

## Stand Down

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As the Aardvark entered Earth's upper atmosphere, Kawehi came over to sit beside Theo.

"There will be a car waiting when we land. If you want to change..."

"I don't think anyone will care what I'm wearing."

"And I'm coming with you. Don't start with the stubborn look, it's my responsibility as much as yours."

He nodded after a moment. "You're right, I didn't mean to be an ass about it."

"Putting a family's feelings before your own isn't being an ass. Just try not to forget you're not the only one who feels like shit about this. Mari says she'll cover the team check in with Ops for us."

He looked embarrassed. "I didn't even think of that."

"I didn't think so."

"Amanda went over as soon as the news came through?"

Kawehi nodded. "Baela and Lou were there as well."

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Ten minutes after the Aardvark had landed, Theo and Kawehi were in a car headed for the Ta'avi settlement. When they'd gotten to the family's house, one of Imae's younger sisters opened the door.

"Theo's here," the five year old yelled over her shoulder. "Hi Theo!"

"Hey Beetle. Are your mom and dad here?"

She shrugged. "I'll tell you for a hug."

Theo knelt down and she grabbed him around the neck, nearly strangling him.

"I'm glad you didn't get dead too," she whispered in his ear.

"Thank you. I'm sorry Imae died."

She let go of him and nodded solemnly. "Bugs are bad guys."

He nodded back at her and got to his feet as Imae's mother came into the living room. She looked startled to see Theo for a second but immediately came to hug him as well.

Later, he decided the worst part of it was how understanding they all were. Her father was a large quiet man with large raw hands from working with their herds in all weather. Theo had been prepared for the man to punch him out. Truth was, he wanted someone to hit him for getting her killed. Instead, Imae's mother insisted they sit down and brought them tea.

Theo explained what had happened. Only when he was done did they start asking questions. Theo explained what they'd been doing there and why the Bugs had come. He could see that they wanted to know more and ended up talking how he hadn't wanted her to go and how she'd insisted on volunteering. Her parents had looked at each other and Imae's mother had smiled through her tears, saying how stubborn Imae was.

Then her father asked why Theo hadn't wanted her, specifically, to go. Theo found himself admitting that they'd become a lot more than friends on the trip. He concentrated on his mug of tea, not wanting to see their faces. He was shocked when her mother had gotten up and hugged him followed by her father. They told him the same thing that Ayr had, that he hadn't done anything to hurt their daughter. Then they told him they were happy Imae had been able to fight back against the Bugs in her own way and how delighted they were that Imae had chosen Theo.

As they said their goodbyes, her parents hugged him again and told him that he was part of their family now. Theo found himself promising her younger siblings that he'd come and visit as often as he could.

"How do you feel?" Kawehi asked as they left.

"Exhausted and sad. I would feel better if they'd been angry at least. What about Shep and Harry?"

She shook her head. "The team was Shep's family and Harry was the same way, married to his work."

"He was very good at it," Theo said, looking out at the landscape going past.

"I'll let everyone know about the Ta'avi memorial tomorrow. And I want to tell you that I'm proud of the way you're handling this."

He just nodded. It was unbelievable that they'd only been gone for two weeks. It felt like months. Everything about the Project was just too big think about, especially Alnatic or the mission. It was just too heavy and he was exhausted.

When Kawehi pulled into the driveway, Amanda and Mirjam were already waiting outside. Emma's truck was parked in the usual spot. As Theo got out, Mirjam told Kawehi she was staying for dinner. Amanda welcomed Theo home with a long Garragh style hug, their cheeks pressed together.

"You keep on making me proud of you," Amanda said. "Welcome home, light of my heart."

"Thank you," said Theo, not trusting his voice.

Mirjam was waiting when Amanda let him go.

"Well done, my love," the blonde woman said, squeezing him hard before kissing each cheek.

They went inside where there were already several pizzas waiting. Thankfully, no one talked about the mission, or even the Project. For one evening it was nice to pretend they were just normal people.

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The day after Imae's memorial, Theo was up before Emma for once. By the time she made an appearance, Theo had already eaten breakfast and was working on his third cup of coffee. He knew better than to say anything as she trudged through the kitchen and opened the fridge. She stood there for a minute, blankly staring into it before she took out several cans of tomato juice and a bottle of Gatorade.

"Where's that vodka?"

Theo shrugged. He had no idea what vodka she was even talking about.

Emma grumbled some more, holding her head as she bent over and got an unopened bottle from one of the cabinets. She filled a glass a third of the way with vodka and then dumped in one of the cans of V8. She opened the Gatorade and drank all of that before going back to the Bloody Mary and putting, what looked to Theo, like a bunch of random spices in it, including way too much Tabasco.

"Are you going to drink that or strip paint with it?"

She gave it a quick stir with her finger and then took a long drink. She sighed and then barely held in a belch.

"You stayed pretty late last night." Theo said.

Theo and Emma had gone to Imae's funeral yesterday along with the rest of the team. One of Imae's aunts asked them all to stay and share a meal when they had

finished. It had turned into a wake, or what Theo thought was a wake. It was more rambunctious than he'd expected but he'd enjoyed it. When Theo left, Emma was engrossed in some game with dice and a game board with shot glasses on it. He hadn't said anything, Emma needed time off from her job as much as he did.

Emma shrugged. "Late enough to get wrecked playing some weird drinking game. My truck must still be there. I think Rachel gave me a ride home."

"You don't remember coming in? I wish I'd had a camera."

Emma closed her eyes and sighed again. "That bad?"

"When did you decide that singing opera was your passion?"

"Seriously?"

"Yup. You were pretty good considering you couldn't stand up on your own."

"I'm never drinking again. Did I wake the moms up?"

"What do you think?"

She groaned and put her forehead on the counter. "They came upstairs?"

Theo laughed. "Yeah, they both came up. You apologized several times, challenged Mirjam to arm wrestle and then threw up on the floor."

Emma groaned. "Dammit. Where?"

"In the living room. You owe me one, I cleaned it up already."

She reached over without opening her eyes and clumsily patted his arm. "You're the best brother ever."

"You should go get ready. We're picking up Rachel at 1:00."

Emma got up and groaned. She headed for the shower, carefully holding her Bloody Mary.

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Rachel showed Theo where to park and they woke up Emma, who'd gotten in the backseat and immediately gone to sleep. There was a path that led to stairs on the lip of the canyon. Theo followed the other two down, sighing with relief at getting out of the merciless sun. The creek that fed the swimming hole started here, falling from the canyon wall into a sandy pool. There were a bunch of tents on platforms with lounge chairs scattered around. A few people were lounging around in shorts and t-shirts

except for Jonesy and Marisol who were fully dressed and waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

"He's here!" Jonesy said when he saw them. "I don't have to go, right? Permission to get buck naked and drunk?"

Marisol rolled her eyes. "When have you ever asked permission?"

Jonesy whooped and ran off through the tents. A minute later there was a splash and laughter from the swimming hole.

"Tomorrow he'll be crying about his wet shoes," Marisol sighed. "Sorry to drag you right back out, Theo. If you're up for it, the tradition is that junior management makes the beer run."

"I'll put your bag into a tent for you," Emma said, taking it off his shoulder.

"Is everyone here?" Theo asked, once they had climbed back into the blistering heat and glaring sun.

"Just a few of us so far," Marisol said.

They got into her truck and immediately rolled down the windows. Marisol started the engine and started driving to get some air moving inside the stifling cab. By the time they'd reached the paved road, the AC was going full blast and they rolled the windows back up.

"Sorry again," she said.

"Don't be. I wanted to talk to you anyway. I have no idea what happens on a stand down. Other than reverse strip poker and pitching washers."

She laughed. "The point of it is getting our heads together. The only official thing is a round-table after-action review. We go through the mission step by step, talk about what worked and what didn't. Everyone sits in and anyone can make any observations they think you need to hear."

"Okay, that's terrifying."

She shrugged. "It's gotten intense in the past but usually when there were personality clashes in the field. Don't stress about it, you're good at listening to people and we all know you got thrown in the deep end of the pool. More importantly, we'll say our goodbyes to Shep, Imae, and Harry. Everything else is relaxing and watching my boyfriend make an ass of himself."

"Okay. I'm glad Harry and Imae weren't overlooked since they weren't part of your IRT," Theo said.

"None of us are anymore," Marisol said. "They dissolved my team the day after we left. Don't look alarmed, we all knew it was coming. Teams are attached to each other, not some name or number that Ops assigns them. Anyway, all three of them deployed with us and were all very much part of *our* team."

They drove in silence for a while.

"What's wrong?" Theo asked.

"You using your superpowers on me?"

"I guess. You drum your middle and index fingers when you've got something on your mind."

Marisol looked at her hand tapping on the wheel. "Huh. I didn't know that."

"That's why I don't play poker with you guys."

"Oh? I just thought you didn't know how."

"Have you met my sister? I think it was one of the first things she taught me."

Marisol smiled. "Really? I appreciate your restraint. Back to your question, I'm concerned how things might look. Especially when people really start letting loose."

Theo thought for a second. "Oh. Like when I walked away from Camp Lazyass. I've got a much broader view of the world now. When she came to get me, Deidre explained that sometimes it does look like people are bed hopping but they're actually working things out."

She nodded, keeping her eyes on the road. "Yeah, and it sounds like bullshit I know. But it works, people stay close and it dissipates a lot of tension. People will imbibe whatever and end up working things out. It's not just bedhopping though. It might be cuddling and sex or a huge screaming match followed by some sparring. If any of that happens, your new team isn't falling apart. We're just resetting."

Theo smiled. "I hear a hint of 'stay out of it' in your voice."

"You're a very bright lad, Theo."

He laughed. "Is there anything spectacular going on?"

She thought for a while. "Losing people means you can never really tell. Add in whoever shows up from the Pioneers and I have no idea. There *is* a lot of shit building up between Deidre and Jonesy. Deidre won't let herself grieve about Shep even though they were really close. Instead she's been jumping in everyone's, especially Jonesy's, shit over every little thing."

"I didn't even notice."

Marisol smiled without looking away from the road. "They're very careful about looking good in front of you, it's really more my department. Anyway, if you add Jonesy's ham-fisted extroversion to the pressure cooker in Deirdre's head, something is bound to go critical."

"I'll follow your lead if I need to actually notice anything."

"I hoped you'd say that. It's as much about us getting our heads together as the troops. It'll be fine though."

Theo nodded but didn't say anything.

"You're pretty quiet now. Everything okay?" Marisol finally asked as they turned onto the road into town.

"I'm a little worried. Is anyone stressing out about me? I don't know that I'm ready for getting screamed at or anything more fun. Not yet."

"I knew you were smart and you don't know how glad I am that it's the right kind of smart. Don't worry, you won't be part of those kind of festivities."

"Oh. Does the management not take part in that kind of stuff?"

"Sure, they do. Just not you this time. You're a part of the team as much as anyone else but no one is coming for your scalp because we all know that you were just supposed to get your feet wet and ended up going down the rapids instead. As for the more fun stuff, not because no one likes you or you're ugly or anything dumb like that. It's because you took such a brutal shot to the emotions. None of us wants you to hurt yourself worse taking on something you're not ready for. When Rachel did her internship with us, she had just had knee surgery. So she didn't run with us until she decided she was ready. Once she did, we started off slow and made sure she had a lot of help."

Now he was embarrassed but relieved. "As long as it's not because I had spinach between my teeth."

She laughed. "Nope. Trust me, if things were different I know of at least two people that would drag you off into the tall grass. Depending on how Imae was about stuff like that anyway."

"I think she would've helped or cheered you on."

"Good for her."

"Thanks, Mari."

"Anytime. I wanted to ask, and don't answer if you don't want to, but was your first time really her and Ayr both?"

Theo blushed but he laughed. "Yeah. It wasn't anything special on my part. It was more a case of a couple of women that weren't prepared to be patient."

She smiled and squeezed his hand gently. "It was something very special on your part. Don't argue, I'm an expert on threesomes."

He laughed. "No argument then. Am I allowed to know who would have dragged me off?"

She laughed. "Nope, let's talk about something else, okay?"

"You got it, boss."

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When they got to Albuquerque, Theo had figured they were going to wander around in a grocery store but instead Marisol pulled up behind an unmarked building and honked twice. The door opened and a man waved at her to back up to the shipping dock. Theo and Marisol got out and helped him load five large kegs of beer into the back. Marisol strapped them down as several more people came out with boxes full of food and liquor bottles.

"Thanks, Wilma," the manager said, handing her a receipt to sign. "I hope your family reunion goes well."

"And thank you for helping load all of this," Marisol said, scribbling a signature. "I'll make sure the kegs get back to you."

"No hurry, I know you're good for them."

She got back into the truck with Theo and handed him the receipt. "Put that in the glovebox, would you?"

He looked at the name on the invoice. "Who's Wilma Piedra?"

"I have to teach you Spanish. Wilma Stone? Like the Flintstones?"

Theo just looked confused.

"You never watched the Flintstones?"

"Oh, there wasn't a TV where I grew up."

"So much for getting a big laugh," she muttered, pulling out into traffic.

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Theo wasn't looking forward to unloading all of this stuff and carrying it down the long flight of stairs. He realized he should have known better when Marisol drove past the stairs and stopped next to a platform made of pallets. It was connected to a winch system by a lot of heavy climbing rope.

"C'mon," Marisol said. "We drove into 'que so we don't have to hump it all down there."

He followed her down the stairs and a cheer went up. A group headed for the stairs but Theo and Marisol ended up helping on the bottom end anyway.

"Guys, a word?" Betsy asked quietly when they had rolled the last keg to a pit filled with ice.

"What's up?" Marisol asked as several people stepped closer.

"We have an unexpected guest," Betsy said quietly. "The younger elf, one of Teydora's aides?"

"Nys," Theo said. "Yeah, I have to take care of some Commonwealth stuff with her."

"She had a kit bag with her," Deirdre said. "Is she joining the team?"

Theo shrugged. "I'm not sure what happens next. Kawehi mentioned focusing on integration with me being new and the Pioneers. Nys might be one of them but Kay never said who specifically."

Everyone else looked surprised.

"Like who?" Jonesy asked.

"What did he *just* say, drunk-ass?" Rachel said, laughing. "Leave the man alone. It's hot up there and Theo looks overheated."

"Yeah, sorry," Jonesy said, putting his arm around Theo's shoulders. "You should really cool off."

Theo was surprised by the concern. "Uh, okay. I'm a little warm, I'll find some shade."

"I've got something way better," Jonesy said, pulling Theo tighter.

"Let me give you a hand," Deidre said from the other side of him. She put her arm around Theo's waist from the other side. He

No, that wasn't accidently

"We can make it a team activity," a voice said from behind him.

Deidre and Jonesy suddenly changed their grip, lifting Theo off the ground.

"Hey!" he said, starting to struggle.

Betsy stepped around to wrap an arm around his legs and they began to carry him toward the swimming hole.

"Marisol, help!" Theo yelled.

"Sorry, LT. I'm dehydrated myself, gotta get a beer!" she yelled back.

"Let me take off my boots," Theo said, trying to roll out of their grip.

"No time for that," Jonesy said. "You need emergency treatment."

Theo laughed and kept struggling as they carried him down to a deck that extended out over the pool. ` Emma was laying on a lounge in with a towel over her eyes.

"Tulip! Help!" Theo yelled.

"It's for your own good," she said without moving.

They swung Theo once and he sailed out into the pool. There was a splash and he surfaced laughing. Everyone who had followed the group cheered.

"Troopers, I'm kind of shocked his Warden didn't lift a finger," Betsy said.

Rachel nodded. "Obviously a clear dereliction of duty."

"There should be some kind of reminder," Jonesy said.

All three of them headed for the lounge Emma was laying on.

Emma sat up and pointed at them. "Cut the crap," she growled. "I'm recovering from last night."

"Oh right, I forgot," Rachel said.

"Wait, you left him alone last night too, didn't you?" Deidre asked.

"Ooooh," everyone else said.

"He was with Amanda," Emma said.

She started to get up but it was too late. The four of them grabbed the chaise and heaved it. There was a string of profanity punctuated by a splash as Emma was launched into the pool. The onlookers cheered again.

The swim area quickly turned into a free for all. Theo's captors had been thrown in after Emma and when no one was left dry, Marisol dragged a cooler of beer at the edge of the pool, turning it into a cocktail party chest deep in water. Theo had tried beer several times but still didn't understand the attraction. Betsy made him a rum and coke and Emma ended up dunking Jonesy when he taunted Theo. That started a whole new

round of splashing and for a little while, Theo was able to forget everything that had happened.

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The next morning, Theo opened his eyes and looked up at the canvas of the tent. The outside world seemed a long way away, fading into the strange timelessness surrounding the Project. It had been annoying at times, especially forgetting what day it was. Now he was grateful for the insulation. All he had to do was put on pants, and that was probably optional around here.

He stretched and yawned. Without thinking, Theo reached out to see where Emma was. There was a fuzzy feeling of a presence from the tent to his left. He sat up suddenly, realizing he hadn't reached out with a hand. He'd done it mentally, something that was completely new to him.

He reached out toward the presence and gave the Emma feeling a nudge. Through the walls he heard a startled squawk and then a thud like someone falling out of bed and hitting the wooden floor. He flopped back on the bed and quickly closed his eyes as Emma stomped over to his tent.

"What the hell are you doing?" she snapped.

Theo opened his eyes and rubbed them. "Huh?"

"Don't 'huh' me, you...you booger head! You weren't asleep!"

Theo sat up. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to do that. I didn't even know I could."

She rubbed her forehead. "It was like you yelled right in my ear. I'm going to have a headache all day now."

"I really am sorry, I had no idea what I was doing."

"Obviously. You need to chill out, we're on vacation. Say it."

He couldn't resist. "Technically we're on stand down."

Emma pointed at him, murder in her eye.

"Okay, right. Vacation, chilling out."

"And keep your thinking down," she grumbled, going back to her tent.

"Some people have no sense of wonder," Theo muttered and quietly got his stuff to go to the shower.

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It was still pretty quiet when he got back. He didn't feel like reading so he stuffed his feet back into his wet shoes and went out to explore the area. They were in a side branch of the canyon that party had been last year. Up here, the ground was mostly sand and a large grove of Cottonwoods shaded most of the area. Theo sighed, happy to be around trees at last.

After he'd made a circuit of the trees, Theo went back to a particularly large one he'd seen on the banks of the creek. He sat down and pulled his shoes off. He put his feet in the running water and leaned back against the tree and closed his eyes. There were a few more people awake in camp but the distant murmur of voices were mostly drowned out by the sound of water. He really was bone-deep exhausted. How did Amanda take even more of pressure every single day? Maybe the Ta'avi's almost supernatural awe of the Tulani family had some truth to it. From what he'd heard at Remembrance, his father's family considered to be something like Batman crossed with Nikolai Tesla with George Washington thrown in for good measure. If that was true, the genes had definitely skipped him. In a way, he was grateful there was no one around to compare him to.

"Your double said I'd probably find you here in the trees." It was a musical voice with chimes accenting the words. "Am I disturbing you?"

Theo opened his eyes, Nys was standing a few meters away. He was surprised to see she was wearing a loose white shirt and a pair of shorts. Her arms and legs looked human but were thinner and longer. Her skin was darker than he'd thought, almost a mocha color. Her hair had been black on Long Axis but now it was silver-white and tied back in a ponytail, highlighting her ears, longer than a human's and pointed as well.

She smiled, looking him over in an exaggerated way. Theo flushed and started to apologize but she held up a hand.

"I shouldn't tease you. I am new and unfamiliar, of course you'd look closely. May I sit with you for a while? Or were you performing a ritual?"

Theo laughed. "No, I don't have any rituals to perform. I was just resting my brain. If you don't mind sitting on the ground, I'd be happy to sit with you."

She sat down, gracefully folding her legs underneath her. "Thank you, Theo. You may not have heard, so I'll be the first to say that Teydora has assigned me to this new unit. Although the argument could be made that you're all joining me."

"However it works, I'm glad you're with us. I get the sense that we're going to need all the help we can get."

"More than you know. Teydora's most immediate concern is giving you all a greater familiarity with the Xero'pah. You will eventually visit our core planets. They can be awkward or even dangerous if you don't appreciate proper context. Another task for you is beginning to learn our bodies and mannerisms. I will aid you with this."

"Uhm..."

She smiled slightly. "In order that you may accurately read an Xero'pah with your talent. Perhaps I should have said body language. Although you *are* quite attractive. For a Terran anyway."

Theo looked at her. "Okay, now you're messing with me."

Nys laughed. "Very good. I am often reprimanded for inappropriate levity. I'm probably much younger than any of the other *pah* you've encountered."

"I'm afraid to ask what young means for elves."

Theo realized what he had said and knew his face was red. "I misspoke and didn't mean any offence..."

She waved the apology away. "We know what you call us. Since we're the source of your myths, how can I take offense at the name? It's even sort of pretty. But let's start with age. As best as I was able, I compared the cultural differences between conceptions of time. To you I am quite old, I was born in your year 1912. However, I'm considered a young adult. Socio-culturally, the *pah* consider me to be in my early twenties."

"What does *pah* mean?"

"People. Xero'pah means 'eternal people' although that is somewhat inaccurate. I have a question for you. On the Long Axis station when you met the Committee Gyr, something sparked your curiosity."

"Oh yeah. The Xero'pah social aide, he was surprised or disturbed by the three of you. He called Teydora a Dark One."

She leaned back on her hands. "Yes, all of those in our regiment are called Dark Ones. Allow me to provide the necessary context. Xero'pah have a very strong drive for self-preservation, one of the reasons we live as long as we do. All species have this instinct of course but for us the need to survive outweighs any other concern. An illustration; if your double were in danger, you would try to rescue her regardless of the danger involved?"

"Emma? Of course."

"My people do not find that such an obvious course of action. Our instinct for life is so strong that it's effectively impossible for one individual to endanger their lives for another. You preforia are astonishingly insane to most Xero'pah, the way you will immediately act to save others of your world or even those you have never met before."

"But you're an ally."

"Yes, and we are very good allies when existence is threatened. You might not want us next to you in a battle however. Most Xero'pah would never consider saving any life except their own."

"Then why are you taking part in the war at all? Wouldn't retreat be a more logical action?"

She looked down. "At the beginning of the war, isolation was considered. The decision was that the enemy's desire to destroy all remnants of the Empire meant that we'd be targeted whether we fought or not. It was deemed better to join in the fight while allies still existed. It makes me somewhat ashamed to tell you this."

Theo shrugged. "If that's the way your mind works, why? It's not like you get much choice in your biology."

She nodded to him. "You are kind to say so. It isn't clear to me whether it is biology or not because of the way we become Dark Ones. It's not a good versus evil dichotomy but a fundamentally different outlook than the rest of our race. Put very simply, we have died and gone beyond our end."

"I thought you were immortal."

"Tradition says that none of us will die of age alone. We can be killed just as easily as anyone. All the Xero'pah members of the Lantern have suffered various deaths and were lucky enough to be revived. I died eight years ago trying to swim across a fast river. I was trying to impress a boy of course. But I underestimated the current. I was pushed rapidly downstream and became wedged under a rock where I drowned. A few minutes later my father managed to loop a rope around my leg. He pulled me to shore and I was revived. But those few minutes had been enough to change me. My family wept when they realized that I was no longer the one they had known. I had become one that had come from the darkness of oblivion."

Theo nodded. "A Dark One."

"Precisely. I had known as soon as my eyes had opened of course. They tried to look past it but my family and friends didn't understand me anymore. Xero'pah are people of connectedness. Not being a part of that network was a very uncomfortable existence. It was a relief when representatives from the Lantern came to offer enlistment."

"Is it the knowledge that you died that changes you so deeply?"

She actually smiled, looking past him. "I had never considered death until I was trapped under the cold rushing water. I struggled until a blackness overwhelmed me. When I opened my eyes again, I was in a place that is difficult to describe now. It was so beautiful that it was almost painful. I was lying on a stone, surrounded by beings. They were...I cannot describe them now. Like their surroundings, beautiful beyond comprehension. They didn't speak but I knew their thoughts and memories. I was surprised that they were not one race. From their memories I knew that they had been many different things before they had died."

"The Founders?"

She made a face. "Definitely *not* them. We spoke and they explained that I was not meant to stay there. My heart was broken but they assured me I would be back at the proper time and they would be waiting. I felt myself slipping from the stone bed then and I tried hard to hold on. Then I was coughing and I saw my father looking down at me. My heart broke with the memory of that place then and I knew I was no longer like anyone I knew."

She was quiet, staring off into space and smiling.

"Did you try to get back there on your own?"

"Suicide? No. I believe that's why I can't hold on to the details of that place, so I wouldn't be tempted. I didn't lose my will to live, I just know the wonder that waits for me on the other side. My friends and family saw me as something less than a true person but the truth is that they are the ones who are incomplete."

"Do they even ask what you saw?"

"We are as curious as any other species and many of the *pah* are driven to distraction wanting to know what we experience. They are jealous and usually too proud to ask. When someone does manage the question, the fact that we are Dark Ones makes speaking with us deeply uncomfortable and they aren't able to understand what we've seen."

"Why do you bother them so much? Just the death?"

"No, we understand death. We consume other organisms like any other being after all. Their discomfort comes from those we meet on the other side. It isn't just Xero'pah. Those beings were all sorts of people here, Prefcoria, Gyr, Salassna, and so on. I believe everyone in this reality is represented there. When we encounter the beings there we learn the truth that is impossible for any *pah* to accept. We are not the only people deserving life, all sentient lives have equal value in the end."

"It bothers them that much?"

Nys smiled. "It must be maddening, trapped between burning curiosity and disdain for all except themselves. They get so angry and frustrated that it's amusing at times. But I do pity them, all Dark Ones do."

"And I bet they just *love* that."

Her face became somber. "Many of our people hate us. Even sheltered in my father's house it was not a happy existence. Remember, we are happiest when we take part in the network of our people. So, I was quick to join the Lantern where I'm not seen as some aberration who is less than a person."

"It makes you feel like more of a real person to me," Theo said. "I'm glad you found a place to belong."

She suddenly grinned. Even somber, she was beautiful but the wide smile was like a sudden sunrise. "And we're given the most interesting assignments."

"The Lantern aren't suicide troops though?"

Nys laughed, her head back. Theo couldn't help but laugh as well.

"Nothing like that," Nys said, still smiling. "I love this existence and will learn everything possible before I go back there."

"That's a relief."

She looked him in the eye, her smile fading a little. "All of this should be a relief, Theophile Cosineau. You lost friends on Alnatic after all."

"Yeah," Theo said quietly. "One of them was very special to me."

"Then let yourself feel joy. At the end of this story, we go *beyond*. That's when we truly begin our lives. Don't let yourself be destroyed by grief and guilt. Yes, you miss your friends now but they weren't obliterated. They are waiting and you will see them again."

Theo blinked. He hadn't considered the implications of her story at all. He looked up at the deep blue sky. He'd carry the scar in his heart until he died and her memory would always be bitter-sweet. But...

*I'll see you again, Chyles'garrel Ittmataera'xoch Flame-Bridge'ohh. I have some work to do first but I can't wait to see you again.*

He imagined Imae laughing and really smiled for the first time since Alnatic.

They sat quietly for a few minutes.

"I see your mind is a little easier," she finally said.

"It is. Thank you for telling me this. I owe you a debt."

"It is nothing. We are comrades and I care about you."

He looked at her.

Nys smiled again. "I care about *all* of you, Theo."

"You're still teasing me."

"A little," she admitted. "Only because it's amusing."

"Really. Can you swim?"

This time she really laughed. "You don't have the skills needed to toss me in a pool, Theophile. But yes, we resemble the prefcoria in most things."

"I was wondering about that. Do you know why we're so similar?"

"The poetic answer is that you were created in our image because of the affection the Founders felt for the *pah*. The more cynical answer is that the Founders wanted us to protect their offspring so they made you resemble us. I have no idea which answer is correct."

Nys suddenly pulled her shirt over her head, surprising Theo.

"You see?"

Her skin was flawless and covered a well developed set of muscles. Nys had two small breasts with pale nipples. Theo agreed that her body was close to a human's and then looked away. Nys laughed and slipped her shirt back on.

"From what I've heard of these teams, you're going to have to get used to nudity, my friend," she said. "Especially on a small ship."

"I'm getting better, but my childhood wasn't as relaxed as everyone else around here"

She looked interested. "I'd like to hear about that experience when you are ready. I was briefed on your past and I'm curious why you were taken."

"Me too. Everyone seems to think I was just collateral damage from a mission to take out the lab that created the gate that Amanda and Ollie invented."

She pursed her lips. "Perhaps. That node feels incomplete though."

He nodded. "Yeah, same here."

"Excuse me," Nys said, putting her fingertips below her jaw.

Theo watched as she listened.

"I understand, we're on the way back," she said after a minute and looked at Theo. "There's been a problem. Teydora and Kawehi are on the way here and would like to speak with you."

Theo nodded and they headed for the stairs. A couple people called to Theo on the way but he pointed to the stairs and waved. By the time he had his foot on the first stair, people were heading for their tents to pack. Emma came out and looked up at him and this time he held up a finger and held his palm down and twitched it to the side.

*Stop and wait a few minutes, I don't know what's going on yet.*

Emma gave him a thumbs up and headed for Marisol's tent.

"That's interesting," Nys said from behind him.

"You don't miss much."

"I'm very detail orientated. It will irritate you at times"

He laughed. "Emma and I made up a version of finger talk when we were little. We decided to use it again for fun."

She gave him an appraising look. "You invented a tactical code for fun? I really look forward to the stories of your childhood."

Theo didn't want to disappoint her so he kept quiet. Really, they'd started doing it again so they could drive the moms crazy by constantly finishing each other's sentences.

Kawehi and Teydora were waiting at the parking area. Kawehi smiled and waved. Teydora was stone faced with her arms crossed over her chest.

"You look rested, good," Teydora said abruptly when they were close. "I have a task for you."

"Yes ma'am," Theo said.

"And you are to stop calling me madam. My name is Teydora."

Theo nodded rather than risking calling her ma'am again. He looked at Kawehi, she had the usual serene look but her eyes were crinkled up at the corners. She always looked that way when she was laughing at him.

"I'll take Theo and explain the situation on the way," Kawehi said.

"Captain, do I need my gear?"

She shook her head. "We're not going any further than town. You don't even need to change."

Theo looked down at his shorts and wet trainers and shrugged. It couldn't be that serious if he didn't need to get into uniform.

"Teydora, it will work out," Kawehi said. "Go have a drink or two."

Teydora smiled, a little grimly, and held up a flask made of some exotic metal. "Perhaps three or four even. Until then."

Teydora motioned for Nys to walk with her back to the stairs. Kawehi was already getting back in her truck so Theo followed her.

"Are they done throwing everyone in the water yet?" Kawehi asked as she turned around.

"I was down by the creek but a lot of people were wearing wet clothes when I went through camp. Is that some tradition?"

She shrugged. "Jonesy seems to think so. Anyone that shows up after he does eventually gets dunked."

Theo thought about that as they bounced out to the road. Kawehi didn't seem too concerned but he was getting uncomfortable.

"Uh, should we call Nys? I think she has an implanted phone. Or Jonesy?"

Kawehi laughed, surprising him. "If Jonesy is stupid enough to try and throw a senior Commonwealth officer in a pond, best of luck to him."

"Uh, he's got people helping him."

Kawehi grinned when she looked over at him. "And she was in uniform when Rome was just a muddy crossroads. Believe me, even Jonesy isn't that dumb."

"Okay. So why's she so angry?"

Kawehi laughed again. "Xero'pah arrogance ran headlong into Ta'avi stubbornness. She told them she needed the Alnatic Pioneers, they said too bad. She tried several different ways but got the same answer every time."

Theo felt his stomach sink. "So she wants me to tell them why they don't need every single Pioneer."

"Yep. Teydora wants to you tell the Ta'avi they now have a permanent home."

"She promised to keep me out of it."

"Nope, she promised not to mention your name. She didn't mention anything about making you do it yourself."

"That's kind of a technicality."

Kawehi laughed. "Yeah. Welcome to life among the Xero'pah. You don't have to tell them you paid for a settlement just that a place has been found."

Theo sighed. "Have you ever *met* Baela?"

"I know, wouldn't she be a great lawyer? Or a Jesuit maybe. Anyway, I'd worry more about Ayr though if I were you."

"What? I thought she'd be on her way to the stand down. And I can see you trying not to laugh."

Kawehi put her hand over her mouth. "Sorry. When Baela drags the truth out of you, how long do you think the news will really stay secret?"

Theo rubbed his face. "Secret? I'll be surprised if they don't get on the phone as soon as I tell them. No good deed goes unpunished."

"That's certainly true," Kawehi said. "Why does this bother you so much? Just trying to stay the same old humble Theo?"

"I read somewhere that gratitude is a half a step from hatred. They're my friends and I didn't want this between us."

Kawehi nodded. "Interesting. I doubt the adults will feel that way because of the Garragh-Ta'avi history together. This new Terran generation on the other hand...."

"Exactly. But the hell with it. If every last one of them ends up hating my guts it doesn't matter, they've got a home. Unless there's some hidden catch in Teydora's promise."

"You don't need to worry there. Teydora believes that what you're doing is the right thing."

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Theo had hoped Ayr would already be gone. but when they pulled into the yard where the family kept their cars, he saw the old car that Ayr and Holm shared. Ayr was putting stuff in the trunk and waved when Kawehi parked.

"Hey guys," Ayr said, walking across the gravel pad. "Don't tell me the elf actually gave up on stealing our Pioneers?"

Kawehi gave her the usual calm smile. "Take your time, I'll be inside," she said to Theo.

Ayr's eyes narrowed. "What's that mean?"

"I guess it means Kawehi is going inside but I have a few minutes."

"Funny. Why are you really here?"

Theo sighed. "Teydora didn't give up. She asked me to come and talk to your mother and Chale."

"Why?"

"Why do you think?"

"You're going to use the clan's debt to your family aren't you?"

Theo shook his head. "I told you last year and several times since then that I don't recognize that debt."

"Oh whatever! You know they'll listen to you no matter what you say about that debt. Why the hell are you on her side, Theo?"

"You're yelling."

"So? This is my house and I'm not on your team anymore, *lieutenant*."

"Look Ayr, I'm not on anyone's side here. In fact..."

"It's because of what happened between me and you, isn't it? I can't believe you Theo! I *thought* we were friends!"

She was screaming in his face now. Theo put his hands on her shoulders, really hoping that she didn't break one, or both, of his arms.

"Ayr, get your temper under control. Seriously."

She glared at him and then at his hands. "Tell me why you're here."

Theo let go of her. "Because my captain told me to get in the car and come to talk with Baela and Chale."

"About the goddamn elf stealing our people!"

She was yelling in his face again and Theo fought his temper down and waited. Ayr took a step back and glared at him.

"I'll find out what you say, *we* don't hide things from each other."

"What have I ever hidden from you? You know, hell with it. Come on."

"Where?"

Theo pointed at the house. "Sit in on the meeting. It concerns you as well."

If anything, Ayr looked even angrier. "Why? Am I being kidnapped to be your...your *brood mare*?"

Theo tried not to but he snorted a laugh. *Now* she looked ready to kill him.

"Sorry, sorry. But do you even know what that means?" Theo said.

"Yes! It's a.... Okay, fine. Your mistress then!"

Theo rubbed his face. "Holy hell, what is wrong with you?"

"Nothing! I'm just...there's nothing wrong with me."

"Great, I'm glad to hear it. I've got to go and have a difficult discussion with Chale and Baela now. Why don't you come in and listen?"

She walked away without saying anything, tension and anger almost visibly radiating from her stiff shoulders and back. Theo shook his head and headed for the door. He had to get inside before she thought of something else to yell at him about.

Baela was waiting for him in the kitchen and took his hands. "Hello, Theo. Welcome to my home."

"Thank you for taking the time to speak with me, Elder Baela."

"Oh shush with the Elder talk. What was she so excited about out there?"

"I'm honestly not sure."

She nodded as though that made sense. She led him into what had been the living room but now looked like a large office. Kawehi and Chale were already there and Chale took his hands the same way Baela had but instead of welcoming him, she leaned forward. Theo had learned enough Ta'avi culture to know what was expected and touched his cheek to either of hers.

"Not as much fun as the first time but you're getting the hang of it," she said.

Baela laughed and Theo blushed. The first time she had greeted him that way he had assumed she was going to kiss him. Instead of lightly touching their cheeks, Chale had been surprised and amused when she received a somewhat clumsy kiss. At least Kawehi hadn't heard about it. That small comfort was lost as Baela immediately told her the story.

When they'd finished laughing the four of them sat down. Ayr came in from the hallway and Baela raised an eyebrow.

"He invited me," Ayr said defiantly and sat on another chair.

Baela shrugged and Chale looked amused.

"You wanted to speak to us, Captain?"

Kawehi nodded. "This chat is something of a compromise between Theo and I. He wanted to be left out of this while I wanted your entire clan there."

Chale and Baela looked at each other and Theo saw tension in their faces.

"Please go on," Baela said evenly.

Theo took a deep breath. "Thank you. The first thing I want to say is that I'm not here to collect on any kind of debt you think you owe me or my family. I'm not here as Lieutenant Cosineau or a Tulani. Just Theo."

Chale started to say something but Baela simply nodded, her face easing a little. "Then talk to me, just Theo."

"Were you aware that the purpose of the Alnatic mission?"

Baela and Chale both nodded.

"We were told when Amanda brought us the news about Imae," Baela said. "Obviously a settlement there is out of the question now."

"I was pretty unhappy about that," Theo said. "I promised Ayr and Imae both that we'd find a place. Well, that happened a lot sooner than I thought it would. The Commonwealth and Xero'pah were able to work out a place with enough room for all of the Ta'avi. It's on a Xero'pah planet and they've set aside a large area for your clan. I'm told it's a safe place, far away from the fighting. Teydora promised me that it is well hidden as well."

The two Ta'avi women were staring at him, mouths open. He wanted to look back at Ayr but didn't.

"This is real?" Baela asked in a quiet voice.

"Completely," Kawehi said. "We are supposed to wait for a Commonwealth courier to bring the announcement but I'm not sure when that will happen. I wanted Theo to give you the news himself."

"Which Theo didn't want to do," Chale said. "He is a friend to all of us, but why was it necessary to have Theo tell us?"

"I would like to know this as well," Baela said. "Do you see a problem ahead, Theo?"

He shook his head. "From what I've been told, it's a great place."

"I don't doubt it," Baela said. "The Xero'pah worlds are usually considered paradise by people lucky enough to see them. We will be generations paying back our settlement debt, if the clan approves this."

Kawehi looked at Theo and he took a deep breath.

"Actually, you won't. All the costs have been taken care of."

Baela and Chale stared at him again.

"That will be a fortune," Chale said. "Who provided it?"

"I did. There was a Commonwealth reward for Founder materials. Since there was most of a city on Alnatic they gave it all to me. I decided the best use of it would be finding a place where the Ta'avi were safe."

"But why you didn't want us to know you had done this?" Baela asked.

"Because I don't want the weight of that debt between us," Theo said.

"We are indebted to you and your family, Theophile Cosineau, like it or not," Baela said firmly.

"Once I heard you say something about the Ta'avi being the younger siblings of the Garragh."

"Our people were very close," she said. "Sometimes we didn't understand the Garragh but we always admired them."

"You're keeping up that tradition," Chale said, smiling at Theo.

"Good, because this Garragh admires the Ta'avi. Imae told me once that the Garragh were always giving things away rather than trading them. I like that tradition, this is my gift for all of you."

"And isn't that just like a Garragh?" Chale said quietly.

Baela looked at him for a long time. Theo felt his face get hot and realized why Holm was terrified of his mother.

"Theophile, you are not the one to decide our obligations," Baela finally said.

"When my brothers and sisters are without a home, my own task is obvious," Theo said stubbornly. "Being repaid for that is out of the question."

Baela looked just as stubborn but Chale understood what he was saying. "Theo, we're asking is that you let us give you the love and honor you deserve for giving us a home. You're not giving us a mortgage to be repaid so much as becoming a part of our community."

"Oh. I'd like that very much then."

Baela and Chale traded a look that didn't leave any doubt about their opinion of Theo's mental abilities.

"Where is this place?" Chale asked.

"On a world the Xero'pah call Haven," Kawehi said. "It belongs to the Most Noble Order of the Emperor's Lantern. They use it as a place to rest and heal. Teydora said that a very large island near their settlement is mostly grassland. She also wanted me to tell you that this place is set aside for the Ta'avi people 'until Time herself sleeps beneath the grass.'"

"Earlier today the Xero'pah said that your people had been assigned to this Order," Chale said. "It lifts my heart that we will not lose our Garragh brother and sister completely."

"While I have nothing but joy in my heart, the timing of this news is suspect. Especially while the question of the Alnatic veterans and the Xero'pah remains to be settled," Baela said.

Theo sat forward. "You're right. But I told Ayr outside and I will say it again, not a single Ta'avi will be stolen from the Flame-Bridge Clan. If Teydora attempts it, I will be beside you fighting her."

Kawehi cleared her throat and Theo sat back.

*What did I just do? Does the Commonwealth court martial people? I don't care, she can't just start stealing people.*

"Baela, with the base on the same planet as our home, we would not lose them forever," Chale said. "And if they are serving beside the Cosineaus it would address the debt to The Lady and Cleverhand."

"But *only* if they volunteer," Theo said. "I do not agree with Teydora's method but I understand her desire. Without the Pioneers on Alnatic none of us would have returned."

Baela thought about that. Theo glanced back but Ayr had gotten up at some point and disappeared.

"The Xero'pah was wise to send someone who can think rather than simply making demands," Baela said. "Under those conditions I will ask if any of the veterans want to join your team."

"I think that's the best way forward," Kawehi said.

Baela and Chale got up and Theo and Kawehi followed.

Baela embraced him tightly. "And isn't all this just like a Theo," she whispered.

"The universe would be a darker place without you," he whispered back.

Chale was waiting to hug him as well. When he went to put his cheek against hers, she turned her head, kissing him on the mouth. For just a moment, her tongue darted between his lips, surprising him. She gave him a very intense look with the same expression that he'd seen on Imae and Ayr's faces that night on Alnatic. She let go of him with a wink that promised some fun if he was ever interested.

"You can't expect us to keep this a secret," Baela said to Kawehi.

She shook her head and laughed. "Of course not."

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Baela had called her family together to tell them the news. Ayr didn't make an appearance but Theo figured they'd be talking later. The gathering snowballed as more and more Ta'avi heard they'd finally found a home. Theo's cheeks were kissed repeatedly and his hand was shaken nearly off. He was also was hugged and had his back pounded until he was exhausted. He had also gotten more than a few whispered invitations from young women as well as a few older ones. Exhausted, he finally snuck outside into the much quieter darkness.

"I wondered how long you'd last," Kawehi said, leaning on the fender of her truck. "Someone here has been waiting to talk to you."

Theo walked to the truck and saw Imae's younger sister that everyone called Beetle. She was sitting on the front seat of the truck.

"Hey kiddo," Theo said.

She hopped down from the truck and looked up at him. "I wanted to tell you thank you for giving us a place to live but it was too crowded with all the grownups."

"There's a lot of them in there, huh?"

"Yeah. Is it nice where we're going?"

"I heard Teydora say it's really nice. Have you been there, Kawehi?"

"Not yet but I've seen pictures of it. Want me to send them to your tablet?"

Beetle nodded and looked back at Theo. "Are you coming with us?"

He smiled. "Not yet, I've got a lot of work before we're done."

"Killin' Bugs?"

"That and other stuff too."

"Mommy said you were like my brother now so I really think you and Miss Emma should come with us."

He knelt down and hugged her and Beetle sniffed. "How about if I visit you whenever I can?"

"Promise?"

"I promise that I'll visit, as often as I can."

She let go of him and wiped her nose. "Double promise?"

Theo nodded. "Double promises with stars and cake."

"Will you bring Emma to meet us? She's my sister now too. Right?"

"I guess so. We'll come and visit this week, okay?"

Beetle's sad look turned into a gap-toothed grin. She looked so much like Imae that Theo's heart ached a little.

"Yeah! I'm gonna meet the Argyro'lsh! My brothers better look out."

Theo laughed. "Is that the real reason you were waiting for me?"

"Just part of it," she said and hugged him around the neck again. "Momma said I have to go back in after I talked to you."

"You'd better listen, you know who might be listening."

She giggled and ran off toward the house.

Theo laughed and got into the truck. Kawehi got in the other side and carefully picked her way through all the other parked cars and headed back toward the canyon.

"What was going on with Ayr earlier?" she asked.

Theo sighed. "She's more broken up about Imae than she'll admit. She's also angry and sad about ending things between us. There's also some panic about joining the team permanently. I'd guess she's torn between the responsibility to her family and the fact that she really wants to go. So she's yelling at me because she knows she can."

Kawehi nodded. "I saw the same thing. Are you going to do anything to help her?"

Theo shrugged. "I'll listen if she wants to talk but I don't know what else I could do. None of her problems involves me directly."

Kawehi turned and smiled at him. "Not too long ago you would have been wringing your hands and trying to figure out what you'd done."

"You think I'm getting callous?"

Kawehi chuckled. "The way you talked to Beetle? No way. I think you're learning some wisdom and self-respect though."

"I have a question. How much trouble am I in for going against Teydora?"

"I doubt you're in trouble at all. I'm sure you did exactly what she wanted."

Kawehi saw the look on his face and laughed.

"I told you, the Xero'pah are devious. She couldn't admit she didn't think that order over before she gave it, especially after those two refused her. So she sent you in to make an agreement both sides can live with."

"She told you this?" Theo asked.

"Not directly. If she was going to send someone to strong-arm the Ta'avi into agreeing it wouldn't be someone with two Ta'avi lovers or the child of the people that brought them to Earth. That's the guy you send in to negotiate after you screw up."

"I was afraid she wanted me to call in the debt between us to get them to agree."

"If she ever does something like that, you won't be the only mutineer." Kawehi's voice was a little grim. "We're supposed to be the good guys."

They were quiet until Kawehi turned onto the road that led out to the canyon.

"Are you aware that Ayr is in love with you?"

"Yeah," he said quietly. "It's mutual and that makes her a blind spot for me."

Kawehi chuckled. "That will improve over time but yeah, I remember when Adam and I first...."

Her voice trailed off. "When Adam and I first met," she said a few seconds later. Her voice was firmer this time. "The emotions create a chemical cascade that impinges on your Talent. You'll get used to it."

"I really need to find time to meditate this week."

She looked at him. "Have you been skipping it?"

He looked embarrassed and Kawehi shook her head.

"Theo, this is a direct order; you will spend at least an hour in meditation every evening that you are not actively in an operation. Taking care of yourself is just as important as taking care of your people. Understand?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Good."

Theo cleared his throat and she glanced over at him. "What's up?"

"I need to talk to you about a related matter."

Kawehi turned off onto the dirt road to the canyon. They both got out and Kawehi went to lean on the front bumper. Theo leaned on it beside her.

She glanced at him and nodded. "Whenever you're ready."

"I don't know if I'm the right person for this job. I just barely made it through losing Imae and the others. Thinking about leading them back out into danger...I don't know if I can do it again."

She slid closer and put her arm around his waist. Theo put his around her shoulders.

"That's because you thought you were alone," she said. "Now you see that you weren't. You can do this. Everyone will take care of you just as much as you take care of them. After losing Imae, can you see why Mari brought me into her relationship when I lost my team?"

He nodded. "I can't begin to imagine that."

She sighed sadly and he held her a little tighter.

"I didn't *want* to," Kawehi said. "Once the mission was complete I was going to put a bullet in my head. You've seen how this job is, it was one thing after another that I had to deal with. By the time I finally came home, I had gotten used to the idea that I might keep living. Between working with the younger kids and Mari's help, I started to heal. I'm still healing but things are getting better."

"There's one other thing I wanted to mention," Theo said.

She looked up at him. "I bet I can guess what that is."

"Yeah. You need to know that I'm still in love with you," he said. "It's as bad as it was out at the ranch. I've gone through the exercises you suggested but nothing has worked."

Kawehi pulled off on the dirt road to the canyon. "It's oddly humorous to hear you talking so seriously about this. What happened to the feeling as you got serious with Imae?"

"Hard to describe but I found that I can love more than one person."

"Love isn't exactly a disaster," Kawehi said. "In a weird way, love is a big part of what makes this team so dangerous. Strong emotional bonds create a seamless integration between us. It increases reaction time and confidence of the entire team. Those bonds also play a big part in getting a team past their losses."

Theo tried to imagine what she had gone through, losing all of those people at once. "I knew you were incredible before but now I'm in awe," he said.

"Like you, I'm just stubborn," she said.

She was trying to smile but her chin was quivering. Theo wrapped his other arm around her and Kawehi hugged him tightly back.

There was a roar of laughter from below the rim of the canyon. Kawehi wiped her eyes and kissed Theo's cheek.

"I suppose we should go see what the children are up to."

He smiled at her and they headed for the stairs. He was about to walk down the first flight when she touched his arm.

"I want you to know that I haven't been able to let it go either."

Theo nodded after a few seconds. "I'll keep trying."

"Don't bother, this isn't our feedback loop anymore. Like I said, if we had met under different circumstances I think we'd be feeling the same thing."

He smiled. "Good thing we're supposed to work on integrating the team."

She smiled back. "I'm not touching that one. I don't have a clue what will happen or where we'll end up but I want you to know that I don't think these feelings for you are a liability. I'm sorry that I originally did."

Theo touched her cheek and leaned forward, kissing her lips gently. "Thank you for that."

There was another roar of laughter and they heard Teydora's voice yelling something.

"I don't think we're going to want to miss whatever this is," Kawehi said.

Theo laughed and they headed down the stairs into the canyon.

The only lights in the camp were tiki torches set around the lake and on the platform over the deep pool. Whatever was going on had something to do with Jonesy being thrown into the water. He was just sloshing his way to shore while everyone laughed. Emma and Holm had their arms each other's waists but Emma turned and waved when they came into camp.

"What's going on?" Kawehi asked.

"Jonesy tried to throw Nys in the water this afternoon. She ended up throwing him in instead. Teydora convened some kind of ancient Xero'pah court of honor and passed judgment. Jonesy went swimming again."

"I have lost my drink," Jonesy announced as he walked up on the little beach.

There were mixed sounds of pity and taunting from the team. Kawehi squeezed Theo's shoulder and headed for the platform.

Holm let go of Emma and faced Theo. "I heard what you did today."

Theo nodded. "I made a promise."

Holm hugged Theo tightly. "Dude...."

"You're welcome."

Holm nodded and kissed Theo on either cheek before letting him go.

"Aww, you two are adorable," Emma said. She hugged Theo and used it as an opportunity to whisper in his ear. "Everything go okay?"

"Has Ayr been out here?"

Emma shook her head. "She's here but disappeared as soon they got here. Problem?"

"Nah."

Kawehi walked out onto the platform and everyone cheered. She waved and it looked like she was about to say something as she stepped to the edge of the platform. Instead she pushed Teydora forward into the water.

There was a roar of approval and laughter that got louder when Nys pushed Kawehi in after her.

Teydora and Kawehi swam to the shore, both of them laughing. Even waterlogged, they were both stunningly beautiful.

"You know, Nys is still dry," Holm said to Theo.

"She said I didn't have the skills to throw her in the water."

"Is that so?" Holm said, staring at the elf.

"I'm getting a drink before I get dragged into something I'll regret," Theo said.

He walked over to the improvised bar but didn't see anything in the coolers except beer.

"Theo!" Betsy called.

He looked up, she was with another woman who looked familiar. They were standing by some kind of frozen drink machine. He went over and she handed him a plastic cup full of something cold. Behind them, someone started singing and everyone else joined in at the top of their lungs.

"Ever had a daquiri?" Betsy yelled. "It's full of rum but you might not taste it."

Theo took a sip. "This is great."

"Hey, do you remember Toni?" Betsy asked, dragging the other woman over.

"Of course he does," Toni said, hugging Theo.

"How's married life?" Theo asked loudly.

"Boring! Kawehi asked us about joining back up so we came out to celebrate."

"Cool, I'm glad you're back!"

"Thanks! I gotta go find my man, talk to you later."

Theo had no idea what they were singing but it had a lot of swear words. Jonesy had found an empty bucket and was beating on it like a drum. Everyone else sang louder.

"Looks like things are nicely out of control," Theo said loudly to Betsy.

Betsy laughed. "We do our best. Deidre was looking for you earlier."

"I'm sure I'll see her. Can I have some more of that?"

She took his cup and filled it from the spout again. Kawehi came over to the machine, still dripping all over.

"What flavor?" she asked, shouting over the noise.

"Classic," Betsy yelled back, filling a cup for her. "You need a towel."

"What? Where's my tent? I'm going to go change."

"What?" Betsy shouted over the din.

"My tent!"

"Yeah, you should go change!"

"What?" Kawehi yelled back.

Theo laughed and headed for his own tent. It was still cooling off and he wanted a sweatshirt. Behind him there were cheers and a splash. He looked back to see that Jonesy and his drum had been heaved back into the pond. There were yells and Marisol was tossed in after him. Theo figured it was a good thing he was already out of sight, his shoes were almost dry.

When he got to his tent, he was curious to see a small glow inside. He opened the flap and looked in. Ayr was sitting on the floor, her knees drawn up to her chest. She had a small lantern on the floor in front of her.

"Hey, you disappeared earlier."

She nodded without saying anything and got up. She looked at him and held out her arms. Theo hugged her tightly.

"I can't believe I was such a psycho," she said into his shoulder. "I don't know what was wrong with me. I'm sorry."

"You've got a lot going on. don't worry about it."

She lifted her head and pulled him into a long kiss. Ayr's tongue touched his as she pressed her body tightly against him.

"Whew," Theo said, when they came up for air.

"Thank you for keeping your promise."

"If that's how you're going to thank me, what else can I promise you?"

"And I'm sorry I didn't hang around before. I was so ashamed of myself."

"You lost someone really close to you and went into what was supposed to be a fight to the death the next day. That shakes people up, even if they won't admit it."

"You did the same exact thing and you didn't freak out."

"That's because I went and hid when I lost it."

Ayr let go of him and perched on the edge of the camp chair. "I want to say something."

Theo sat on the bed across from her.

"I want you to know that I'm ashamed of the way I treated you after the fighting ended. But I just couldn't, I mean it wasn't you but..."

"Ayr. It's fine. I completely understand where you're coming from. I wasn't upset and we're still friends. Right?"

"I'm sure you've moved on but I wanted to tell you that was a mistake."

"Moved on in the last week? You're a dork."

Her smile looked more like the Ayr he was used to. "Am not."

"Are too."

"And I'm volunteering for the team."

"I was hoping you would. I need the help."

She laughed a little and reached over to poke his arm. "It's also infuriating when I'm yelling and you just act reasonable."

"I've heard that more than once."

She moved to sit beside him on the bed and ran her fingertips over his thigh. "Have you gotten the idea I'm trying to express here?"

"I'm smelling what you're selling."

She winced. "Not really the appropriate time for that expression."

He chuckled. "True, sorry. So now that you've gotten your hint across, I want to ask you if you've heard of this whole bonding process the team goes through."

"Team bonding or team bondage?"

"Bondage is Wednesday evenings after shuffleboard. But I'm trying to figure out how being your boyfriend works in a team where conflicts might get worked out in bed."

She grinned. "I want you to appreciate how badly I'm tempted to yank your chain right now."

"So noted, I applaud your restraint."

"You'll remember that Imae and me fooled around on occasion. She wasn't the only one, we're kind of a horny bunch. Remember her theory?"

"Your brother and my sister constantly remind me."

Ayr leaned against him and put her arm around his lower back. "I think that's why the Ta'avi Pioneers work so well together. We don't call it team integration or anything fancy like that."

"What do you call it then?"

She shrugged. "Saturday night?"

Theo laughed and let Ayr push him over on the bed and pulled her on top of him.

"This is promising," she said, wiggling against him. "Before it gets even better, I want to say out loud, with small words and big pictures, that I know you'll get pulled into someone else's bed. If I don't happen to be there, I want you to know that I'm not going to be jealous or angry. Well, maybe a little jealous but we'll work that out in bed ourselves. Or the shower. Maybe on the kitchen counter."

"And you said there were big pictures of all this?"

She rolled her eyes and kissed the end of his nose. "And you need to realize that I might get pulled into a dark corner occasionally. Or I might pull someone into my bed. Some guys are weirded out about other guys being involved, so you might not always be invited."

He nodded. "I might be a little jealous myself but like you said, we'll work it out."

She bent down and kissed him and Theo's tongue pushed into her mouth. Ayr moaned and worked her hips to slide her sex over his erection.

There was a tapping on the tent door. "Is that Theo in there?" a female voice asked.

Ayr felt Theo laugh silently beneath her and grinned.

"Is that you, Tessa?" Ayr called.

The door flap opened and another Ta'avi woman stuck her head in. "Oh, hello. I didn't mean to interrupt, I didn't realize you already in here Ayr."

"We were just working some things out, Tessa."

The other woman laughed. "I can imagine the things that are going to get worked out. I was just walking by and I thought I'd check to see if Theo needed anything."

"Do you need anything, Theo?" Ayr asked.

"I can't think of anything at the moment. Definitely later though."

Ayr sat up and leaned over to kiss Tessa. "I'd totally invite you in but I'm doing a lot of apologizing for being such a bitch lately."

"I'm happy to see the two of you together," Tessa said. "We'll play together another time, okay? Goodnight."

They waited until she had walked away.

"You've got a *lot* of Ta'avi admirers now. More than Holm Half-hand maybe."

Theo worked her shirt over her head. "He gave himself that name, didn't he?"

Ayr pulled his shirt off. "What do you think?" she giggled. "That reminds me, did Emma kill him yet?"

"I don't think so, why?"

Ayr snickered. "He found out about the three of us on Alnatic and was jealous. He was going to ask her about trying a threesome."

Theo shrugged as he pulled a blanket over them. "I have no idea how she feels about that kind of stuff. I'm starting to wonder how complicated things are going to get."

Ayr rubbed her hard nipples over his chest. "Not complicated, *fun*. I'll bet life with the Lantern will be too intense to worry about anything else but the mission. It just makes it more fun when we do relax."

"How does it all work exactly?" Theo asked. "Is there some roster or something."

Ayr giggled again. "No, there's no roster, no supervised orgies. Stand down after Pioneer training missions is usually hanging out and partying together. With everything that's happened, people have a lot more built up tension and emotions. Add in a bunch of new people and things have the potential to get really intense."

"Is that Ayr?" Emma asked from outside. She pulled back the door. "Hey girl! I'm glad you're finally here. And happy to see you guys are on uhm, better terms."

Ayr sat up, taking the blanket with her and wrapping it around her chest. She and Emma pressed their cheeks together.

"We were just kissing and making up," Ayr said, laying back down on the bed. It was getting chilly and she pressed herself against Theo's side and put the blanket back over him as well. "I was just asking Theo if Holm had asked you yet."

Emma laughed. "Are you kidding? It was almost the first thing out of his mouth when he got here. I said I would think about it just to make him squirm. But Naomi and Helli asked him if he wanted to take a walk a few minutes ago."

"Did his head explode?" Ayr asked, giggling again.

Emma laughed. "I didn't want to risk it so I slapped him on the ass and told him to go have fun. I came up here to see what the Sparrow was doing. I'm glad he's not in there brooding."

"Hens brood, not sparrows," Theo said, looking closely at Emma. She didn't look upset and he didn't feel any strong emotions from her.

"What's up?" she asked, seeing the look.

"I thought you might be the jealous type."

She laughed. "Growing up around *here*? Not even a little. I mean if he tried to go behind my back I'd be hurt."

"Then *he'd* be hurt," Ayr said.

Emma grinned. "Probably, yeah. But if those two hotties hadn't taken him off into the dark, I'd be happy to share him. Now he can help with *my* threesome fantasy now."

"Ooh, make him kiss the other guy," Ayr said and all three of them laughed.

"I've intruded enough, when you two are done, come down to the fire. It's mellowing out a little."

"Definitely," Ayr said. "Would you hang something on the door so I don't have to get cold again?"

Emma pulled a bandana out of her pocket and blew them a kiss as she left. Ayr slid on top of Theo and he ran his hands down her back to her firm ass.

"When did you take off your shorts?" he asked.

"Just a minute ago. Sneaky huh? Now let's get yours off."

They wiggled under the blanket and Theo's shorts were tossed out.

Ayr rubbed her sex over his rigid cock. "Can you feel how wet I am for you?"

He nodded and pulled her down into another kiss. She writhed slowly against him and Theo squeezed her ass.

Ayr stopped kissing to catch her breath. She moved her hips up and down, coating his cock with wet warmth. "I want to tell you something," she whispered in his ear.

Theo squirmed as her breath tickled his ear and she dragged the tip of her tongue around the edge and bit his earlobe gently.

"I want to tell you that no matter who else I fuck, they won't get this part of me."

"What part is that?" Theo whispered, his fingers going between her cheeks as he squeezed her ass again.

"I want to be your slut, baby. Your dirty fuck toy that will do anything you want. *Anything*. I'll swallow your cum or you can shoot it on my face. Would you like that?"

"Yes," he gasped.

"You can fuck my mouth or my pussy, they're yours," she whispered, making sure to blow into his ear. "I want you to fuck my ass, feel how tight it is. My body is yours to play with."

The feel of her wet lips on his cock was making Theo breathe hard. He held her ass, moving his hips so that he finally slid inside of her.

Ayr groaned as she pushed herself down on him.

"You feel amazing, so wet and hot," he whispered into her ear, teasing her with his tongue. "I want you to teach me to lick you the way Imae licked you."

"Yes!" she gasped. "I want to cum in your mouth and taste it on your lips!"

Ayr sat up on him and spread her legs wide, putting one on either side of his head. He pushed even deeper inside of her and Ayr's head fell back as she groaned. She could feel the heat and flutter rising in her belly and picked herself up so she could feel him slam inside of her again. The feeling of it pushed her over the edge and Ayr's body strained, drawn as tight as a bow as she pushed down, feeling Theo fill her.

"I'm getting close," he gasped.

Ayr laid on his chest, sliding up and down and squeezing his cock with her body. "Give it to me," she whispered. "Put your cum inside me, I want to feel it."

He was thrusting faster now, breathing hard. Ayr bent down and tugged on one of his nipples with her teeth. Theo groaned and his hips almost lifted her off the bed. Ayr felt the spurts inside of her and moaned.

She finally felt his softening cock slip out of her and laid beside him, cuddling close. Theo put his arm around her and Ayr kissed his chest.

"There's something I want to tell you," he said after a few minutes.

"You're pregnant aren't you?"

He just sighed and Ayr grinned and kissed him. "Tell me."

"I'm in love with you."

She smiled, snuggling against him. "I know."

They drifted off to sleep, lulled by the low murmur of voices outside.

A few minutes later Ayr opened her eyes again. Instead of cuddling with Theo under a blanket, she was standing in a forest next to a creek. Steep slopes rose to either side of her and she was surrounded by the sound of rustling leaves. There was a deep booming off in the distance and Ayr jumped.

"It's just thunder," Theo said from behind her. "I miss thunderstorms."

She spun around. "Where are we?"

"It's a composite of my favorite places, sort of. I end up here a lot but I don't always recognize it."

A wide grin split her face. "You mean...."

He smiled at her. "Yeah. I call it the dreamscape."

"But it didn't work before, are we really here?"

He shrugged. "Ask me when we wake up."

Ayr touched one of the trees. Silver oozed from her finger and flowed up and down the bark, like poured mercury. She watched it run up the trunk, craning her neck. "I can't believe how big these trees are."

He put his hand over hers and a metallic blue appeared, pursuing the silver around the trunk. "This happens a lot, the trees are the size I remember but suddenly look like this."

Ayr looked around. They were standing on a massive root instead of the bank of a stream and the trunk of the tree stretched high overhead, disappearing into the mist that swirled through the trees.

"This must be what trees look like to ants."

He wrapped his arms around her from behind and she turned her head to kiss him.

"How is this possible? It didn't work before."

He smiled, feeling her quiver of happiness running over him as well. "Maybe we were too traumatized. Or maybe I wasn't sleeping very well. Or it doesn't happen every

time I sleep. I have no idea, I don't really control it. I can change it in small ways but that's it."

The sun broke through the mist overhead and they were back on the bank of the creek. Ayr closed her eyes, smiling up into the warmth of the sun.

"Control your anger, you must," a creaky voice said from deeper in the trees.

Ayr laughed. "*Seriously?*"

"He gives good advice," Theo said and kissed the back of her neck.

Ayr leaned her head to the side and sighed as the kisses continued up the side of her neck. "I'm in love with you," she said.

"I know."

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Around midnight, Ayr and Theo walked down to the fire. There were a few of the Ta'avi Pioneers hanging out. They whistled quietly and there was a thrumming noise underneath it when Theo and Ayr showed up holding hands.

"Is that a good thing?" Theo asked Ayr and the Ta'avi laughed.

"Yeah," she said, looking embarrassed and happy at the same time.

The rest of the Pioneers laughed and Theo and Ayr sat down with them.

"Did Jonesy finally fall asleep?" Theo asked Deirdre who was next to him.

"It took a few tranq darts and several blows to the head but I think they got him into the tent finally," Deirdre said.

You didn't need to be an empath to pick up on the derision in her light tone. It was quiet around the fire for a little bit.

"How are you?" Theo asked.

She shrugged, keeping her eyes on the ground between her feet. "Sorry, had a little too much merriment tonight. I'm still getting past Shep, y'know?"

He leaned over and bumped her shoulder with his. "If that's why we're drinking, I'm in."

She was still looking at the ground but she laughed at least. "Okay, but there's just rum or beer."

"I really get a sense of the differences between our cultures at times like this, wanting a pina colada but being far too embarrassed to ask."

She finally looked up and grinned. "We'll put a battery powered blender in the gear next time."

"And how about those little swords?"

Everyone laughed. One of them offered him a long curved stem pipe. "If you're not into alcohol, there's other ways."

"But there's a lot of cultural similarities too," Theo said, taking it. Someone handed him a lighter and he took a long draw from the pipe. He almost coughed but didn't exhale until he'd handed it back.

"Wow," he whispered and everyone else laughed. "That's really good."

"How many times have you smoked weed?" Ayr asked.

He blinked. "Once, why?"

"You coast on that hit for a while," she said firmly.

The rest of them laughed again. "Broaejad, little sister," the one who handed him the pipe said.

"Hey, I think I could actually pronounce that one," Theo said. "Broaejad."

"Holy shit, Birdy," Deidre said. "Why'd you say *that*?"

"What? It sounded just like him saying it. Didn't it?"

Ayr sighed and took his hand. She pressed it against her throat. She repeated the word and Theo felt a strong vibration. It repeated when she said the word again.

"There's a subsonic part you can't hear," Deirdre said sternly. "Do you have *any* idea of what you just said?"

"You're surprisingly perverse, Theo," someone else said.

"I actually feel a little sick," Tessa added.

"I threw up in my mouth a little," the pipe guy said.

"What the hell did I *say*?" Theo asked Ayr.

She scooted away from him on the bench. "I-I think we're going to have to be *secret* friends from now on. Okay?"

He looked around the circle of faces. Every one of them was trying very hard not to laugh. Theo sat back and gave Deidre the finger. "Nope, nice try though."

They all broke up in laughter, Ayr punching him in the shoulder gently. She got up to rummage around in one of the coolers.

"Theo, why do they call you Birdy?" the woman beside Tessa asked.

"It's a nickname for my nickname," Theo said. "Weird?"

"I wouldn't say Sparrow is your nickname," Deidre said. "That's Emma's name to use."

"But why Sparrow?" the woman asked. Theo remembered suddenly that she went by Hannah.

"I can answer that," Emma said, coming out of the dark.

"That's okay, you don't have to," Theo said. "It's really just a name, Hannah."

"When he was little..." Emma started.

"We're the same age!" Theo protested.

"...he would crouch down and sit on his heels," Emma continued, ignoring him. "And he was such a little chubby thing that he looked just like a fat little sparrow."

He shook his head as they all laughed. Emma came over and kissed him on the top of the head.

"I love you," she said into his hair.

"Yeah, right."

"So why Tulip?" Deidre asked.

"When we were younger, Amanda watched us a couple afternoons a week..."

"The Lady Tulani was your *babysitter*?" someone gasped.

"She's their aunt, Tessa! Are you drinking again?" Ayr said.

"Shut *up*," Tessa said. "And yes."

Emma laughed. "We'd put on makeup and fancy costumes. Then she'd put on music and we would have fancy dance parties."

"You and Amanda put on makeup?" Jala, the guy with the pipe said.

"Nope," Emma said, looking at Theo.

"I hate you so much," Theo said as they laughed.

"At least I didn't tell them what your favorite costume was."

"Emma would wear the same hat every day," Theo said quickly. "It was one of those yellow rain hats and she'd fold up the brim on it. Her head looked like a tulip."

Most of the Ta'avi made a sound like "aww."

Emma looked triumphant. "I get the flower name because I'm prettier."

"Dance parties? We had to go there?" Theo muttered to her as the others laughed. "I was almost looking manly here."

"Sweetie, you weren't even close," she whispered and bumped his head gently with hers. "But I think you might have to talk with Ayr about having some quality time with poor Tessa. She only comes off as a space case when you're around. She's actually really smart. You make her neurons misfire or something."

"Around me?" Theo asked. "Are you sure?"

Emma shrugged. "She had that thing at Remembrance last year and she's acting the same way now."

"You know, she came to the tent a few minutes before you did," Theo said.

"Really? I'm surprised she had the nerve."

Theo grinned. "She was completely calm actually. When she saw that Ayr was already in there, she said we could all hang out another time. Not a hint of nervousness at all."

"Really. What's with melting down every time you're around her the rest of the time?"

"Obviously it's not *me* she's googly eyed for. When you were noticing how smart she was, did she see you?"

"Uh, no. There were in the seat behind me." Emma looked across the fire and caught Tessa watching her. The Ta'avi woman looked away quickly. "You might be on to something there. Maybe."

Theo shrugged. "You're in my house now, gun-bunny. Go talk to her and see what happens."

Emma was suddenly nervous. "Yeah, but I've never tried to hit on a girl before. I don't know what I'd say."

He laughed. "You don't *have* to hit on her."

Emma looked at him with a little smile. "Yeah, but if it's really me that winds her up, of course I *have* to hit on her. The tension might be bad for the crew."

"We can't have *that*," Theo said, rolling his eyes.

"I wonder what that would be like," Emma murmured. "I've never seen anyone have such a visceral reaction to me."

She ran her fingers through her curly hair, messing it up a little. She got up and winked at Theo before standing up and going over to where Tessa was leaning against a tree, listening to Ayr and Deirdre. Emma walked up beside Tessa who didn't notice her. She finally laughed at whatever the punchline was and glanced over at Emma. Tessa almost dropped her drink. Emma just chatted with her, pretending not to notice. Tessa was so jittery it looked like she was shivering.

"Told you so," Theo muttered, watching them.

Emma asked Tessa something, pointing over her shoulder at the path down to the river. Tessa nodded, starting to helplessly grin at Emma.

Ayr sat back down beside him. "What's going on?"

"I just hooked my sister up with Tessa."

Ayr followed his look. "Oh, finally," she sighed. "Tessa loves badass types and she had a crush on Emma for a while. Then she found out that Emma was the actual Argyro'lsh and she's been impossible to live with ever since."

"I didn't really intend to get them together," Theo said.

Ayr shrugged. "It would have happened sooner or later."

"There they go."

Emma and Tessa had started walking down toward the swimming hole. Tessa was nearly skipping.

*"Bring the noise,"* Ayr whisper-yelled and Theo cracked up.

"How about right here?" Emma asked. They were out on one of the decks next to the creek and there were a pile of cushions on one of the chairs.

"Uh...sure. I mean it's perfect," Tessa stammered.

Emma pulled the cushions down onto the smooth wood planks and sat on them. Tessa gingerly sat next to her and Emma scooted closer while Tessa was putting her drink down. She turned back to realize that Emma was much closer now. They were practically touching.

"You're adorable," Emma said, looking her in the eyes.

"Oh, uhm, thanks," Tessa said. "I don't hear that too often, I mean I know I'm pretty but..." Her voice trailed off as Emma traced the edge of her ear with a fingertip.

"Holy shit," Tessa breathed.

Not knowing how to respond to this, she grabbed Emma's head and pulled her into a long kiss. Emma ran her fingers through the woman's short auburn hair, slowing down the frantic pace of the kiss. Finally, Emma sucked on Tessa's bottom lip and pulled her head back a little. Tessa stared at her, breathing hard.

Emma grinned at her. "Was that a panic response?"

"Uh, kinda. Was it okay?"

"Don't ask stupid questions," Emma said, pulling Tessa toward her again.

Theo took another hit from the pipe when it was offered. He happily watched everyone around him. Holm had come back looking exhausted but the two women with him looked pretty pleased with themselves. Theo wondered how Emma was doing and closed his eyes. Very, very gingerly he tried to find her.

*Emma and Tess lying on cushions. Their lips pressed together, their shorts open. Each had their hand in the other's panties, stroking and exploring...*

Without thinking about it, Theo slid deeper. Suddenly he felt Tessa's warm skin pressing against his, felt her tongue slide along his. He jerked back into his own head. There was no way Emma hadn't felt that. Now he was going to get a beating, the only question was if it was immediately or later.

Opening his mind again, Theo felt around gingerly. There weren't any promises of doom or rapidly approaching clouds of fury. Instead he felt a sort of amusement. She had known he was going to peek. Theo quickly opened his eyes. Ayr was sitting next to him again.

"Why do you look so guilty?" she asked.

"I'll tell you later," Theo muttered.

Ayr laughed and leaned against him.

## PART 2

Theo opened his eyes and looked at the tent's ceiling. Today there was some kind of bug walking around up there. He was alone, Ayr was already gone, she'd gotten up as soon as the sun had risen. The Pioneers were having their own post-mission review this morning before joining the larger group to do the same thing. Last night, Theo had frowned when she told him but Ayr kissed him and explained that they'd planned it before knowing how the meeting between Teydora and the Ta'avi Elders would turn out. Theo had nodded and started to explain that they needed to start working on being

a unified team. Ayr had kissed him again, saying that she agreed but reminded him that some of the Ta'avi had decided to stay with the clan. Theo had been about to agree but as soon as he opened his mouth, she was kissing him again. He was a little frustrated and grabbed her butt, squeezing it hard.

She moaned her approval and they undressed as they kissed before retreating, shivering, to the bed. Unlike the sex earlier that night, this time they were both quiet, moving slowly and tenderly as they explored each other's body. Theo imagined Imae's presence in the tent and he smiled as he thought about her. Knowing that she hadn't been destroyed by death had helped the ache in his heart immensely.

After hours of kissing and exploring each other, he and Ayr were both too sleepy to continue. She'd cuddled up against his side. Theo told her what he'd learned from Nys. Ayr had just snorted.

"Of course we'll all meet again. What did you think?" she asked.

He'd shrugged without saying anything. She'd chuckled sleepily and kissed his chest. They'd both fallen asleep quickly.

Theo stretched and sat up to grab his towel and shower stuff. It was early, maybe he could get a shower without standing in line. As he walked through camp toward the bathhouse, Betsy popped out of her tent. She already looked wide awake and waved at Theo. He nodded back at her and smiled. Betsy ducked back into her tent and came back with her own towel over her shoulder and a kit bag in her hand.

"Good morning," she said cheerfully.

"Good morning, how are you feeling?"

She beamed. "I'm just spiffy. How about you? Ready for the mission roundtable?"

He sighed and she laughed. "It's not *that* bad. Hardly anyone ever cries."

"Thanks."

Betsy was almost skipping. "Actually, you should just start off blubbering. They might go easier on you."

"I didn't realize you were one of those disgusting morning people. I wonder if I can throw you off the team for that."

"Why are you so *grumpy*?" Betsy leaned closer. "Rumor is you got laid last night," she said semi-quietly.

They walked along the long bathhouse building. "Last night isn't the problem, the mission review is."

"What good will stressing over it do? I think what you really need is a big Bloody Mary."

Theo snorted a laugh. "I'd just sleep through the whole thing."

"See? It's perfect."

Betsy went into the door with the showers, but Theo stopped. Betsy looked back at him. "What?"

"Isn't that the entrance to the men's side?"

"You're adorable," Betsy said, coming out to take his arm. "C'mon, we'll shower next to each other and we can have a happy little chat."

"Throwing you off the team *and* getting you assigned to the Ulthira," Theo grumbled.

"Ooh, aren't they great?"

Theo finally laughed. "Okay, you win."

Betsy stopped at one of the shower stalls. "The secret is a lot of espresso when you first wake up. Jonesy has a bad hangover this morning and I'm going to drive him *insane*."

Theo laughed and opened the door to the stall next to hers.

"Wait, where are you going?" Betsy asked, looking hurt suddenly.

"Uh, to shower? You said next to each other."

Betsy toyed with the neckline to her shirt. "I kind of thought we'd be helping each other get...uhm, nice and clean. You could wash my back?"

Theo froze, not sure how to deal with this. "Uh, Betsy, I don't know if..."

Betsy fought back a giggle that quickly turned into laughter.

"Oh my god, your face!" she gasped.

Theo rolled his eyes and went into his own shower. The partition stopped a few feet from the ceiling and Theo could hear her still chortling. He got undressed and turned on the water. He turned his back to the shower head, letting the hot water beat on his shoulders. The water next to him turned on and Theo heard Betsy sigh.

"Uhhh, Betsy, I don't..." she said in a deeper voice. Then she started laughing again.

"You sound like a chipmunk on helium when you laugh."

Betsy gasped. "That is *so* mean."

"Oh mah gawd, yerrr face!" Theo said in a high-pitched voice.

"Hey, Theo?" Betsy said after a minute.

"Yeah?"

"Look up!"

He glanced up just in time to see a plastic bag of water sail over the partition. He whooped as it hit him and dumped ice cold water over him and Betsy giggled madly in a voice more suited for a cartoon squirrel. Theo burst out laughing as well.

Someone came scuffing down the passage and the door next to Theo's slammed.

"Quiet, you animals," Holm said. "I'm dying over here."

"Told you to leave the Jaeger alone," Betsy said cheerfully. "Hey Theo, you got that bag?"

He leaned over and grabbed it and turned the water on full cold. "Sure do."

"Oh good."

"Seriously, go jabber somewhere else," Holm grumbled as Theo filled the plastic bag.

There were a couple of taps from Betsy's direction and Theo tapped back twice. A few seconds later Holm screamed hoarsely as two cold water bombs delivered their payload.

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Theo tugged on the bottom of his shirt once more, glancing down to make sure he hadn't stained it in the three seconds since he had last checked.

Kawehi sighed and Emma chuckled. Kawehi put her hands on his shoulders and turned him to face her.

"Theo," Kawehi said gently and very firmly. "Relax. You're blindly Projecting all your nerves."

"You'll have everyone flipping their shit going in like this," Emma added.

He tried to listen but got distracted by trying to stop his hands from shaking. Kawehi and Emma looked at each other.

"Now?" Emma asked her.

Kawehi nodded and Emma stepped behind Theo, wrapping her arms around him to hug him tightly. At the same time, Kawehi stepped closer and put her arms around

him. Then she gently put her lips against his and kept them there. While it was technically a kiss, she didn't do anything other than put her lips on his.

Theo had immediately felt Emma's strong presence. Then the overwhelming sensation of Kawehi's soft lips against his interrupted that feeling with a different one. The two emotions mixed and swirled in a way that was kind of uncomfortable for him. He completely forgot the nervousness however.

Kawehi stepped back and nodded. "Good, let's go."

Emma held him for a second longer. "I'm proud of you, little brother," she whispered in his ear.

"Same age," Theo said automatically.

Both women laughed as they walked out and joined the circle of people waiting.

Theo sat near Kawehi and Teydora with Emma right next to him.

"I get to pinch you really hard if Kawehi notices you're not controlling yourself," Emma said. "Want to feel my purple nurple?"

Theo put his hands over his chest. "No. Relax, I'm fine."

Emma leaned forward to catch Kawehi's eye, hand close to Theo's chest. Kawehi laughed and shook her head. Finally, Teydora and Nys came out and sat down.

The whole process went smoothly and soon Theo forgot what he'd been so worried about. Kawehi pointed at Ayr to start and she mentioned a few things Theo hadn't even noticed, mostly about her Pioneers. She sat down and Betsy to her right, was next. They slowly went around the circle, the few comments Theo got concerned his refusal to get enough sleep. The first time it was brought up, Theo had a hard time sitting there without offering explanations. When Jonesy brought it up for the third time, Theo found himself nodding. He had been a little stubborn but luckily it hadn't affected much on the mission. He was surprised at how much criticism they gave Kawehi and Teydora about mission planning though. They both took it calmly, nodding agreement. He wasn't sure what they could have done differently, no one had known the damn city was there. Then it was Deidre's turn.

She started off mentioning the same few issues that everyone else had. She was getting more and more upset as she talked though and by the time she addressed Kawehi and Teydora's roles in the mission she was nearly screaming at them with tears running down her face. He was ashamed that he hadn't seen how devastated Deidre was about losing Shep and he had to wipe away a few tears of his own. Theo realized that this review had another important purpose, Kawehi was getting everyone to vent their emotions over what had happened. He wasn't sure how the two senior women

were able to take it without taking it personally. Then he saw Kawehi wipe tears from her eyes. She wasn't just letting people vent, she was learning from them as well. Teydora looked unhappy but he had no idea if the Xero'pah even cried the same way.

Finally, it was Emma's turn. He expected some smartass comments and a joke or two but she delivered a surprisingly comprehensive critique of their engagement with the Bugs. She'd noticed a lot more than he had, even mistakes in his troop deployments that he hadn't even known about.

Then it was his turn. He stood up, it didn't feel right to sit in front of them.

"As a few of you noticed, I wasn't sleeping the way I should have and I missed a few things, probably because of that. I went through the training exercises but I had no idea what an actual mission was like. I want to thank and compliment each of you on accomplishing on what turned out to be far more than any of us had imagined."

Theo looked around the circle, looking everyone in the eye. "But you need to tell me what I'm missing next time. I'm relying on each of you to do your jobs, you're all experts in ways I can't be. That's all I want to bring up here. However, I do have a problem with my performance. I've avoided looking too closely at anyone around me, trying to give people privacy. It also protects me from having to feel too much, from having to get involved on that kind of level with everyone I see. Bringing that attitude to the mission was stupid. You all are my family and I let you down by not using every tool I have to support you. I apologize and it won't happen again. Thank you again for bringing me home."

Theo sat down and there were a few nods but mostly people were surprised.

"Lieutenant, does this mean you will always want to know when we're taking our clothes off?" Betsy asked from across the circle.

"Just you Betsy. I've got to keep people focused on the mission after all."

There were a few wolf whistles while everyone laughed. Betsy winked and blew him a kiss.

"That was very intuitive, Theophile," Teydora said.

Theo, Kawehi, Marisol, and Nys were sitting around one of the many patio tables. After the mission review had ended, Kawehi had told Theo that Teydora had some things to talk about.

"Ma'am, like I said, it's just Theo."

A flash of irritation crossed Teydora's face but that might have been because Nys had started laughing. Kawehi held back a smile and one of her eyelids drooped in a very subtle wink.

"Merciful Ones save us all from these infant smart-asses," Teydora said, looking around at all of them.

"You love us, and you know it," Kawehi said.

Her teasing tone surprised Theo but not as much as the smile from Teydora.

"I'm sure it's some sort of developmental pathology," the eldest Xero'pah said. "In any case, *Theo* had a very good point."

Kawehi looked at Theo, smiling. "I told you he was good."

Theo didn't think he blushed but he could feel the silly grin on his face.

"Now, I have my own comments about the exploration mission," Teydora said. "My aide is compiling them into written form. Now, I want to discuss one element. You were very fortunate, Theo."

He nodded. "I've had nightmares about that."

"Then stop it. There is not an agreed-on quantification of phenomenon known as luck, but it is a very real presence," Teydora said. "You are correct to worry about relying on luck alone, we cannot control that. Therefore, your team will be assigned to Haven to the Lantern training facility. We *can* control the acquisition of new information and techniques. This team will be given both so that we need not rely on luck alone next time. Nys will provide the necessary details."

"Am I going to repeat the course?" Nys asked.

Teydora smiled at her. "No. You will be *finishing* your time there with your team.

For just a moment Nys looked surprised but she controlled her expression almost instantly and simply nodded.

"However, I do have an errand for this team before you arrive at Haven," Teydora continued. "A small specialized settlement has not responded to routine communications for several weeks. A company of the Imperial Fist was routed through the area to check on the colony. They landed briefly and found the settlement empty. No signs of struggle were found and one of the lookouts reported seeing a colonist observing them. He briefly made contact, the colonist requested that they be left in peace. The individual retreated after that but the Gyr reported that something was different about the human he'd encountered."

"The smell?" Theo asked.

"The Gyr were reluctant to provide the details," she said. "So that is a reasonable assumption. This is a multi-species settlement which limited the reasonable scenarios for the Commonwealth planners to model. None of them fit the situation. The Lantern are masters of the unreasonable and we've been given the task to reestablish contact or provide an explanation of the loss. A Commonwealth official was dispatched and will arrive with the formal briefing in thirteen Terran days. After the recovery period, the team will begin gathering equipment for this extended time away from your home planet."

"How long?" Marisol asked.

"Up to thirty months with outside nutritional support. I apologize, I assumed there would be more time on Earth before departure, but my other teams are presently engaged and the orders come from a significant level of the Commonwealth organization."

"We'll be ready," Kawehi said.

"Thank you for your attention," Teydora said. "Before I leave, I want to relay my approval for the first steps your unit has taken together. Well done, all of you."

Teydora told Nys to walk to the parking lot with her. When they were gone, Kawehi looked at them. "Finally, I want to offer my deepest apologies for what happened on Alnatic. If I had had the slightest clue what was coming..."

"Mari, we know," Marisol said, her voice gentler than Theo had ever heard it. "I never worried about that."

Emma got up and hugged her. "Me either."

Kawehi blinked tears out of her eyes. "Thank you, Emma."

Marisol glanced at Theo. After a second she twitched her eyebrow. Kawehi noticed and laughed when Theo shrugged.

"It was one of the things I considered," he said, slightly embarrassed. "I didn't think it was likely and when Kawehi and I talked, I knew it wasn't her fault."

Emma laughed. "Everyone, I'd like to present Sparrow. All the truth, none of the tact."

~~~

Theo was headed for his tent when he saw Nys coming back down the stairs from the rim of the canyon. She was moving slower than he'd seen before and he changed direction and was waiting for her at the bottom.

"Theo, I didn't expect you," she said when she saw him.

"I wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Thank you but it is a sadness that will pass. Teydora has been as my mother since I came to the Lantern and I didn't expect to lose her so abruptly. We spoke of the importance of interconnectedness of my people, I am truly alone for the first time in my existence. It was past the time that I learned this but the lesson is difficult...."

"Do the Xero'pah hug?"

She smiled slightly. "Of course, we do. May I have a hug?"

Theo put out his arms and Nys stepped close. He wrapped his arms around her.

"Thank you," she whispered into his shoulder.

"You're not alone, it's just a new network," he said gently.

She nodded and squeezed him tightly before stepping back. "Thank you for the correction. As I said, I'm quite young."

"Maybe throwing Jonesy in the water would make you feel better."

She laughed a little. "He is already drunk, no challenge there."

"That's too bad. Holm was bragging that he could put you in the pool," Theo said.

"Indeed? I will keep that in mind."

He smiled at her and headed for his tent. A few minutes later, there was a startled yell from the pool and then a splash. Theo laughed and went to open his tent. It was already open and Emma was sitting on the edge of the platform.

"Oh, uh, hey."

Emma grinned. "Hey. Why do you suddenly look guilty?"

"You just surprised me is all."

"Yeah, right. Now that you're calmed down I wanted to talk."

"About last night? I'm sorry, I didn't mean to intrude. I was just..."

She laughed and got up. "Relax. Let's go somewhere where we won't be disturbed by the Theo harem."

"Avoiding witnesses? Very crafty," Theo said, dropping his bag in the tent.

Emma took his hand and they walked down to the creek. "If that was the case, it would've been easier to get to you while you were asleep."

He looked at her. "You're scary sometimes."

Emma nodded happily. "But that isn't what I want to talk about."

They walked down to the running water and sat down.

"Do you have any idea what's going on between us?" Emma asked. "This started off as twin-sense thing and it was kind of cute. I could sort of tell where you were and make a decent guess about how you were feeling. The last few days has gone *way* beyond any of that."

"I'm not really sure, I've been as surprised as you are."

"A couple of days ago you about knocked me out of bed. How?"

Theo shrugged. "I had the same kind of vague sense you did but it slowly got sharper. Without thinking, I reached out to see where you were. Then I kind of nudged you. Have you tried doing that?"

"No, I have no idea how it works."

"Me either, I just kind of do it. It's like reaching out without moving your arms."

Emma shrugged and screwed her eyes closed. She frowned as she concentrated.

Theo scooted closer, so their shoulders were touching.

"Trying relaxing more," he said. "It wasn't hard, it felt very natural."

Emma let out the breath she'd been holding and opened her eyes. "I don't think I can do anything like that."

Theo raised an eyebrow. "Who are you and what have you done with my sister? She never gives up like that."

Emma pushed him with her shoulder. "Shut up."

"Let's try something else."

Theo got up and moved over to where a tree had fallen next to the creek. He sat down, leaning back against it.

"Come over here."

Emma started to sit down next to him but Theo pointed to the spot in front of him.

"Lean against me."

Emma shrugged and sat down with her back against his chest. She looked back at him, a little uneasy.

"This reminds me of something."

"Something bad?"

She shook her head. "No, I just can't put my finger on it. Déjà vu I guess."

"Lean back and close your eyes. Just relax and let your mind go."

Emma leaned back against him and Theo put his arms around her. They both closed their eyes and Theo concentrated on matching his breathing to hers. In his mind, he reached out to the Emma shaped thought right in front of him. Emma took a deep breath suddenly but he let her surprise go past him and concentrated on gently drawing the figure toward him. She slipped out of his mental fingers but he tried again. It was hard but after dozens of attempts he had the sensation of pulling part of her away from the Emma shape, like he'd taken her arm. He imagined his own shape and put her hand on his 'shoulder'. Emma sat up with a gasp and he was thrown away from her.

"Holy crap, I felt it!"

Theo rubbed his head. "Yeah, I know. Take it easy next time though."

She turned around. "Oh shit, I'm sorry Sparrow."

"We're even for the other morning," he said, smiling at her.

Emma leaned back and kissed his cheek. "Thank you! That was amazing. I don't think I can do it on my own, but I see what you're talking about."

"The first time I reached out I was half awake. Maybe that helps or you just have to practice."

She looked around and down at her watch. "We've been sitting here for almost three hours!"

Theo stretched his back, suddenly aware of the aching. "I guess so."

Emma got up and pulled him to his feet and they headed back to camp.

"You feel really happy," Theo said after a few minutes.

"I am. I was afraid I'd get left behind."

Theo stopped and looked at her. "Left behind how?"

She shrugged, a little embarrassed. "You picked up everything I'm good at but I don't know what you're doing most of the time. I guess I was kind of afraid you'd get to a point where you didn't need me anymore."

Theo hugged her tightly. "I will *always* need you. How could I leave half of myself behind? Besides, I'm nowhere near as good as you are at what you do."

She pressed her cheek against his. "Okay, so I won't worry about it anymore."

"You gotta tell me this stuff, Tulip."

She sniffed as they let go of each other. "It was dumb."

"Yeah, but that doesn't matter. I'm always there for you."

She kissed him and messed up his hair. "You're the best little..."

"Same age," he interrupted.

Emma held up a finger. "Nope, eight minutes."

Theo rolled his eyes and they both laughed. They walked the rest of the way back to camp holding hands.

~~~

Later that evening, Theo and Emma stood in a half circle with the rest of the team in the wide space where the side canyon joined the main one. All of them wore the uniforms of their service branch; dark gray for the Rangers, medium brown for the Pioneers. Nys wore the ornate black uniform of the Lantern and Rachel walked with her in the midnight blue of the Raptors.

A small fire had been started in a stone cairn that stood in the middle of their formation. Something had been added to it and the curls of smoke that drifted past all of them were an exotic mix of incense and wood smoke. They were silent for a long while, staring at the fire. Finally Kawehi walked over to the aromatic flames. Her eyes moved over the group, meeting each person's eyes for a moment.

"I grieve that there are four fewer here tonight," she said in her low melodic voice. "Four fewer friends, lovers, family. Four fewer laughs, touches, four fewer smiles. Like all of you, I've mourned our loss. But I refuse to despair because I see all of you that remain. I hear your laughter and I feel you around me. Seeing the brothers and sisters of those four gives me hope because each one of you is as much a hero as those we've lost."

Ayr walked out from the other side of the circle, carrying a large recurved bow. She stood beside Kawehi, who took a small wrapped bundle from her pocket. "This is the name and accomplishments of Dr. Jonas Harrison Bray, Pioneer. We came from energy and to energy we will return in the end."

Ayr nocked an arrow as Kawehi carefully put the little scroll in the flames. The fire flared and Ayr put the tip of the arrow in the flames. When it was lit, Ayr turned and

fired the arrow into the sky. A trail of fire leapt into the sky, climbing high before it disappeared.

"Take up the task eternal," the Pioneers said with one voice. "All the rest on us depend."

Kawehi held up another wrapped scroll. "The name and service of James Alan Shepperd, Sergeant of Rangers. We came from energy and to energy we will return in the end."

Again, Kawehi placed the packet in the flames and Ayr was waiting with an arrow that she lit and shot into the sky.

"Do Right!" Marisol barked as the streak of fire climbed.

"Fear None!" the IRT veterans yelled back.

"Marcus Francis Willoughby," Kawehi said, kneeling again. The fire blazed up and was shot into the sky.

"We Watch and Ward," Rachel said, watching it go.

"We Rule the Sky," the rest of them answered.

Kawehi took out the last packet, looking directly at Theo. "Here is the name of Chyles'garrel Itmataera'xoch Flame-Bridge'ohh. She has already begun her journey and we remember her name and life once more."

Emma took Theo's hand as his vision blurred. He couldn't make out the details but saw the flames blaze up one last time before they streaked into the sky and were lost.

*Salt and smoke, I will see you some time again,* he promised as the Pioneers sent Imae off with their motto.

*I am waiting with love and joy.*

Theo's eyes widened as he distinctly felt the lightest touch of a hand against his cheek. He looked over and Emma was staring at him.

"We remain here without them," Kawehi said. "I know that when we are all reunited the stories of your deeds will make our friends as proud of you as we are of them."

Ayr and Kawehi returned to the semicircle of people. It was silent again as they watched the flames gutter and die. When the light was gone, everyone turned and silently walked away.

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Theo sat on his bed, unlacing his boots. The team had followed the tradition of going to and returning from the memorial in complete silence. There were a few quiet voices but the camp was mostly silent. Theo unbuckled his belt and pulled off the heavy canvas pants and jacket, trading them for a pair of comfortable shorts. He didn't feel ready to take the charcoal gray t-shirt off though and left it on. He pushed his feet into trainers but instead of going out to the party that was supposed to start, he stared at the wall of the tent. Had he really felt Imae's presence or was it just his imagination?

"Hey," Emma quietly said from outside a few minutes later.

Theo flipped back the door of his tent. Emma came in and sat on the camp stool across from him.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

Emma smiled and shook her head. "You are the greatest shit-disturber in the entire history of shit-disturbances."

"You felt that too?"

"Imae? Uh, yeah! I about crapped myself."

Theo snorted. "That would have been an interesting new tradition to start."

"If you ever doubted that Imae loved you, you should probably stop now."

He smiled. "Yeah. Turns out the universe is a pretty interesting place, Ms. Tulip."

"Especially around you, Mr. Sparrow."

The relative silence of the camp was split by an eerie wailing noise that made the hair on Theo's neck stand on end. Before he could say anything, the unearthly sound became something he'd heard before.

"What the *hell* is that and why's it playing Amazing Grace?"

Emma got up and pulled Theo to his feet. "Those are bagpipes and it means that the wild rumpus has begun."

Theo followed her from the tent. "That sounds ominous."

Other people were emerging from their tents and Theo saw he wasn't the only one to keep his uniform t-shirt on. There was a loud whoop as drums and voices joined the bagpipes.

"Now it's time for the *real* party," Emma said. "Everything else was just a warm up."

By the time they got to the main gathering area of the camp, the music had morphed into some kind of Celtic punk music that Theo had never heard before. There

were a few people dancing already as he headed for the drink machines. Deidre grinned and handed him a tall glass with something red in it.

"Daiquiri!" she shouted over the music.

Theo took a sip and gave her a thumbs up. Ayr grabbed him from behind and spun him around for a kiss and Theo barely managed to keep his drink from spilling all over Ayr. She helped him finish it and then dragged him to where everyone was dancing. It was too loud for Theo to explain he'd never danced before so he watched everyone else. It was mostly bouncing and swaying to the beat of the music and he quickly got into it, losing himself in the dancing and music.

~~~

A few hours later the music had gotten less frenetic and the party began to shift into a quieter thing. People had kept Theo's drink full and he'd had to be careful to keep his wits about him. After making out with him in the middle of the dancing, Ayr had disappeared. He walked carefully over to the picnic tables that were under a roof. Nys and Kawehi were having a deep conversation that he didn't want to interrupt so he changed course, heading for the creek. A hundred meters away, the music became part of the background and Theo picked a tree to sit down against. His legs were a little rubbery from dancing so long and it felt good to rest them.

Someone walked past, obviously looking for someone.

"Is that Holm?" Theo said.

"My man, Theo," Holm replied, coming back to sit on the ground next to the tree. "Have you seen Emma around?"

"Not lately but I was dancing until a few minutes ago. Have you seen Ayr?"

Holm looked a little uncomfortable suddenly and looked away. "Uh, yeah. She was, uhm...."

"Occupied?" Theo asked.

Holm nodded quickly. "Yeah, pretty occupied when I saw her."

Theo smiled but felt a jealous gnawing. "Okay, I'll sit here and hold this tree up then."

"There's some people that I bet would love to hang out with you," Holm said.

He obviously felt bad and Theo felt a wave of affection for his friend. Theo didn't really feel like "hanging out" with anyone new, not after so many drinks. He felt okay but he wasn't convinced he was an accurate judge of anything feeling this way.

"Nah, I'm good, Holm Halfhand. I think I'll hang out here with my friend the tree for a while."

Holm looked closer at him. "You sure you're okay?"

Theo gave him a thumbs-up. "I'm good. But maybe I had a little too much to drink so I'm going to coast for a few."

"If you're sure, okay. If you see Emma, I'm going down stream to the clearing. We're having some weed and playing a singing game. I bet you'd like it too, come down when you're done coasting."

"I'll let her know," Theo promised.

Holm got up and squeezed his shoulder before heading back the way he came. Theo tried to very lightly feel for Emma. He didn't want to pop into her head again, he was just curious where she was. There was nothing and he carefully tried to look closer. Whether it was the alcohol or inexperience, he ended up searching too hard and sliding into her perception again.

*She was on her knees, looking up at someone. His hands were wrapped in Emma's hair pulling her closer to his erection. Arms wrapped around Emma from behind, soft skin sliding across her own. He could feel Emma's awareness of him but Theo was transfixed by her lust and the sensations of her body. Theo knew it was Toni behind her, Willi's wife. Hard nipples were rubbed across Emma's back and Willi's hands pulled her mouth closer. Emma took his hardness in her hand, reaching back with the other to stroke whatever part of Toni she could reach. Willi's cock pressed against her lips and Emma parted them, letting the thickness push into her mouth. She moaned as one of Toni's hands slid over Emma's muscular stomach and then lower to the smooth skin over her pubis bone. Emma felt the cool air on the wetness between her legs and moaned again as Toni's fingers found her clit. Willi was pushing deeper and Emma stroked him with her tongue, sucking gently as he pulled back. He pushed forward, going deeper and Toni's fingers found her wet hole. Emma's body tensed as a small orgasm raced through her...*

Theo's eyes snapped open. He was breathing hard and could feel his own erection under the shorts.

"No linking while I'm drunk," Theo muttered.

That had been a *much* stronger than anything he'd felt before. Maybe it had to do with strong emotions. Emma was feeling a few, that was obvious. Someone was walking by and Theo sat up, happy for the distraction.

"Everything good?" It was Jala, the guy who had shared the pipe with him last night. From the smell of things, he had refilled it.

Theo pushed himself to his feet. "Uh, yeah. I think it's time for bed though."

Jala looked surprised but nodded. "I'll walk up to your tent with you."

There was a palpable sense of concern coming from Jala though he didn't say anything.

"You absolutely sure everything is okay?" the Ta'avi asked.

"Everything is good," Theo said. Then his mouth suddenly ran away with him. "My girlfriend is 'really occupied' in that direction and Tulip is just as occupied somewhere over that way. And I'm truly drunk for the first time in my life. My tent is the only direction I know that's safe."

"Oh. Uhm, do you want me to go and..."

"No. Whatever it is, definitely no," Theo said firmly. "I am handling everything nicely. I just know that my judgement is shot to hell just now."

Jala nodded. "Seems like you're doing pretty well to me, Theo. Are you sleepy?"

He shrugged. "Not particularly."

Jala waited while Theo untied the tent door.

"Since it's your first time being drunk, I'd feel better if you had some company, okay? Just for a while."

Theo nodded, thinking Jala meant that he was going to sit with Theo for a while. But the other man said he'd be back and disappeared into the darkness before Theo could change his mind. He sighed and turned on the small light in his tent. If he was going to end up dragging people up here, the least he could do was give them some light.

Jala came back a few minutes later with Hannah, Georges, and Tessa following him. They all seemed happy to hang out at least. They lounged on the ground outside Theo's tent and Jala loaded his pipe and passed it around the circle. The strong weed mixed with Theo's buzz but it wasn't unpleasant. The haze from the daquiris seemed to be dissipating leaving him with the deeply relaxing feeling of the smoke. The three of them talked and Theo listened, happy to not be in the center of things for once. Georges told funny stories about life in Paris before his parents had been recruited. Tessa and Hannah taught Theo more Ta'avi words with Jala offering useless advice. The sounds of the party had been dying down for a while and before long Georges said goodnight and went off to bed with Hannah. Soon Tessa was yawning and Jala offered to walk her to her tent.

"Thank you for this," Theo said to them. "It was an intense day, sitting around with friends was just what I needed."

Jala hugged Theo and said he was glad they were friends. Tessa hugged him as well, telling him to come and find their little group instead of hiding in the dark next time. They disappeared into the darkness, humming a song between them. Theo had been a little sleepy at first but he was wide awake again. He grabbed his field pants and rolled them up into a pillow and moved over to where he could see the sky through the trees. He let his mind drift as he watched the distant lights slowly wheel in the sky overhead.

"Hey you," Rachel said quietly a while later.

Theo sat up. "Hey yourself. Want to watch the stars?"

She smiled, suddenly looking a lot more like the woman he'd met last year. "Got another pillow?"

Theo got up and got her one of the blankets and folded it for her.

"This is huge," Rachel said, laying down and putting her head on it. "Share it with me, you don't have to use your laundry."

Theo laid back down, his head on the other part of the blanket.

"I'm kind of surprised you're up here alone," Rachel said. "I figured the Pioneers would have dragged you off into the darkness with nefarious intent."

He chuckled. "There were offers but I really needed to sober up and process the day. Why aren't you out there indulging in the wicked pleasures of the flesh?"

Rachel shrugged. "I got wasted and really wanted to find someone to play with, but I know from bitter experience that there would probably be crying and possibly some self-loathing involved."

"Yours or his?"

She laughed. "I was drinking tequila so I'm not sure."

"What did you think of the memorial?" she asked a while later.

"I liked what they did. You've seen it before?"

"Variations of it, couple of guys burned in while I was in flight school. I want to ask you a really inappropriate question if you don't mind."

"Those are the best kind, go ahead."

"Do you think Imae thought of you when she was hit?"

Theo looked over at her. "I don't know. Vuli told me that it was very fast, Imae probably didn't have time to realize what was going on. Why do you want to know that?"

"Because Marcus downloaded a message before he attacked the transport. It was the data on the two ships, info about the carrier jumping away, and his tactical plans. But he didn't say anything personal. Not even goodbye."

"Maybe he was just focused on his plan?"

"You're not the first person to say that. How hard is it to say goodbye though? I think he was too wrapped up in playing hero."

"Well Rachel, he *was* kind of an asshole."

There was a surprised gasp before she burst into laughter. "Theo!"

"Oops. I'm not completely sober and that was out of line, I apologize."

She moved over so that their heads were closer together. "No, it's the truth, he was. And he was really intimidated by you."

Theo snorted. "Yeah, I kinda noticed. But I *am* sorry he didn't say goodbye. That's inexcusable for someone as great as you are."

"Thing is, I'm not all that upset about it," she said. "I keep waiting to feel this surge of grief. I mean, I'm sad that he died. But more like I lost a friend, not a lover. All that other stuff, nada."

"Hmm."

"That's it?" Rachel asked, sounding amused still. "Where's the usual Jedi-like insights and advice?"

Theo laughed. "That was the asshole comment."

She smiled. "You give really good advice in really awful ways. Now that you know what's going on out there, do you still like the stars?"

"They're beautiful and always will be. Everything could be wiped out, Earth, the Commonwealth and Dominion, and every other speck of life in the universe but that beauty would be left. It makes me feel better."

"Hmm. You're kind of a weirdo, Birdy Cosineau."

"The polite term is deep thinker, thank you very much. Since we're asking inappropriate questions, I've been wanting to ask you one. I won't be offended if you don't want to answer though."

"I dunno. Does it concern my underwear?"

He laughed. "You wish. I wanted to know what happened between us last year. We stayed away from anything romantic because you were almost ready to start your Warden bonding. The other day Emma mentioned you and Marcus had been thinking about getting married and that you were considering reassigning to the Raptors instead of the Wardens. If you weren't into me, it would have been a lot kinder to just tell me outright."

Rachel sighed. "First, Marcus was the one pushing the marriage thing. He wanted mostly the one talking about getting married. He wanted me to stay out of the field and have his babies."

Theo looked at her, surprised. "How?"

"I have no idea. I'd guess that he forgot I wasn't human, he did it constantly and yes, it pissed me off. But back to the thing between you and me. You didn't do anything wrong and I think you're one of the most amazing guys I've ever met. But there's a history between our families that I can't get past. The thing between you and me is complicated though. You didn't do anything wrong but there's a history between our families that I can't get past."

Rachel didn't say anything else and finally Theo sat up and looked at her. "Like what?"

"Like what my father was. Do you know what he did for your family?"

Theo thought back. "He said he was a steward for my uncle's properties or something."

"Yeah, he was a Tulani servant." Rachel sat up. She sounded angry and was glaring at him.

"I guess you could look at it that way, but he made it pretty clear that he wasn't ironing and mopping floors," Theo said. "It came across more like he was some kind of senior executive for my uncle."

Rachel looked away. "Yeah, well, until pretty recently I didn't know that. All I knew was that he nearly bowed whenever he saw your aunt, the Great Lady D'hamandhau Tulani."

"I saw that, sure. Did you ever consider that might have been gratitude? She invented the gate that evacuated his daughter from certain death."

He could see on her face that she hadn't but she just shrugged. Theo was kind of irritated but kept it away from his face.

"We're *all* servants to something, Rachel. I'm a serve all of you and I'm a servant to Emma as much as she is to me. All three of us serve this Project. Even Lady

D'hamandhau Tulani. No, *especially* her, Amanda works herself to exhaustion every single day. Service isn't a dirty word."

Rachel didn't reply and Theo let her think.

"Growing up here I learned that servitude meant very different things," she finally said quietly. "I saw my father around Amanda and I vowed that I'd never be a slave to anyone. Everything was fine until you came home. I found myself thinking about you a lot and that really messed with my head sometimes. I was half afraid that there was some sort of racial trait that pushed me to give myself to a Tulani."

Theo smiled. "My last name is Cosineau and I really don't want anyone giving themselves to me. I've got enough pressure as it is."

She punched him in the arm gently. "You know what I mean."

"Yeah. You never heard her say it, but Amanda told Baela at one point that the title of Great Lady and the House of Tulani belonged to the past, not the present. I agree, there's only three of us left. We're hardly a regular household let alone a Great House, whatever that means. I don't want you beating me up again, so I'm not going to say anything about your relationship with your father influencing the rest of your life..."

"Except you just did. So we've established it's not you, it's me. So what now?"

Theo rolled his eyes. "So we don't worry about this kind of crap. So we don't worry about whose fault something is. Someday I want my oldest and best friend to come back and be my friend again. Does that imply ownership? I'll be *your* friend instead."

Rachel wiped her eyes. "Or we could be each other's friend."

"Perfect."

"What if your friend wanted a hug?"

Theo scooted closer and hugged her tightly. "That answer is always yes."

They embraced for a long time and then Theo felt Rachel yawn.

"Don't say a word," she said, letting him go.

"Who, me?"

She poked him in the chest very gently. "Yeah, you. It was a long day and I'm wiped out."

Theo got up and helped Rachel to her feet. "Then thank you for watching the stars with me."

She pulled him close and hugged him once more. "You're welcome. Are you going to the water park tomorrow?"

"I thought that was just Betsy making grandiose drunken plans."

"Other people have adopted them now. It is now an official grandiose plan."

Theo yawned. "No, I could use some quiet time."

Rachel smiled. "Me too. I'll see you tomorrow."

Theo got his blanket and pants and went into the tent. He yawned several more times as he spread the blanket out on the bed and stripped down to his shorts. The last thing he heard was a breeze shaking the leaves of the Cottonwoods overhead.

"Hey," someone whispered some time later.

"Mmrph," Theo replied.

"Can I sleep with you?"

He picked his head off the pillow. "Emma?"

She came into the tent, wrapped in a blanket. "Yeah. Holm didn't come back to the tent and I'm freezing."

"Come on," Theo said, holding up the blanket. Emma spread hers on top of the one he was holding and hurriedly got into the narrow bed beside him. Emma was shivering and she put her feet against his.

"How are you this cold?" Theo grumbled, putting his arms around her. "Is it snowing or something?"

"I fell asleep outside on the ground."

He snorted. "Fell asleep."

Emma tried to laugh with chattering teeth. "Yeah, kinda sudden like."

"Maniac."

"Here, feel my hands."

Theo gasped. "Keep those on your side of the bed!"

"Cold right? Hold on, let me turn over," Emma whispered. She turned on her other side, back facing him. Theo put his arms around her, glad he'd worn a shirt to bed when she cuddled back against him. Even through her shirt and his, she was frigid. Theo wondered if she had passed out in one of the ice filled coolers.

"You need to explain his duties as boyfriend," Theo whispered. "Or start passing out in warmer places."

Emma's back twitched as she laughed. The shivering was slowing down at least.

"You're the best brother I ever had," Emma whispered back. "Not to sound dirty, but would you put your leg between mine?"

"Okay, now you're just being a freak."

"Shh! My legs are cold too."

Theo sighed and pressed his legs against the back of hers. "If I get a boner, you can just go sleep in the truck."

Emma started giggling and it set Theo off as well. When they calmed down, Emma felt a little warmer and they started to drift off to sleep.

Theo knew that he was in the dreamscape but he'd never arrived in bed before. Emma was laying against him in the bed, his leg held between hers. One hand was in front of her face, she was sucking her thumb. Her other hand held one of his against her side. Theo's other arm was curled in front of him, against Emma's back. In the strange vision of the dreamscape they were both adults while they were simultaneously unborn children.

"Emma."

She took the thumb out of her mouth and looked around them. The bed had sunk into the root of a tree. She reached out and patted the bark a few inches below her face.

"This is where you went with Imae?"

Theo disentangled himself and sat up. "This is what happened. I've never seen this spot before."

Emma rolled off the bed and stood up. She pulled Theo to his feet while she looked around.

"Did we get shrunk?"

Theo shrugged. They were standing in a misty forest and the trees towered over them, mist slowly winding between the branches.

"We had to get shrunk," Emma said. "These things would be thousands of feet tall otherwise."

Theo crouched down and patted the bark. "It feels real, stuff here never felt real before."

"You must really be into trees," Emma said, hopping down to the ground. The root was easily six feet thick.

"I usually wake up in the trees, but the trees from home. Regular sized ones. I've gotten glimpses of these monsters but not a whole forest at once."

"There's a path here," Emma said from the ground. "Come on."

He jumped down and followed her. White flecks were spread densely underfoot, winding between the roots of the trees. Theo stooped to look at them. It sort of looked like flower petals but he couldn't seem to grab one.

"I can't influence things this time," Theo said.

He looked up to see that he was mostly talking to himself now. Emma was a long way ahead of him. Theo stood up and jogged after her. Things telescoped somehow so when he caught up, he nearly ran into her back. Emma had stopped on the edge of a strange clearing. The roots encircled the space and made a wall around it. There didn't seem to be any particular reason why and Theo started to walk past her, but Emma grabbed his arm.

"Not yet."

Theo raised his eyebrows. "Why not?"

She shook her head. "It's not ready yet. Look at those other paths though."

He looked carefully and saw the same white flecked path repeated wherever there was a gap in the roots. "It's a crossroads, I wonder where those other paths go."

She didn't let go of his arm. "Can't you feel it? This is the ending of the path, not the beginning. We're not supposed to go in there, not yet. It's not time."

Theo looked at her. "If you say so. Maybe we're in your head instead of mine."

"What's that water noise?"

He looked around, relieved to see that things had changed into the spot he normally ended up in. The trees were now loblolly pines planted in precise rows and a small stream gurgled past, falling over rocks.

"*This* is where I usually go," Theo said.

"Oh yeah?" Emma said, looking past him. "Never would have guessed."

Theo turned to see a tyrannosaurus with Emma's head lumbering through the trees. On its back there was a diminutive wizened figure with green skin wearing a brown hoody. He yodeled and waved a lightsaber at them in greeting.

The next morning, Theo wrote everything he could remember about the strange path in the titanic woods. Emma claimed she didn't remember much but did a pretty good dinosaur impression as she left the tent, giggling.

"Hey you."

Theo looked up, Ayr was standing just outside his tent.

"Hey cutie, what're you doing out there?" he said.

She grinned at him and came inside. Theo rolled to his side and she sat on the bed, lounging against him.

"You're not mad?" she asked. "About me disappearing on you last night?"

"Nope. But you were right, I was a little jealous."

"I'm sorry about the disappearing part. My friends Japh and Lynya are staying on Terra with the rest of the clan and I don't know how long it'll be before I see them again."

Theo nodded. "I figured it was something like that."

"What about you?"

"Jala, Tessa, and Hannah came up to hang out and they taught me new swear words. Then Rachel came by and we talked and watched the stars. I don't think I like being drunk though."

"Looked like you still like dancing though, even without the special costumes and makeup."

Theo sighed. "How much money do I have to spread around to keep that quiet?"

Ayr laughed. "Way too late for that, cutie. Did you and Rachel finally uh...work things out? I didn't hear any screams of passion from up here."

"We just talked. There was something bugging her about our families, nothing very interesting. I think she'll figure things out now. She left, I went to bed and slept like a baby."

Ayr sighed. "You two need to have a really long and involved conversation while you're both naked."

"We do?"

"By which I mean screwing each other's brains out."

"Yeah, thanks, I got that."

Ayr got her "patient" look and laid down on her side facing him, putting her arm over his waist. "Look at it from her perspective. She dumped you for another guy, he got killed and now she's alone."

Theo moved closer to her. "It's a lot more involved than that."

"So? Go fix things with her."

Theo kissed her and Ayr put her leg over his, pulling herself against him. Someone yelled that they were leaving in ten minutes. Ayr and Theo both sighed.

"You're not skipping the waterpark because of me?" she asked.

Theo grinned. "Well, your constant sexual demands have exhausted me. So, kind of."

"You need to get to the gym more often, I've been taking it easy on you." Ayr stopped and put her nose to the blanket. She looked up at him. "Wait a minute, I smell another woman on your bed. Maybe it's not *my* sexual demands, hmm?"

"Oh, that's Emma," Theo said.

Ayr's eyebrows went up. "You *are* surprisingly kinky, Theo."

"No, I mean we slept together last night. And stop doing that with your eyebrows. I mean we were asleep in the same bed."

"Uh huh, sure." She kissed him again and then sat up. "Hey, it's our last night before we go back to the real world. Can we spend it together? If you're not too busy with your hot twin sister I mean."

Theo rolled his eyes. "I'll think about it."

"I'll try to up my game, never had to compete with a twin sister before. Especially a hot one."

"Let it go. Aren't you supposed to be leaving?"

"I'll be thinking about this all day now," Ayr whispered in his ear. "I'm already hot and bothered. Do you guys need a filling for that Cosineau sandwich? Don't answer yet, just think about it."

She kissed him on the lips and got off the bed. She smiled at him and left. Theo turned his head and watched her walk away. Ayr's hips were swaying gently. She was definitely doing it on purpose.

"What the hell have I gotten myself into?" he called.

"You love it," she answered, waving a hand but not turning around.

Theo and Emma got out of her truck, wearing the mottled uniforms of Lantern operatives. Theo tugged the blouse into place and put the brimmed cap on. It looked a little like a baseball cap, one that had been lifting weights according to Amanda.

Of course, Emma's uniform looked like a recruiting poster by the time he had the thing straight on his head.

"Are you *sure* we're not supposed to tuck in this...jacket thing?"

She smiled. "There's nothing wrong with calling it a blouse. And yes, I'm sure. I think you're just nervous."

He looked around as they walked toward the gate of the airfield. If the battered old hangar had been gone, he wouldn't have recognized the place as the Almaro airport. There was a new runway being bulldozed out across the scrub and new buildings had been mushrooming up everywhere. Even more fences had gone up and teams of guards patrolled the area with dogs.

"You were right," Theo said as they walked across the lot to the main gate.

"Of course I was."

Theo had appeared in his usual Project utilities but Emma had nagged him into the other uniform. He'd argued that she just wanted to show off but she had refused to leave the house until he'd changed. Now that they were here, he saw everyone was wearing the familiar utilities and there was a long wait at the main gate as security checked everyone's identification. Theo doubted that anyone knew what the gray-green uniforms signified but they were waved to a side gate where two American Marines were waiting, along with a vicious looking dog.

Emma showed her identity card first. Theo smiled at the other Marine and the dog. They both stared back at him, expressionless.

"Leave the dog be, he's working," Emma said to Theo.

"Just trying to be friendly," Theo said, handing the small folder to the first guard.

He still had the phone to his ear and muttered Theo's name to whoever was on the other end. Emma rolled her eyes at the K-9 troop as Theo was cleared through. There was a small twitch of his lip in return.

"Man this place has a weird vibe now," Theo said as they walked down a walkway toward the old hangar.

"I think most people would see this as normal and we were freaks before."

"Then I liked being a freak better," Theo muttered and Emma laughed.

Inside the hangar, there was an Aardvark that was already full of pallets. There were crew swarming over the ship and the twins had to stop and look for Rachel.

"Over there," Emma finally said, pointing to a couple of figures in the same uniforms they were wearing.

They had come to see Rachel off. She was shipping out before the rest of the team with one of the few new additions to the team. A Raptor named Kyriake Iordanou had arrived from last night from one of the European Project centers. She was Greek but had trained at Almaro a few years before Rachel. Today they were making the first leg of a long trip out into Ulthira space. The team had been assigned a new ship equipped with a brand new Synthetic Navigator and the two pilots were going out to be introduced. They'd meet the rest of the team in a few weeks on Haven.

Kyriake jumped to her feet and saluted when she saw the twins. Rachel looked at her in surprise and got quickly to her feet as well.

"We're not very formal," Emma said to the other woman. "We met yesterday when you got in?"

"Yes ma'am."

Emma glanced at Theo who looked very nervous suddenly.

"I'm Lieutenant, uhm...Theo," he stammered, putting out a hand.

This confused Kyriake long enough that Theo tried to salute her back as the woman offered her hand. Rachel and Emma were both snickering by the time the other two had figured it out.

"Now we know how to freak Lieutenant Birdie out," Rachel said to Emma, hugging her.

"Oh, there's tons of ways," Emma said. "Kyriake, we mostly do first names around here. I'm Emma and now you've met my ward and twin, Lieutenant Uhm Theo."

"I wondered if Echo was still mellow, all the Arclight installations are pretty intense about military ranks."

"We're still officially an R&D post," Theo said. "You can leave off the Lieutenant Uhm, I'm just Theo."

"Kiki," she said with a smile.

"I'm taking Theo over there and kissing him goodbye," Rachel announced.

Emma laughed at the look on Kiki's face as the other two walked further down the aisleway. "I mean, *really* informal."

Theo and Rachel's long passionate kiss was interrupted by a loud whistle.

"Whew," she said, putting her head on his shoulder. "I'm going to miss that."

"Be careful out there," Theo said.

"Try not to get in too much trouble yourself," she said and kissed him again, gently on the lips this time.

"What fun would that be?" he asked as they walked over to the Aardvark.

Emma had grabbed Rachel's gear and walked with Kiki to meet them near the crew door where a line of people was waiting to board. Rachel and Emma hugged tightly. Theo offered his hand to Kiki again.

"Good luck," he started to say.

Kiki surprised him by hugging him and kissing his cheek. "I don't do tongue on the first goodbye, Lieutenant."

Emma and Rachel were grinning at him when Kiki let him go. Theo shook his head and Rachel chuckled as she followed Kiki through the side door of the Aardvark.

"I knew you were going to pull something like that."

Emma put her arm around his waist as the main hangar doors began to open. "Sure you did, that's why you had that look of utter panic on your face when she hugged you."

A tractor began to pull the ship into the glaring light outside as the crew door was sealed shut. A minute later, the main engines of the Aardvark grumbled to life. The twins walked outside, seeing the ship turning onto the long runway. It sat motionless for a few seconds and then the grumbling growl of the engines shifted into a roaring shriek. The plane abruptly accelerated, tilting up almost immediately. It leapt off the ground and climbed at a far steeper angle than Theo would have thought possible.

"What's next?" he asked as they got back in Emma's truck.

"The information officer Teydora sent is arriving in a few hours," Emma said, checking her tablet. "Ayr sent a message, something went wrong with their requisition list, Jonesy wants you at the range for qualifications this afternoon. You've got a sit-down with Ops at 1300."

“Why?”

“Hold on...it says Supply and Maintenance aren't happy with your paperwork, that you put 'classified' and 'need-to-know only' all over the forms.”

“Oh. I hoped that would work.”

Emma laughed as she started the truck. “Nice try.”