled, his weight tugged at her hair. She took her hand off the ceiling, slipped her arm over his side, fingers spread wide on his lower back. *Egoist*, her mind warned her. *This doesn't change anything—*

Someone's coming. The thought cut in in its alertness. They were in full rapport now. The link undeniably active. Sensorial impressions not her own followed, isolated approaching footsteps from the general ruckus outside, identified standard navy ship boots as footwear, drawing conclusions with absolute certainty. *ADC. Two. Headed for us.*

Goose rolled over, facing the door. Niko reached for her badge, froze. It was still attached to her uniform. Her *white-and-blue* uniform lying tangled with his gray Navy slacks on the lowest bunk. In plain sight. And her means to obfuscate their attention was still attached to it. They—

A sharp buzz preceded the sound of the door being opened. "Specialist. The admiral wants to see you."

"And he didn't know how the comm works?" Goose growled, propping up on one elbow, effectively blocking any sight past him.

"Right now, specialist." The second ordinance insisted disapprovingly.

Pressed into the shadows against the back wall, Niko more felt than heard Goose's snort as he threw the cover back over her. *Stay put. Ventilation system's good. They won't smell anything.* Then the space beside her was empty. Goose had rolled out of bed, dropped nude as he was to a smooth stand in front of two now very rattled ordinances. "Like this?" he asked.

Peering at them from under the ruffled blanket, Niko saw heat flashing across the female officer's face. The muscles in her partner's face worked angrily. "In proper attire," the man bit off. "Five minutes."

Goose indicated the door and growled. "Get lost. Or are you here for inspections, too?"

"No. We saw enough."

Niko released a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding when the door closed behind them. "That was close," she whispered, unsure how far the ordinances had retreated. She pushed back the cover and climbed down. It seemed a miracle that they hadn't spotted her white-and-blue among the grays, though she'd be first to admit that Goose shirtless—*clothesless*—was a near perfect distraction.

He was already sorting their uniforms, donning his own. She felt self-conscious when he tossed her her underwear, wondering aloud, "What would you have done if they hadn't budged?"

Goose, pulling up his pants, shrugged. "Gone."

"Stay safe," Goose said quietly, closing the last clasps of the Navy greys as he turned for the door. "We've been reckless." *In more ways than one. There's a difference between ability and permission. Don't learn that the hard way.* Eight weeks ago, Walsh's warning had come too late. This time, he'd just ignored it.

As if I'd given you much choice, Niko told him, pulling his head down for a kiss. *Don't worry.* "Any idea what the admiral wants?" she asked out loud.

"Probably telling me where they plan to store me until the next massacre's due." She winced, making him regret his choice of words. "I didn't get deployment papers. They can do whatever they want."

"No, they can't!" she declared angrily – *at him? at the Navy?* he didn't know – unclasped her badge and pinned it to his shirt. "Here," she stated fiercely. "Remind them what you are!"

The shining gold star on the Navy grays implied a defiance he wasn't sure was wise given Su-badar's temper, but removing it was out of the question. Instead, he arched a brow at her. "Yours?"

⁵ See "Shattered Souls: For an Eye" (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

“A Galaxy Ranger. Law enforcement,” she corrected, patting the badge on his shirt firmly. “And that there are people who will enforce it for you!”

He was already on his way to the admiral when he realized that her fiery statement did not deny his joked suggestion.

For a ship already docked the corridors around the bridge were sure busy, but the personnel still managed to give Goose a wide berth as he passed with his escort. These people hadn’t been in the Psychocrypt, but tales traveled faster than light – even on a moored ship. More than one of the glances zipped from his face to the Ranger badge pinned to his chest, the polished gold an odd contrast to the gray cloth...

The admiral awaiting him with a stern expression behind his desk wasn’t a surprise, Zach in front of the desk was. Goose saluted and stood at attention. Subadar studied him thoughtfully. A rustle of cloth indicated Zach moving, but Goose knew better than to divert his attention under scrutiny. Finally, the admiral said, “at ease,” allowing for parade rest.

“There was a mix-up regarding your papers, *Ranger*.” Subadar indicated a sealed blue envelope on his desk. “It has been corrected. Your captain has the details. It would be prudent to disembark in correct uniform alongside your unit.” Goose blinked, but said nothing. “You’re also expected at the post mission events. Dismissed.”

“I see Niko found you,” Zach said after Subadar’s door had closed behind them. He nodded at the badge pinned to Goose’s shirt.

“Yes, sir.” No reason to deny it.

“You know that Niko can track you?”

“Yeah.” Goose drew a deep breath. “It’s called a resonance⁶. We tried to separate it, but I can’t do my part of the bargain. Those receptors control my bio defenses, Zach. After Deltoid I know better than to tamper with them.” He looked aside. “We decided just to keep it. It’s not that distracting and knowing the other’s sound is kinda useful on missions.”

“And you didn’t tell me,” Zach remarked none too pleased.

“We didn’t tell anybody,” Goose clarified with a snort. “It’s embarrassing. Like pink socks!” Only that he’d come to like pink socks. It made them easy to spot in the laundry and— He shook his head. “Do you know what this was all about?” He distracted, waving the envelope.

“I assume the results in the Psychocrypt cannot be explained without admitting that you were there,” Zach said grimly, “so they filed your deployment post factum.” After a few steps, he added, “You were right. I don’t like the difference in your M.O.” Goose nodded, tense. “But then, neither do you.” Zach sighed. “Let’s get your gear and leave this pot, Lieutenant.”

“Yes, sir.”

BetaMountain

A cheer went up in the crowd gathered in front of the wall-mounted screen in the hall. On screen, the first soldiers were leaving the Comanche, walking in orderly rows across the dock cordoned off by MP against media and spectators on site to the waiting shuttles to Earth.

Eliza, staying near the far wall as she made her way towards the maintenance access tunnel she’d memorized on one of the “base tours” the kids had given her, snorted inwardly. *In formation*. Still, she watched the rows of Navy grays interspersed with a few technician khakis streaming past the cameras, putting the scene up on screens planet-wide in different angles with breathless commentary drowned out by the excited crowd in the hall. *That’s one way to make sure they didn’t have to come*

⁶ see “Silence” (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

up with believable broadcast stupidity, she thought. Still, then why make a broadcast at all? Distracting the people made it a lot easier to execute her plans. Did they want her to do it? Telling them how to sabotage BETA? But for that to work this would have to be a real copy of the base and if they had that they wouldn't need the knowledge how to—

Stop it! Eliza shook her head. The Queen had messed with her head often enough.

Something white flashed at the edge of her vision. A row of white-and-blue Ranger uniforms filled the screen on the opposite wall. She stopped, watched.

'Zachary', flanked by the shapeshifter on the left and the witch next to the techno-mage on the right. One of the cameras caught him in profile, making her heart clench at how close the Queen's machination had come to impersonate her love. *Or—?*

Angrily, she quenched the nagging doubt, and began working on the control panel to the maintenance tunnel. She'd been trained to withstand psychological influence, but her instructors hadn't imagined alien mindtech going as far as the Queen's had. Eliza drew a quivering breath. She was running out of time, now and in her head. She couldn't hope to stay off the grid for long, and she was sliding towards their trap even now.

Eliza was closing the entrance cover when the hall fell silent. The last image she caught on screen while putting the cover screws back in were a line of flag-covered coffins floating on the heels of the last row of returning personnel. Not everybody had a made it back alive.

BetaMountain Hangars

"O'Malley must be foaming from the mouth," Goose said under his breath as the transport cabin finally left the ground and raised them high above the milling crowd of reporters, news teams, camera teams, and local representatives. The crowd filled the cavernous hangar from wall to wall save for a narrow corridor cordoned off by an impressive amount of – armed – MPs.

"How so?" Zachary frowned at him.

"She got into a funk because of confetti. What do you think she does about chewing gum on her runways?"

Zachary blinked. "Chewing gum? Are you sure?"

Goose sniffed briefly. "I *am* sure."

Doc beside them sniggered. "Then those MPs have to turn around and save the masses from her wrath."

"And us from scraping duty," Niko sighed.

"Can't you just levitate it away, dearest maiden?"

"Would you want to learn that much about somebody else's dental status?"

"No, but—"

His vibrating wristcom distracted Zach from the ongoing banter. He tapped the screen. "Fox here." Immediately, the tiny screen filled with his son's panicked face.

=Dad. Mom's gone. We just came back from school and GV doesn't know where she went and—=

"When did she leave?" Zach interrupted him, already calculating how long it would take them to get there and—

"Captain," Goose said quietly beside him. "I can leave now, if you cover for me at arrival." He indicated the dark ground rushing past far below them. "There's a supply access up ahead that'll get me past the media."

"Will do." Zach nodded grimly at him, silencing the wristcom as he met the green eyes firmly. "And remember, *my wife is no enemy.*"

"Understood, sir." The ST leaped from the transport cabin, disappearing in the dark underneath.

"That wasn't necessary," Niko told Zach angrily. "He didn't deserve that. And you know it."
Did he? Zach wiped a hand over his face. *Not now.* He raised the wristcom again. "Zachy, Goose's on his way to find her. The two of you stay out of his way."

=Yes, Dad. But mom's—=

"It's going to be alright, Zachy." It had to be. Anything else wasn't bearable. "I'll be there as fast as I can. Dad end." He immediately tapped the emergency line to Walsh. "Sir, my wife's reported missing. Ranger Gooseman is already looking for her."

=Understood.= Walsh replied gruffly. =Is he aware of the media clogging the public areas of the base?=
=

"He went via the supply network, sir." Zach reported.

=Good. All of you are public faces right now. I don't want him in that press unsupervised.= A brief pause. =Critical infrastructure is already guarded because of the media ruckus. I'll make sure the guards also expect less civil intervention.=

"Sir, my wife isn't—"

=—*is* a tactical operative gone rogue, Fox. Walsh end.=

"Zach," Niko asked cautiously into the lasting silence filled only by the noise of the transport cabin rattling along. "Just what is going on here?"

"Yes," Doc chimed in, "and why is our über-boss considering your wife a threat warranting our resident ST on her heels despite the press-press?"

Zach winced. Their questions made him wish for an Andorian pressure tube system cutting the transport time to a few seconds, instead of the twenty minutes the long route up to the command level took. He drew a deep breath. And told them.

Personnel Quarters Level

Gooseman didn't so much as stop in front of Zach's door, but jogged past it. Eliza Fox' scent clear in his nose. She'd left less than two hours ago, probably only minutes before Zachy and his sister had been sent home from school. This was a quiet, residential area without many passersby on normal days, and luckily the press people swarmed elsewhere. He inhaled deeply, getting a fresh imprint of her scent.

My wife is no enemy.

Yet, she still smelled exactly the same as last time, no mingling with Zach's scent, as if—

Gooseman shook his head. It wasn't his business. It didn't feel right to focus that much on Mrs. Fox. Still... It was strange. Niko smelled of him now, and his own scent held traces of hers. No ST worth their rations would miss that. At least, most of the others knew better than pissing him off in earnest. And Stingray was dead, Gravestone and Jackhammer wouldn't bother. Killbane was another matter. If Killbane smelled Niko on him, or worse, him on Niko—

He stopped dead. Mrs. Fox' scent was gone.

Transport Cabin

"So, you're married to a TacOp?!" Doc whistled. "Mon Capitan, those waters of yours are unexpectedly deep."

"Nonsense." Zach snapped. "Eliza worked in astrography before we were redeployed for Kirwin. She hasn't been in the field as an operative after contact."

"But she was taught to inflict serious damage behind enemy lines if necessary," Niko cautioned. "And it's likely that is where she believes she is."

"Just what do you want to imply here?" Zach returned sharply.

"That Walsh might have good reason to send Goose after her." She avoided his eyes. "And that Goose might not be able to *talk* her out of it."

Elsewhere in BetaMountain

*FairBreathe*⁷. Goose sniffed again, then wrinkled his nose and sneezed. Someone had emptied a family pack of the stuff in this section. Maybe more. *Who would—? Damn.* He grinned. The lady had brains. It would have worked like a charm – against a bloodhound. Too bad for her that he wasn't a dog and could conclude from the end of one stink to the beginning of the next. Another sneeze. Too bad for him that he now had to follow a trail of *FairBlech*. Yuck.

Transport Cabin

“There are two common tropes in Xeryon fiction,” Niko explained. At Zach and Doc’s incredulous stares she rapidly added, “we translated a lot more than mere technical manuals before we figured what we were dealing with.

“Trope one is a trapped dream traveler being made believe to have woken up only to realize later that he or she never stopped traveling. The second trope is almost the opposite, somebody already woke from the dream tour, but believes to be still traveling. From what you told me, Eliza believes to be in the first condition, whereas it’s the second.”

“Did the books have solutions for that?” Doc asked. “Or were the Xeryons all into drama?”

“It was usually corrected by a loved one using a common secret the dream traveler hadn’t thought of in ages, so that it couldn’t be part of the dream tour.” Niko swallowed.

“And you believe that will work?” Zach asked dubiously.

“It’s a plot device in pulp fiction, Zach. I have no way to know the validity of those books.” Niko looked down at her boots. “Or the accuracy of Sven’s translation of them.”

Elsewhere in the Mountain

Goose closed the maintenance exit soundlessly behind him, glad to have escaped the hall without being spotted. A miracle in his books, given that some of the screens had showed his very face in reruns. At least, the white-and-blues were a common enough sight within BetaMountain not to draw attention. He turned his back to the entrance and sniffed, sorting through the musky scents of dust, electronics, stagnant air... and a biting whiff of odor-trapping chemicals. Right track. Mrs. Fox had come past here not too long ago. The maintenance tunnels were a maze parallel the lower levels of BetaMountain, housing network, water, electricity, and aeration lines, and connecting storage rooms and emergency facilities and—

Tracing her here would take time he didn’t think Mrs. Fox would give him. *Think, Gooseman,* he berated himself. *Where would you go from here to cause the most damage?*

He fell into a run.

Eliza heard the heavy-duty safety door at the entrance of the server hall scratch over the rough permacrete floor. She stilled. It was likely a technician or one of the ubiquitous guards doing his or her duty. It couldn’t be the shapeshifter, who’d promised to come after her should she run.

Even if he’d followed her trail, she’d come through one of the emergency access locks in the back of the hall, basically opposite the door that had opened – and closed again – just now. So, a guard doing his round; a technician wouldn’t be done already. She still didn’t move, waited to be sure to be on her own again, before—

⁷ An earlier version was marketed as “Febreze”.

"You can come out now," the shapeshifter called out. "I know you're here." His voice carried well through the cavernous hall. Echoing between the chaotic rows of servers, data links, and the crystal loci linking Andorian and human technology, it seemed to come from all directions at once.

"How did you find me?" Eliza called back, knowing the echo would obscure her location as well.

"It's where I'd go to disrupt base operations as much as possible without hitting the ammunition depot. Besides, *FairBreathe* stinks. Come out now."

Eliza huffed. "Make me!" she challenged, working frantically on dismantling the isolation from the main power line to the crystal loci feeding the mainframe.

"Please. Do you know what Zach does to me, if I get you out by force?"

"Tell that Queen bitch of yours, I don't fall for her fakes!"

Dead silence, slowly filling with the blips and beeps of the electronics surrounding her.

"You think we're something the Queen made up to get to you?" There was clear disbelief in his voice. She didn't deign that with an answer. "Then why do you give her what she wants?"

What? Eliza froze.

"If this is a sim, then you're showing that bitch how to hurt us," he summarized the situation. "In your shoes I'd be playing along, have some fun, and force her to sit an eternity on her scrawny ass without getting anything."

W—What!?

"Please," he repeated. "I don't want to end up in the cryocrypt because of this shit."

She snorted. "As if they'd freeze a Galaxy Ranger."

"They'd freeze a supertrooper."

Supertrooper? He was a...? She recalled news broadcasts about a military project gone wrong, about genetically engineered soldiers rioting. It had made her secretly glad that they were bound for Kirwin with Jessie and Little Zach. But they hadn't arrived there, instead— She swallowed. The shapeshifter being a supertrooper would explain another facet of her nightmares, rationalize them. Bionics were possible, also that Zach did something desperate to rescue her. And yet—

"Please, ma'am."

It was the desperation in his voice that had her close the network link without directly connecting the crystal locus with the power source. "Let me guess," she said as she climbed down from her vantage point on top of the third tier of servers. "You were the baby face of the litter."

"Something like that, ma'am. And no, I wasn't used for PR." He activated his wristcom, once she'd made a step away from the ladder. "I have her, Captain. Shall I return her to your quarters?"

=Negative,= came the voice that sounded so much like Zach from the small receiver. =Bring Eli Connery to Walsh's office. Fox end.=

"Who is—?" Gooseman began, but the connection was already closed. He scratched his head.

"Who the fuck is Eli Connery?"

"That's me," Eliza said, her thoughts racing. "I'm Eli Connery."

Eli. Short for Eliza or *Eli Connery*. Eliza's thoughts were in tumbles as she followed Gooseman through the maze of BETA mountain's service tunnels almost on autopilot. *How on Earth can they know that!?*

Mr. Eli Connery had been their ruse for dating in their academy times. Zach's parole conditions hadn't allowed him to leave the campus for non-educational purposes, and fraternization on campus was strictly prohibited. However, meeting a tutor from the JoSIS⁸ Observatory for astrography and stellar navigation had been grudgingly granted. Not that star systems and navigation had been a top priority on their minds—

"Ma'am?" the supertrooper had stopped in front of a safety door labelled "Administration" and gave her a wary look. "Is everything alright?"

⁸ Joaquin Sacramento Inland Sea Observatory, established in 2078, ten years after rising sea levels had finally flooded the Sacramento and Joaquin Valley.

Eliza forced a deep breath. If 'Zach' was Zach, then— The realization was painful. "No," she admitted, squaring her shoulders. "But it will be."

Cmdr. Walsh's Office

"Sir, I am aware that my actions will have consequences. I am prepared to accept them." Eliza stood rod-straight at attention. "Including but not limited to a localization bracelet."

The commander in front of her laughed humorlessly. "I received the report regarding your med band, corporal. An external tag would be identical to accepting your word."

"Which I will give, sir," she replied firmly.

"Which you would also give if you considered us an enemy to be deceived. Catch-22. We're talking about an implant."

"No!" Zach broke protocol. "You won't chip my wife like a common criminal!"

"This isn't about your wife but about *my* base!" Walsh snapped icily.

Gooseman near the door shifted. "Permission to speak, sir," he addressed the commander, waiting for a grudgingly given 'granted' before continuing. "Mrs. Fox gave *me* a run for my money. If you don't go for a maiming placement⁹, a chip for her will only result in a bloodier escape."

Eliza froze. Everybody stared at the shapeshifter

"That's illegal even in times of war, Gooseman."

Calmly, "That's why I brought it up, sir. She's come down from the network racks voluntarily and we're still online."

"Did you check for timers?" the commander didn't let her out of his eyes as he asked that.

"There's a stripped powerline. No way to time that." Gooseman sounded casually. "ALMA already called the techs and told RHONDDA."

"Thank you," Eliza said quietly after they'd cleared the office. A group of armed MPs were waiting to escort her home. "I owe you."

"Just did my job, ma'am." Gooseman shrugged. "Use bleach to mask your scent next time and we're even."

"There won't be a next time," Zach warned her with a glance towards the waiting MPs. "In case you didn't notice, that was a close shave. I'll be home right after debriefing. We've got to talk."

"No, Zachary," Eliza said firmly, closing her hand around the tracking bracelet on her left wrist. "If you are who you claim to be, you know that *'talking'* isn't going to cut it." She looked back at Gooseman and inquired, unfazed, "would bleach work better?"

"No, ma'am." The shapeshifter—no, the *supertrooper's* grin revealed fangs. "But it doesn't stink that awful."

Hall of Earth

Applicants waiting room B

It was dark outside. In the distance, the artificially snowcapped massif of the Kilimanjaro glowed in the night. Strong, stark white floodlights took care that this symbol of power dominated the landscape even after dark. Fleet-admiral Frederic Subadar tugged at the tight collar of his white dress uniform and watched his mirror image next to the powerful mountain in the black window pane do the same, while he waited for the assembly to call him in.

⁹ A "maiming placement" refers to a tracking chip implanted so that removing it outside a qualified surgical setting results in incapacitating damage; usually by inserting it into a vital organ – such as the heart wall or the liver – or coupling it with a small detonation device and placing it near the spinal column. The Treaty of Gweta, Botswana, ratified in 2061, defined tracking devices placed to maim as a 2nd degree war crime.

He recalled the events leading up to the loss of his ship and the subsequent Psychocrypt campaign. This report would decide if he got another ship or was grounded indefinitely...

Decoy! I repeat: Decoy! Angelina's bait!

A broken radio silence and ignored orders...

"Your orders were straight forward, Lieutenant."

"Sir, I knew I'd come in hot and wouldn't take off again anytime soon. The Laredo had no space to spare for a burned wreck like mine."

"The Laredo's spare space was not your concern, your orders were."

"With all due respect, sir," the ST returned. "Two months ago, I did a planetfall without a ship and walked away from it!"

"And if you hadn't walked away from it this time?"

"You'd get a medal for solving the Board's problem, sir."

No, Frederic decided, he wouldn't get a medal for this. He probably wouldn't even get a new ship if he pulled this off. He snorted. The green light over the door to the assembly hall went on. He stood and straightened his shoulders. *Showtime.*

BetaMountain
MPQ 206

Eliza closed the bedroom door firmly between her and her children. Zachy had eyed her warily when the MP had delivered her home and Jessie's eyes had seemed enormous at the sight of the open-carried military pistols her 'escort' had had at the ready, at least until the front door had closed. She didn't know if there was a guard in front of the apartment now. It hadn't seemed prudent to check.

If this was real, if the commander was who they said he was, then she'd maxed out his leniency today. And if he wasn't—if Zach wasn't—if—

Eli Connery. She clasped her elbows. Her being Mr. Connery wasn't on file. Couldn't be on file, or they'd have been cashiered for fraternization. That tutoring for astrography hadn't involved more navigation than making sure to get close enough to the observatory above the Joaquin inland sea for Zach's electronic ID to register there, and then they'd swerved off, hiking along the slope among the sequoias in the dusk—

She still recalled his hands on her skin, the bark of a huge redwood pressing into her back through the thin shirt as he pinned her to the living wall of the tree. A storm of sensations rushed through her when she'd lost the ground under her feet, held upright only by his hands under her buttocks and the rough bark against her back. She closed her eyes at the memory. It had been good... so good...

"My Dad is going to kill us, you know?" she panted breathlessly against his muscular shoulder as they stood with her legs still slung around his hips, the cloth of his cadet uniform chafing at her inner thighs, trembling with exhaustion in the warm night's air.

"No..." he returned in a husky whisper, breathing heavily himself, "your Dad's gonna kill me. Mr. Connery is just going to be grounded for the rest of his life."

She laughed so hard, they lost balance and tumbled to the thick cover of dried needles...

It had been difficult to sneak back on to base without having to explain the pieces of bark and resin in her hair and on the back of her blouse, and a dress uniform skirt crumpled beyond recognition. The risk to sneak back between curfew end and morning roll call had been a titillating addition to that night. There'd still been sequoia needles pricking in her underwear. Luckily, staff sergeants didn't strip search at roll call—

The opening of the front door called her from the memory. Eliza heard quiet steps in the hallway and even quieter words to her son who'd likely lurked there since she'd been brought home. She was glad the kids had resisted the urge to cling to her in person – or maybe they were too old to be that childish by now. She didn't know, but she knew who'd arrived. And feared it—*him*. No. She shook her head. Fear wouldn't do. She turned at the sound of the bedroom door.

"Good, you're still here." There was obvious relief in his oh-so-familiar face. He hadn't been sure she'd stay.

Eliza's closed her hand over the tracking bracelet spanning her left wrist. "Where would I have gone," she asked, "without breaking my word?"

He replied nothing, closed the door behind him and she expected the hiss of a seal. It didn't come. He crossed the room, put his service weapon in the weapons safe; their routine ever since Zachy's birth. But now there were finger-sized dents in the reinforced door frame, reminding her that his real weaponry couldn't be locked away safely. The thought gave her pause.

"How much?" she asked after the safe's lock engaged. "How much of you is still you?"

He winced at the question. "Approximately 55 per cent, discounting the ceramic laminae reinforcing the natural bone," he answered, matter-of-fact, as if the question hadn't hurt. When she said nothing, he explained, "My left side was fried. It was pure luck that the shot missed the brain."

She studied him curiously, weighed the straight answer against the wince, his actions against her fears, her memories against her nightmares. "And your...?" She arched a brow at him.

"My—?" he asked, uncomprehending.

"I'm your wife," she reminded him dryly. "I'm supposed to have a certain interest in that part of your anatomy."

Heat flooded his face as he got it.

"You're blushing," Eliza noted, surprised. She went closer, allowed her fingertips to ghost over his cheek that even after what had to be long day without rest, appeared clean shaven. "On *both* sides." She looked up, studied his face. "Your eyes are your own."

"The head was spared," he rasped, holding dead-still under her scrutiny. "Mostly," he amended. "There are some plates in the jaw and the implant to control everything."

"It must have hurt like hell," she whispered, transfixed. The skin under her hand felt warm, natural. A muscle in his cheek worked as he fought for composure and said,

"I was out of it, most of the time."

"But not all of the time."

"They can't set the interface if there's no response from the nerves." He shook his head. "You're trying to derail me," he accused her almost plaintively. "This has to be about you, not me."

"No, this has to be about us," she corrected more brazen than she felt. "And whether or not there is a redwood tree in our past."

This time, he got it immediately.

Hall of Earth

Admiral Frederic Subadar studied the row of faces along the wide table who'd just accepted the set of medals he'd bestowed on the Kiowa's pilots, a sad number of which would be awarded posthumously. He abstained from tugging at his obnoxiously tight collar and cuffs and, squaring his shoulders, determinedly switched off the presentation showing the collar cam recordings of the personnel to be honored. As expected, the suddenly empty screen caused a stir and a wave of frowns among the politicians, assembled in person or via holoscreen.

"Ladies and gentlebeings of the board," he said into the disquiet. "I will not keep these data and the ugly reality of close combat from you, but first, allow me to tell you about a young soldier without whom both — the battle for Earth and the battle for the Psychocrypt — would have been lost, the battle for Earth devastatingly so..."

In the wee hours of the morning, Eliza lay awake. False moonlight filtered through a screen she could pretend was a terrace window, along with a soft breeze smelling of desert night that came from the air conditioning set above it, mimicking normal life. Mimicking. Pretending. Was she pretending normalcy as well? *Were they?*

She glanced over at the other side of the bed, where Zach was sound asleep on his back. For as long as she knew him, he'd always slept on his side, but maybe the bionics played a role in that change. Weight certainly was an issue, certified by the reinforced bedframe and the caution with which he had touched her. Or maybe that had been his wariness.

He hadn't said anything, but she knew her reaction had hurt him, *she* had hurt him, and he clearly didn't want to hurt her. He'd taken her as cautiously as if she were made of woven glass, slowly and tenderly, making her forget her own wariness. His artificial skin had felt warm and natural, but then she'd held on just a little firmer and there'd been no bones underneath but a smooth metal structure, reminding her that there beside her was enough power to bring down a combat spacecraft.

She suppressed a shiver, recalling piloting one he'd shot down. No, that had to have been the slaverlord she'd powered. She recalled being collected off the battlefield later without so much as a scratch – and that ship had been blown apart around her. Still—

Her hand ghosted towards his chest, feeling for his warmth, tracing the inked Romulan warbird. She'd been surprised that they'd bothered to restore the elaborate ink, when removing it would have sufficed, as they'd done with his beard. Zach always had had a hard time staying clean shaven over the course of a shift. Not anymore.

Maybe that was why he had kept the tattoo, symbol of the one thing that had turned his life around. She was loath calling it a mistake. Without it, he wouldn't have been at the academy when she enrolled, and they'd never have met again under different circumstances. Her parents had had a hard time accepting him even when the uniform covered the ink—

She was glad that they had, not that their disapproval would have changed her choice. Closing her eyes, Eliza felt for his heartbeat against her fingertips and made a silent vow that fifty-five per cent would be enough.

2088-10-10

BETA Space Station
Space Navy

The main docking bay had been cordoned off and decorated with flags, a raised dais, and rows of white-laid tables. Navy personnel, decked out in dress blues, formed an honor guard behind and to the left and right of the area holding the tables. A broad swath along the opposite wall had been handed over to the press. Tri-D drones whirred overhead, kept at bay by the safety netting still stretched overhead across the dock despite neither this nor the two adjacent bays being in use.

Safety in more than one aspect, Gooseman thought when more than a dozen of the drones tried to zoom in on their table – and him specifically – despite the net. *At least, the fucking buzzers won't splash into the coffee.* This felt less like a military ceremony and more like Mrs. Hays' madhouse¹⁰. He suppressed a shudder, feeling as if a dozen target designators had a fix on him.

Relax, this isn't a battle field, Niko soft voice said in his head.

No, this is worse, he replied in his thoughts without looking at her. *There I can shoot back.*

¹⁰ see "Beyond the Frontier" (fan fiction by A. Kniggendorf)

They are just taking pictures, Shane, she reminded him.

Yeah, because the media lacks footage of BETA's pet monster.

Maybe they just want footage of a very handsome ranger for once out in dress uniform, Niko suggested, daintily adding sugar to her cup.

And maybe you're biased.

Laughter trickled back over the link, along with unexpected warmth. *Not 'maybe'.*

They were five at the table. Mrs. Fox, in civilian attire, had accompanied the captain. She was sitting very straight, very composed between Zach and Doc. The tracking bracelet on her left wrist was dainty enough to look like steel jewelry – there *were* limits as to what the commander accepted regarding risks to his base. Though BETA space station technically wasn't his base, and Mrs. Fox smelled of Zach now, so maybe it was something else and—

Gooseman firmly turned his attention to the coffee in front of him, trying to discern the brand of the beans instead. *Acidic. Volcanic soil. Nothing of the leafy green and loam notes typical for South America.* He sniffed consciously. *African blend, he decided, not even laced.* Somebody had paid for the good stuff. He glanced at the officers' table where Antonova, Blake, Subadar and Walsh seemed to discuss something, and wondered who'd done it as he took the first sip. Nope, this was nothing like the dishwasher Supplies handed out. It almost made this thing bearable—

The ceremony went on for hours. Awarded medals and recommendations were announced in increasing importance not only for the Psychocrypt Campaign but also for what had been labeled the Defense of Earth before that. Post-mortem awards to be handed to the next of kin in a private ceremony afterwards were announced and laid out on a long table covered in black cloth. It was a solemn display, reminder of the staggering losses suffered especially in the DoE.

Zach knew he was supposed to give a good example, but even his attention was waning by now. Doc had received a badge for taking control of the Psychocrypt's computer system ahead of schedule, deactivating the automated laser batteries pinning the Comanche, and Niko had been recommended for her translation work and leading the only combat team without casualties. Zach sighed inwardly. His recommendation of Gooseman had been rejected – as usual – and he himself hadn't distinguished himself in battle, so as far as the ceremony was concerned, his unit was off the hook. He could allow his thoughts to drift now...

Eliza seemed relaxed, even happy here among his team. He noticed that she hadn't even tried to hide the tracking bracelet. No, she'd polished it to gleam and added a matching steel buckle to her belt, turning it into a fashion statement. It had been a week since her change of mind, and he still found himself reeling occasionally, not quite sure if he believed in it and—

"...the Nova Star in Gold..." the master of ceremony's voice cut into his thoughts. Tension raced through the assembled personnel, followed by hushed whispers. *"...proposed by Fleet-Admiral Frederic Subadar..."* The whispers swelled to a deafening rumble, forcing the speaker to wait for silence. Subadar was notoriously stringent when it came to decorations, and the Nova Star... the last time Earth Force awarded its highest medal had been in the Colonial Wars almost thirty years ago. Who had—

"...and granted by the Board of World Leaders with only one No for..."

Now say it, dammit! Zach felt Eliza resting her hand on his suddenly clenched fist, calming him.

"...Galaxy Ranger Lieutenant Shane Gooseman."

Goose froze in mid motion. Niko's elbow hit his side, strong enough to almost slosh the coffee out of the cup. "Go," she hissed frantically. *"Get it. A war hero's harder to freeze than a supertrooper!"*

The hangar was dead silent, the only sound coming from the buzzing camera drones overhead, when the ST shoved his chair back, squared his shoulders and headed for the dais to come to attention in front of the master of ceremony.

"Because of the admiral's strict wish, we skip the reading of the dedication." The speaker handed Gooseman the opened box with the gleaming gold medal on dark-blue velvet and saluted respectfully. "It is an honor to serve with you, lieutenant."

The ST returned the salute, turned sharply on his heel to return to their table, his steps echoing in the silence.

A single pair of hands began to clap. Niko had stood up, looked with flashing eyes at them.

Zach jumped to his feet after Eliza kicked his shin under the table. She and Doc both stood by now. More and more hands fell in. Zach recognized the first people as those who'd been trapped with the ST in the Psychocrypt. By the time Goose reached his place, the applause was a deafening noise. Zach only wished the ST wouldn't look so haunted when he placed the now closed box next to his abandoned cup, after they all took a seat again. Niko reached over, ran her fingertips over his sleeve.

"Don't," Goose hissed with a tense look towards the brass.

"What does the justification say?" Doc asked, breaking the awkwardness.

"No idea."

"Then have a look at it," Zach suggested. "It's not as if they can classify that."

"You'd be surprised what can be classified if they want it," the ST returned dryly, but he opened the box and reached for the small parchment in the lid, traditionally holding the handwritten justification, when a small camera drone the size of a five credits coin flitted across the table at him, rapidly turning to circle them again - apparently trying to get good facials and a scan of the card before its foray into forbidden space ended. Goose snapped the medal case shut reflexively, but stopped himself from reaching for his blaster. Niko beside him scowled openly at the invasion.

Annoyed, Zach took the white cozy prominently sporting the Space Navy's emblem off the coffee pot and plopped the cover unerringly over the offending drone. "Do you take cream?" he asked his wife, drowning out the angry buzz beneath the thick padding, while meticulously refilling first her than his own cup.

Eliza hid a smile behind her hand, her eyes sparkling with laughter as she shook her head.

Doc had his CDU out, bluish sparks reflected on his face. A moment later, he smirked. "Captain, would you please pass me the coffee cozy?"

The tiny drone buzzed away and bee-lined to the line of honor guards, precisely hovering a hands-length below belt-line behind the first of them. Zach blinked.

"I corrected the face recognition," Doc dead-panned.

Eliza arched a brow at that. "You didn't make butt-cognition infectious to media drones, did you?" she asked.

"No," Doc looked curious, glancing at his CDU. "Should I?"

"It would probably improve Tri-D news these days."

Zach groaned. "Eli, please don't give him ideas."

Meanwhile, Goose had opened the justification, read it, and laughed. At the incredulous stares of the others, he turned the card over, showing it to them. "Not even Wheiner's sharks could twist this into a breach of secrecy."

The gold-framed, crème-colored sheet carried a single word above Subadar's signature:
Deserved.

Six hours later

The bar with the viewport overlooking the docks was nearly empty. The Navy personnel usually frequenting it were still at the festivities following the ceremony. Frederic Subadar sighed. He looked out at the wide dark-gray hulls of the two carriers currently in dock. Black scorch marks still marred both ships, and countless workers and repair droids swarmed over them like ants. It wasn't likely for him to see them restored to their shining glory, at least not outside a Tri-D news flash. He emptied his glass, and signaled the bartender for a refill.

"Thought to find you here." Joe's gruff voice interrupted his misery. Unmasked, he pulled out the stool beside him and sat.

Subadar snorted. "What brings you here?"

"You have to ask that?" Walsh returned. "You made a lot of powerful enemies today, Freddy."

"I know." Subadar turned the new glass with the golden liquid between his hands. "Might well have cost me my ship." At Walsh's surprised look, he added, "They were still debating it when I left for the ceremony."

For a moment, Walsh studied the knob on his walking stick. "Then why risk it?"

Subadar sighed, gulped down his whiskey. He was done wallowing in misery. "Because that's what you do with special snowflakes." He stood. "You don't treat them special, but you make sure they're treated right." He stood. "I assume you have a glider nearby. Care to give me a planetfall?"

"Your chances of staying grounded might be slimmer than you assume," Joseph told him once the cockpit had sealed and they'd cleared the station vicinity. "The Queen's still at large."

"She lost the Psychocrypt," Subadar shrugged. "That's a major blow to her operations."

"A severe one," Walsh agreed, "but would you have such a crucial piece of infrastructure without at least one full backup plan?"

"One?" Subadar laughed mirthlessly. "A dozen, if I had the resources."

"She's got an empire." Walsh didn't laugh. "And doesn't give a damn about her subjects."

BetaMountain

MPQ 206

"What did you tell Gooseman about our Academy times?" Zach asked once the lift had closed and was on its way towards their quarters.

"Nothing." Eliza pointedly didn't look in his direction. "Why? Are you worried I'd undermine your authority?"

"Concerned," Zach corrected. "He's a complicated case. The gov't really pulls a number on him. Compared to his, my academy restrictions were a summer camp in Hawaii."

Eliza laughed faintly. "That boy was scared shitless when he found me in the network station."

Zach threw her a sideways glance. "He should be. You're downright scary."

"And yet you trust him well enough to have him sent after me," she concluded, preceding him out of the cabin.

"It wasn't as if I had a choice," Zach answered grimly, following her. "If it had gone on file, the gov't would have been after you." He closed his eyes briefly. "Do you believe in us now?" he asked just as they were approaching their place.

"Enough to give you the benefit of the doubt," she answered just as GV opened the door and she pushed inside. It was an honest answer. Not the one he had hoped for, but one they could work with.

Epilogue

The parcel lay in front of his door, covered in the typical ugly brown wrapping used for interstellar mail. It was covered with the rainbow-colored tape that designated it had been mailed with IPS on one of the border planets, near the Empty Zone.

Gooseman sighed and picked it up before opening his door. The IPS people already knew that—aside from Niko—none of his neighbors would accept a parcel for him. At least, being an ST also made sure that parcel was still there and left untouched whenever he came back to it.

Poss rubbed up against his legs, almost tripping him. He laughed, and brushed the cat in a quick movement across the back, while pushing the door shut behind him with his foot. "At least you're happy that I come home."

He put the parcel onto the table. The cat immediately jumped up and sniffed at it, then touched it with one daring paw. "I'll look at it later, pal," he assured. Poss slashed his claws across the paper, tearing it and meowing. "Hey!" Goose grabbed his cat. "That's my mail and I'll open it when I want. Let's get you your food, first." Poss head-bumped against his chin.

He turned the parcel in his hands. It was small and very light. The high postage the tape indicated had been due to the long distance. No sender. He shrugged and tore off the ruptured wrapping. The content almost made him laugh. A data crystal. Again.

The image went white when the tiny forcefield generator couldn't maintain a field strong enough to withstand the annihilation energy of the recombining matter-antimatter-explosion. The images Goose had just seen repeated before his inner eye. He still stared at the screen when the white was replaced by a screenshot of the recording he'd just seen: Ryker Killbane in midst of his disintegration arching in the sudden agony of annihilation. A line of text appeared below it: "Thanks. I owe you."

The line was still on the screen when he took out the data crystal. "You owe me nothing, Daisy." Goose clenched his fist around the crystal. "Nothing at all."

~*~*~*~

Elsewhere...

The suns burned hot from a sky tinted red by the dust kicked up by a storm this morning, coloring it almost the same as the burned earth and the low adobe dwellings made of it. Doon was at the edge of what the Queen controlled, far enough from Tortuna that occasionally some strands of the empire's fabric escaped even her iron fist. At least, that was what Marna had told herself when she ran after a brilliant white explosion had consumed the streets of the neighborhood she'd worked. Finding a stow-away's place on an old freighter touring the edge had had the usual price, despite two-year-old Silarya sleeping in her arms. Not that it mattered...

Outside, Silarya's grey eyes narrowed, predatory intent transformed her sharp-edged, angular face. Marna followed her gaze and spotted a lizard scorpion clinging to one of the succulents framing the yard. A large lizard scorpion, the venom bags along its curled tail filled bright red. Frolly at Silarya's side yipped excitedly, darting towards it, but her daughter beat the donkey rat effortlessly to her prey, snatching the lizard scorpion away before Frolly's long whiskered snout could come close to it. The lizard scorpion twitched, trying to apply the venom bloating its tail. With a sharp crack, Silarya broke its spine. "You won't eat Frolly," she declared. "Or me."

Marna watched her scruffy, dark-haired daughter bury her venomous prey in the hard-baked earth and holding a stern lecture to their pet rat not to go after something that dangerous. She sighed. No, her daughter would never be a dainty beauty like the customers preferred. Silarya was strong, not pretty. And like the feared, one-eyed customer Marna believed to be her father, she was a predator...