

# **OBSIDIAN'S WAR**

By M S Lawson



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Cover image: shutterstock

*But he, that hath the steerage of my course, Direct my sail! On  
lusty gentlemen.*

Romeo on his way to meet Juliet

William Shakespeare 1595

## CHAPTER ONE

Private Gellibrand Bosworth Baines Plymouth Obsidian of three platoon B Company, Second Regiment of the Lighthold Sector Assault Infantry was sound asleep aboard the interstellar troop transporter Highreach, dreaming of women, when his platoon sergeant came to wake him. Gel, as he was to his friends, may have highly trained in cutting-edge weaponry and sensing systems resulting from centuries of technological advancements, but his sergeant's approach to rousing the soldier would have been familiar to a Roman legionnaire or a Greek Hoplite.

"Get up Obsidian, you lazy sod," said staff sergeant Sefton, flipping up the capsule's cover and shaking Gel. Being old school, the sergeant would have tipped the private onto the floor and dumped his mattress on top of him, but Gel was in a sleep capsule on the second tier of the bunk room's array of capsules. The sergeant had to make do with shaking.

"Wha.. Staff Sergeant?" Gel automatically looked at the display set on the bulkhead beside him. "Still half an hour to alarm."

"Not for you, we're making you a squad leader."

"But I don't wanna be a squad leader," protested Gel. "I've told you that. I don't wanna start worrying about what some other poor Salt should be doing." The Assault Infantry called each other Salts.

"Major Tatcha has told me you either accept the job or we're authorised to put you in the air lock and space you. Lieutenant Andris" (this was the platoon leader) "says he will personally work the override for the outer doors to open while you're inside."

"Isn't it against military law to murder privates for refusing promotions?"

The sergeant pushed his face up close to Obsidian's to glare at the private.

"The court of inquiry will find that there are extenuating circumstances, such as the private in question being aggravating." Gel had refused promotion several times. "You're squad leader, no argument, and senior squad leader too." The sergeant withdrew his face and jerked his thumb to indicate that Gel should get up. The other members of the platoon, in sleep capsules with translucent covers closed, as regulations demanded, slept on.

"Say, what? What's happened to Jim, Gus and Ella?" said Gel as he swung his legs over the side and grabbed his trousers.

"Squad Leaders James Guthrie and Gustav Graves had to be switched to other platoons to cover gaps," said Staff Sergeant Sefton. "Guthrie has been made brevet sergeant in C company. His promotion is deserved as you know. Squad leader Ella Hutchinson is still finding her way, as she admits. That leaves you, heaven help us all. You are older than the others and sometime make more sense – which doesn't say much for the others - and you've done the squad leader course."

The sergeant could have also added that Gel was somewhat taller than the platoon average, powerfully built and had more than held his own on all levels in the give and take of barrack rooms without making enemies. The others would not mess with him lightly. He was a natural choice for the vacant junior leader slot.

"I only did the course because you threatened me with field punishment if I didn't," said Gel putting on his socks.

“Did I?” The sergeant affected surprise. “You shouldn’t have such a good memory, Obsidian. Finish getting dressed and get to the ready room. The last-minute shuffle has upset things. Assistant squad leader Finney is the other promotion in three platoon, and Obsidian.” the sergeant lent in again.

“Yes sergeant?” said Gel, leaning back.

“If you didn’t want promotion you should have stayed away from the assault infantry.”

\*\*\*

The ball was a swanky, formal dinner with a retro theme including a live 1940s style big band. This band launched into the swing time classic, *A string of pearls*.

“Swing,” exclaimed Gellibrand Bosworth Baines Plymouth Obsidian. In keeping with the theme of the night, he wore a white coat with wide lapels, black bow tie and black pants.

“Alison, let’s dance?”

“Not now, dear,” said Alison. “I want to work the room.”

“But this is a ball,” protested Gel. “People dance at balls not network. I want to dance with my fiancée. I’ve even been taking swing dancing lessons.”

“That’s nice dear,” said Alison, scanning the room. “But you’ll never get into the senate if I don’t get out there and make contacts.”

“Senate?” Gel was momentarily taken aback, then shrugged, “if you’re that interested in politics mother will buy you a senate seat after we’re married, and you can sit in that dreadful Senate building and have meetings.”

“I’m not talking about the planetary senate, Gel,” said Alison rounding on him. “I’m talking about the Imperial Senate on Earth.”

“Imperial senate?”

Gel’s blood ran cold. His mother had mentioned that he might go into politics, but he thought she had heeded his strong protests and dropped the idea. The vast family fortune could be used to back some other poor devil who actually liked being in meetings, giving speeches, having his picture taken and being interviewed. Gel detested the publicity that came with being heir to a vast fortune and actively avoided it. But if Alison was talking about aiming for the Imperial Senate Gel knew that his mother must be behind the idea. He also knew that what his mother wanted, she got.

“Why in all of Imperium would I want to get into that senate?” he said. “I don’t want to be in politics – I don’t want to start worrying about what some other poor citizen is doing.”

\*\*\*

The newly promoted senior squad leader assembled with the other B Company leaders in the ready room for Major Tatcha’s briefing, which included changes to the company hierarchy.

“Staff sergeant Sefton tells me you’ve graciously accepted promotion,” said Tatcha to Gel, smiling.

“He made me an offer I couldn’t refuse, sir, involving an airlock.”

“It’s sad what we’re reduced to in the assault infantry,” said Tatcha, still smiling.

“Very sad is it not, staff sergeant?”

“Yes sir, very sad sir. Privates should want to murder their mothers for a chance to become squad leader. Instead, they have to be forced to take it.”

“Sad, very sad.”

The major called them to order and went over the leadership changes which included a new lieutenant for the Heavy Weapons and Support (HWAS) platoon, a bewildered looking Lieutenant Hasten. Then he moved onto the mission bringing up a map of the region they were to be transported to from orbit.

“It’s our turn to go down the surface, the last formation of the expeditionary force to go, Ladies and Gentlemen, and we have a straight forward mission,” he said. “A good chance to shake down the changes just made. We’re going down in a trident formation of four transports, the three platoon transports spread out with HWAS at the rear to land just outside this town,” Tatcha pointed to a square on the map, “called Walter’s Find. Someone called Walter found whatever is being mined there, it seems, and that’s about as complicated as place names get on this planet. The town is nothing more than a mining settlement of a few buildings but its right on top of a mother lode of smart crystals used for the new AI systems.”

As the Major did not bother to explain but his audience knew Smart Crystals were a rare form of the very common tectosilicate crystals. When right impurities were added and the deposit left under pressure for a geological age, these crystals were transformed into material that delivered processing and neutral net power two generations above those of the old, clunky silicon chips, while being far easier to use than Quantum systems. As smart crystals were very difficult to fabricate in a reasonable time, the deposits were highly sought after. The lift crystals which supplied lift when an electric current was passed through them and were widely used in transport vehicles, were a form of cyclosilicates but also required unusual geological conditions to form.

“The sector government wants to show off to the Imperial administration,” the major continued, “bless all their pointy heads, with a fresh supply of these crystals and we are to secure that supply for him. There is a set of ruins behind the town and to the North which isn’t human, as far as we know, and, no I don’t know what that means either. The miners found it by accident and cleared away some of the jungle, but they were told not to do anything more until archaeologists have taken a look. That means we go down, occupy the town and secure the area, including this ruin whatever it is. We have also been told to leave it alone, although we will take a peek. Make sure it’s secure.

“As for opposition, there have been reports of militia from the Sylvan Republic to the East – again a tin pot place named after someone or other – in the area, but as Walter’s Find is some distance from the border our diplomats have agreed with those guys, the Sylvan militia will be staying away, we hope. If we come across any militia, we ask them nicely to leave. If they won’t leave voluntarily then we will insist, as only assault infantry can, that they must leave scaling up to lethal force if necessary. Questions?”

“Any fire support on offer, sir?” asked Lieutenant Andris.

“Good point,” said Tatcha. “Just our transports, I’m afraid, and no weapons heavier than the ones we already have in HWAS. Our forces are spread thin occupying the key points of Outpost 3” (this was the name of the planet) “and like I said the brass has assured us there’s no opposition in the area. We land just outside the town, check it out and then do a sweep. Our main problem will be the terrain – we’re landing in jungle – and the weather. Its pouring down, ladies and gentlemen, take your waterproofs.”

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Gel watched Alison make her way around the tables smiling, chatting and occasionally touching hands. As a tall, radiant beauty in a sky blue gown she drew eyes, both men and women, wherever she went. Powerful men were only too happy to network with her; powerful women wanted to meet her. As Gel watched an old goat whose wife happened to be away from their table grabbed Alison’s hand and kiss it. Alison laughed, withdrew her hand

then touched the man on the shoulder saying something to him before moving on. He was a member of the planet's senate.

Normally Gel would have just asked someone else to dance but his conversation with Alison had been so alarming that he decided to confront his mother instead. As it was a charity ball all the generations were there. He found his mother on a table at the other end of the room with a temporarily empty seat on one side of her which he occupied.

"Mother, what is this I hear about you plotting with Alison to get me into the Imperial Senate?"

"She told you did she," said his mother. She had been a spectacular beauty with a will of steel whose bid to catch Gel's father and the Obsidian fortune had succeeded. The beauty had faded - what was left still brought men around in droves - but the steel was as hard as ever. "I wondered when she would. Alison will do wonders in moulding you, in giving you a purpose in life."

"I have a purpose in life, mother," snapped Gel. "I'm a patent attorney. I like being a patent attorney, and I don't want to be in politics at all or be moulded."

His mother snorted. "You're an intern with that pokey little firm and you can do so much more with your life, Gel. As your father used to say, you're far too easy going. I've tolerated the patent attorney thing as it looks well on political pamphlets, along with science and law degrees."

"I didn't do any of it to look good in politics, mother. I did it because I wanted to."

"And that's what you should say to any interviewer," said Mrs Obsidian leaning towards him. "The family fortune has to be protected at the political level, and beyond that in our sector of space we have to start thinking of our future," she lowered her voice, "outside of the Imperium".

"Outside of the Empire?" spluttered Gel also lowering his voice. "Mother, what are you planning?"

\*\*\*

Gel's platoon assembled in the ready room, shrugging on their combat outfits including bullet proofs and the all-important digital tac helmet, with visor, then checked equipment and communications for the mission. Despite his change in rank Gel still had the Dart-Gun, his squad's heavy weapon. This looked something like an over-sized assault rifle with even larger sized magazine on top filled with explosive darts. It was fired while resting on the operator's shoulder like that of the World War II bazooka or their descendants such as the M72 Light Anti-Tank Weapon and Swedish AT4. Unlike those last two one-shot weapons, however, the Dart-Gun could keep firing both armour piercing and anti-personnel darts, interchangeable at the touch of a button. This all made the gun much heavier than the standard assault rifle, but Gel had the physique to cope with the weight and liked the weapon. He thought he could win a lot of arguments on the battlefield with it.

Private Milo Gilbert was making the usual nuisance of himself.

"We just land and walk around?" sneered Gilbert, a tall, pale man who seemed to have joined the Salts because no one else wanted him. "Why do we need the whole company? Why go at all?"

"What's the matter Milo?" said Gel. "You worried you won't have the chance to lead a death or glory charge against the local militia? You may still win that medal, awarded posthumously, and then staff sergeant Sefton can lead us to victory."

That part was added as the sergeant had come to check on preparations.

"No," said the sergeant. "The lieutenant will lead the platoon to victory. I'll make sure you achieve victory smartly and in accordance with proper military procedures."



“After Private Gilbert dies gloriously?” asked Gel, hopefully.

“Private Gilbert can choose to make the ultimate sacrifice if he wishes,” said Sefton. Gilbert sneered but stopped questioning the mission.

For the sergeant the byplay confirmed his opinion that his pick for senior squad leader would do very well. Gel had silenced Gilbert, a pain in the rear end, without screaming or unpleasantness. Screaming and barking orders had their place but not in such matters.

“Maybe we’ll take militia women prisoners?” said Private Theodore Turgenev.

“You can only hope,” said Alyssa Sampson, rolling her eyes. A medic, the only female in Gel’s squad and a favourite of his. “Maybe they’ll be so grateful you won’t have to pay for it.”

“I’m a guy,” said Turgenev. “I’m just looking to get what I can wherever.”

“We still going to try for the 14<sup>th</sup> level, senior squad leader?” said Private Carver to Gel. Barely out of school, Carver had his squad’s storm cannon, a distant descendent of the machine-guns used in Earth’s wars. He was also Gel’s wing man in a violent fantasy game.

“Nothing’s going to stop us taking the 14<sup>th</sup> level,” said Gel. “Just those demons and us after we get back from taking territory.”

“Yeah!” said Carver bumping fists with Gel.

The two transport pilots came in. One was a square-jawed heroic, male type and the other a red-haired sub-lieutenant female barely out of flight school who nodded at Alyssa.

“Time for the infantry to occupy a bunch of dirt,” said the male. “Follow us.”

“Red flight is so hot,” moaned Turgenev. He had the sense to moan quietly.

They filed through the access passage and down the ladder through their transport’s top hatch. Gel was near the back with the lifting android whose job was akin that of the pack mules of older conflicts on Earth. Called a Mule-Droid, although it was a blocky humanoid shape, the droid followed the platoon around carrying heavy stuff.

“Okay guys,” said the pilot, over the intercom. “Get ready for the best ride in the park. Full combat entry through atmos onto the planet surface. Lots of heat from re-entry; lots of shaking. Plenty of speed. You’ll love it.”

The transport ship’s bay doors swung open below them. Another of the company’s four platoon shuttles was almost touching Gel’s craft but, peering out of the porthole, he could see a sliver of the planet’s surface below them. What he could see was mostly cloud with blue ocean gleaming through tiny breaks.

The transports dropped.

\*\*\*

The band started another swing number, the ever popular *Sing Sing Sing* which echoed through Gel’s mind as they fell towards the planet’s surface.

*Sing, sing, sing, sing everybody start to sing..*

“You spend a few more years or so at that dreary little firm,” said Mrs Obsidian, “make senior associate, that shouldn’t be too difficult, maybe even partner then run for the Imperial senate. With the Obsidian name and money and Alison by your side ensuring you’ll get into news feeds everywhere it should be a shoo-in. We’ll hire a campaign manager from earth – several if you want, and a stylist.”

“I don’t want several, I don’t want any.” Arguing with his mother, Gel often thought, was like arguing with a brick wall. “And the stylist can get lost in space somewhere. Why don’t you put Alison in the Senate? She’s really into that stuff.”

“You’re just not seeing the bigger picture,” said his mother impatiently. “It’s not going to stop at the Senate. There’s the governorship here of course and then, when this sector of space is sufficiently developed, it will need someone with an instantly recognisable name, political clout and a track record in public service to guide it out of the Imperial shadow.”

“I’m to become a tin pot regional emperor?” Appalled, Gel had trouble keeping his voice down. “I’ll pass mother. The empire has rule of law, free trade, a big fleet and the Imperial Marines. Look what’s been happening in the Dimarch system. They threw away rule of law to bring in torture centres and very nasty prison camps, and they want to expand at our expense. A regiment of Imperial Marines will stop that.”

“We now have our own marines..”

“Assault infantry, mother.”

“.. we have our own army, and that army will have its own, strong ruler,” said Mrs Obsidian. “Someone who understands the issues, who can keep Dimarch out.”

“I’m hardly a strong ruler type, mother.”

“There’s no need to concern yourself over that. Alison and I will make sure there are people around you who can do the strong ruler thing.”

“You want me to be a strong ruler puppet. That doesn’t make sense, mother. Include me out of this. Get someone else.”

“Ungrateful boy,” chided his mother, “you don’t know what I’ve had to do to groom you for this role, in spite of your resistance.”

“What have you had to do that justifies me being grateful for the role of sub-Emperor?”

“Who do you think fixed the drink-driving charge?”

“Ancient history mother, and I would have just done the suspended-licence sentence.”

“Who do you think bought off that slut you were seeing before Alison?”

That stopped Gel. He felt himself go cold.

\*\*\*

The transport shook violently.

“I don’t feel so well,” said Private Carver.

“Hang in there, not long,” said Gel.

The front of the craft was glowing red.

Then Gel noticed that Alyssa was watching a screen in front of her, listening to the onscreen action through earphones. This was a breach of regulations, not that Gel cared but it was an excuse to tease his friend. He was close enough to tap her on the shoulder.

“You’re not watching one of your dramas are you, Alyssa?” he said, after she had taken out one of the earphones. “We’re supposed to be on a do or die mission here.”

Private Sampson sniffed. “We go down, grab some dirt and impress a hamlet by running around. If anyone gets hurt falling over themselves, call me, senior squad leader.” She said the last words with particular emphasis then put her earphone back in. Gel smiled.

“How come we’re not marines,” he heard someone say. “We’re dropping out of spaceships to land on planets. Isn’t that a marine role?”

“The Empire had a lock on that brand name,” said Private Carver. “We’re sector infantry. They couldn’t use mobile infantry, as that only goes with power suits, it seems. Storm troopers was suggested but that had some old movie association, so we got assault infantry.”

Then the transport was in thick, grey mist.

“Cloud cover, people,” said the pilot over comms. “Bad weather out there. We get to stay in the craft where its dry. Few more minutes.”

\*\*\*

The band had started another chorus.

*“Sing sing sing sing...”*

“You mean Lucy?” said Gel. “You bought off Lucy? I was in love with Lucy.”

“You thought you were in love with Lucy,” retorted Mrs Obsidian. “She was playing you from the moment she met you. When I contacted her, she started negotiating without turning a hair. And it cost a lot to get rid of her.”

For a moment Gel was at a loss for words. When he spoke it was in a low and quiet voice and with an intensity that his mother had not seen before. “How dare you interfere, mother.”

“It isn’t interference when you’re just playing your part,” protested Mrs Obsidian, taken aback by her son’s reaction. “She was expecting my call, and my money. She dumped you happily.”

Gel thought about this glaring at his mother who gestured at Alison, visible across the ballroom.

“I see Alison is doing the networking thing, as we agreed,” she said.

“Tell me, mother,” said Gel, eventually, an edge to his voice. “What is the worse thing I could do in your eyes. What would make you disinherit me, as you’ve been threatening to do since I can remember, and drop me out of these mad schemes entirely?”

His mother thought about this somewhat concerned about her son’s sudden intensity and shrugged. Gel had been rebellious before but the problem had been dealt with by minor concessions.

“I suppose you could enlist with those army people.”

“You mean the sector army, the assault infantry?”

“That’s right,” she said, with a wry, knowing smile, “you could enlist in the assault infantry.”

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The assault infantry platoon put on their combat helmets, pulled the visors down, donned their waterproof ponchos and checked weapons.

“You all know the deployment,” said the sergeant, “let’s do it right.”

“All craft,” said Major Tatcha over the command link. Gel’s new senior squad leader status meant that he was allowed to listen on the command link, provided he did not say anything. “I want to set down early. The town was told to expect us but no-one’s responding. Probably nothing but better safe..”

Suddenly they were through the cloud and very low over a green carpet of jungle stretching as far as Gel could see, in pouring rain.

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“I have to see Alison,” said Gel, standing up.

“Of course, dear,” said his mother, thinking that the storm had passed. “And do some dancing. I know I will.”

Gel looked for his fiancée among the tables where she had been a few second ago. Nothing. Then he noticed a splash of colour behind a row of giant pot plants – a decoration in keeping with the 40s theme – on the other side of the room. He circled around to get a better view, stopping beside a pillar with empty tables on either side. The diners were up dancing. The splash of colour was Alison’s dress. From what Gel could make out through the ferns she seemed to be talking earnestly with another man.

“Gel, hi, can I fill in for Alison on the dance floor,” said a voice behind him.

Startled, Gel whirled to see an old friend, Charlotte, very fetching in a green gown, had come up behind him. They had played together as children.

“Not just now,” said Gel with genuine regret. He liked Charlotte. “I have to wait for Alison here. But I’ll come and find you soon.”

“You do that,” said Charlotte. “I shall be angry if you don’t.” She pointed her finger at him in mock anger and then walked off.

The man Alison had been talking to emerged from behind the pot plants. He glanced around but did not see Gel who was now mostly hidden by the pillar, then looked at a message on his phone. Dressed to fit the 1940s formal theme of the night the man looked familiar to Gel although it took a few moments to place him. Of course, they had been at the same school, but the newcomer had been two years ahead of him. They had only spoken a couple of times, but Gel seemed to recollect being told not to have anything to do with the older student.

“Good looking, a womaniser and dangerous,” he had been told.

What had Alison to do with him? The man went off through the exit to the bathrooms.

Alison came out from behind the palms a few seconds later, waved at a couple of ball goers, stopped to chat briefly with another and then moved to the same set of doors. She looked around before leaving but also did not see Gel.

Suspicious suddenly aroused Gel walked quickly, pushing his way through the doors. The band had changed to the most famous swing number, Glenn Miller’s *In The Mood*.

\*\*\*

“Missile detected!” yelled someone over the command link.

“Put us down now!” shouted Lieutenant Andris from his front seat, “we’re sitting ducks up here.”

“There’s no place to land!” screamed the pilot.

“Just get us down,” yelled Andris. “Anything, now, or we’ll be shot down.”

“Second missile on screen!” yelled a pilot in one of the other transports, panic evident in his voice.

“Counter measures,” said the woman co-pilot of Gel’s transport.

Gel heard the thud of the canisters being ejected and the light as they flared. The rest of the platoon were looking around wide-eyed. Alyssa hurriedly stuck her earphones and device in a pocket.

“Third missile on screen!”

The alarm started blaring.

“It’s going sideways people,” yelled Sefton. “Brace positions. You know the drill.”

Gel leant forward, hugging the top of the seat in front of him.

His world exploded.

\*\*\*

The tune *In the Mood* seem to follow Gel. He couldn't see Alison or the other man in the momentarily deserted corridor leading to the rest rooms. He looked in the other direction to the kitchen entrance with staff hurrying to and fro. Another corridor lead off to the left and Gel thought he detected a faint whiff of Alison's scent. He walked on.

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The blast smashed the right fore part of the craft hull, ripping off part of the outer skin. Rain poured in. Several of Gel's platoon, including his computer game partner Carver, had time to scream before they disappeared into the night. The transport ploughed into the jungle canopy, Sefton yelling at the platoon to 'hold on'. Tree branches and fronds visible through the wrecked hull slid past. The transport stopped, tilted slowly then fell. More screams. The craft stopped again for a moment, caught by branches lower down, then plunged to land with a shattering crash in the mud and tangled undergrowth, leaning drunkenly on the remains of a tree.

Off to the right, the sky was lit up with a flash and the boom of an explosion. Gel thought that the explosion had occurred about where he would have expected the right hand transport, two platoon's craft, to be. Then he looked up through the hole ripped out of the fuselage and the gash in jungle canopy carved out by the ship to a grey sky, rain spattering on his visor, to see a Hunter Killer drone appear over the edge of the trees. Kept aloft by lift crystals, HK drones were typically armed with missiles and a mini gun – a distant descendant of the gatling gun. It could wipe out the whole platoon in seconds.

The Obsidian legacy kicked in. Gel's grandfather had carved an empire out of the swampy wilderness of a new planet, his father had created industries. Their descendant, almost without thinking, slapped the release on his seat belt, stood up, set his Dart-Gun to load an armour piercing rocket, and yelled "clear". The cross hairs on his sight showed a lock just as the HK's mini gun coughed into life and he fired. The rocket whooshed away at almost point blank range to hit the HK square on, exploding. It dropped. A single rocket fired by the drone shot off somewhere in the canopy to explode out of sight.

"Guys, whose wounded?" he said, moving down the aisle towards the lieutenant. That officer had given his last order. A jagged piece of fuselage had sliced into his head. The others, those that could move, were stirring in their seats. Then Gel realised the sergeant had not been barking orders. The HK's minigun had fired for just two seconds at the most but it had caught many salts sitting in first few rows, bullets punching through the standard bulletproof jackets. Then the sergeant's hand moved and he groaned. Still alive!

Gel looked around. Whoever planned this was being thorough and would want to finish the job, maybe with missiles. Then he recalled the explosion off to the right.

"Guys!" he screamed. "We've got to get out, now, and I mean now! Check for wounded. Carry them out. Grab packs and ammo and move!"

He checked those around the sergeant. Two had caught the full blast of the HK, another had copped a piece of fuselage. All dead. He thought to look in the cockpit to find the red haired co-pilot closing the eyes of her boss.

"Ma'am grab your side arm and survival pack and let's go. Whoever's done this hasn't finished."

Gel pulled the sergeant up into a fireman's lift and looked around. Those who were not moving or being helped out of their seat were clearly dead. Alyssa was checking bodies one by one feeling for pulses at the throat. She found one and worked him out of his seat. Gel

had a hand free to help haul the casualty. The flight officer came up to grab a side and they hauled him along.

"Any others, Alyssa?" asked Gel.

"The rest are gone," she said.

"Back ramp's not responding," said Theodore Turgenev.

"Manual release at your right hand," yelled Gel.

Theo ripped open the hatch and worked the lever. The ramp dropped into the mud and they filed out, just as another flash lit up the sky, about where the transport with Major Tatcha would have been, followed by a boom. The mule android -the all-purpose carrying droid issued to every platoon - was still seated at the rear of the plane, awaiting orders from Gel.

"Grab the supply packs there," he said pointing. "Don't strap up, just come with packs in hand."

"Packs in hand," repeated the android. His only conversation was to repeat what was said to him.

Then they were out squelching through mud, pushing through the jungle undergrowth, rain pouring down. Gel could see those ahead of him pause and turn back to look at him.

"Keep going!" he yelled. "Well away from the transport."

They stumbled on through the mud and undergrowth before a missile hit the transport with a whump, the shock wave pushing Gel off his feet into a muddy tangle of bushes, the sergeant on his back.

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Gel tried the handle of one door in the corridor to find it locked. Then another. *In the Mood* echoed through the corridor which merged with a rain-soaked jungle on another planet. He paused at another door where he could hear voices murmuring. He paused, drew a deep breath then turned the handle and pushed open the door. Alison screamed.

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Gel flipped the sergeant's body over so that his head rested on a tangle of plants and bushes, his body shielded from the worst of rain by two trees. He was still alive - just. Alyssa knelt beside him with her scanner – a device better than a whole radiology department of an information age hospital. She looked at the device's screen, rain splattering over her and the device's control face, then up at Gel and shook her head.

"Not long," she mouthed.

The sergeant grabbed her arm.

"You will tell my family my last thoughts were of them?" he wheezed.

"Yes, staff sergeant, I will. I promise."

"And Obsidian, you sod!" said the sergeant with some of his old energy, grabbing the front of the squad leader's poncho and dragging him down.

"Yes, staff sergeant."

"You refused those promotions because you didn't want responsibility. Now you've been dropped right in it, haven't you?"

"Yes sergeant."

"It's your job to lead the others out of this and I expect you to stop mucking around and do it you poor, misbegotten son of a whore."

"Yes, staff sergeant."

“Tell me one thing before you take over. When we met you told me you were a poor Obsidian, but you’re not, are you?”

Gel liked the staff sergeant and was not about to lie to him now.

“My grandfather was Baines Obsidian and my father Plymouth Obsidian,” he said. My sister and I expected to eventually split the entire thing between us.” Alyssa’s mouth dropped open, as did that of the flight sub lieutenant, and most of the rest of the platoon who had crowded around to find out what was happening with the sergeant. “But technically I wasn’t lying. I got disinherited.”

“Then what in all of creation are you doing in my platoon?”

“I was running away from my mother’s mad political schemes, which started with getting me into the Imperial Senate. She said the worst thing I could do in her eyes was to enlist in the assault infantry, so I did. That and I found that my fiancée was cheating on me.”

The sergeant chuckled. “Police, homicide detectives came round to see you I was told but didn’t take you away. Did you kill the guy you found with your fiancée?”

“They were asking about something else, and I didn’t do it.”

The sergeant chuckled, coughed painfully, and released Obsidian.

“Weapon, I want a weapon in my hands.”

Gel took out his sidearm, a nine millimetre pistol and pressed it into the staff sergeant’s hands.

The sergeant gripped it, smiled and muttered “Valhalla”. Then he seemed to be listening. “I hear music,” he said and died.

Then it hit Gellibrand Bosworth Baines Plymouth Obsidian that he was platoon commander, possibly even company commander, with the remnants of his platoon staring at him with expressions somewhere between shock and horror, in the middle of a rain soaked jungle with a well-organised, well-armed unknown enemy looking to kill the rest of them.

The sergeant had been right, he was really for it now.

## CHAPTER TWO

The tune *In the Mood* echoed from a ball room corridor, in Gel’s mind, into the jungle as rain poured down. He took a deep breath. He was still Baines Obsidian’s grandson, and his platoon, now just 12 effectives and four wounded, two seriously, was in an almighty mess. It was up to him to get them out.

“Great!” said private Gilbert. “We’re in deep shit and we’ve got a rich spoiled kid..”

“Gilbert!” snapped Gel. His voice had a parade ground edge that made the whole platoon stand straighter. Any doubt about who was in charge vanished. “Your comrades need you to hold it together and this isn’t helping! Can the complaints!”

“All right, all right,” muttered Gilbert then shut up.

“Guys,” said Gel, raising his voice. “For those who haven’t been keeping up with current events, our whole company just walked into a well-executed ambush.”

“The whole company?” said someone.

Another whump and shock wave from away to the West made them all dive to the ground.

“That was the HWAS platoon transport getting the same treatment as ours,” announced Gel as they stood up. “That’s about where the transport ’d be if they kept formation. I heard the other transports call ‘missile detected’ at the same time as ours. We had an HK in our faces almost the moment we stopped moving, and it was followed up by a direct hit from a tac missile. I’m betting all the transports, one after another, got one. I dunno

who's behind all of this but I'm going to take a wild guess here and say that it's not any local militia we were told wouldn't be here."

The platoon murmured.

"Dennehy, you've got your comms pack?"

"Yes, squad leader."

"You can get a signal out through this?" Gel pointed at the cloud cover above them.

"Voice only as I can't boost through the shuttle but sure. Need a line of sight."

"I'll take it. We've just managed to carve a big hole in the jungle canopy. We'll transmit through there. The first step, people, is to call this disaster in." The tension eased noticeably. There was a plan. "But the brass will want to know what's happened to Major Tatcha, not to mention everyone else in the company. Hutchinson?"

"Yes, squad leader." She was the only other squad leader to make it out of the transport.

"Take two people – better make it three - and hike hard for the major's transport. Whatever's left of it should be in line with us and we were all heading East. Then try to get to two platoon's transport. Come to think of it, their beacons should be on, but if they aren't transmitting don't try to turn them on. In fact, everyone stays in protected mode (this meant no external communications with the helmet electronics shielded from detection). "Do not use mobiles or personal com devices, not even to receive. Switch everything off now and keep it off."

The squad murmured and compiled.

"Hutchinson, as fast as you can. You're looking for survivors but, having made a real effort to wipe us out, our missile throwing friends are bound to come calling. They'll want to make sure the job has been done right. If you see anyone do not start shooting. You fade into the jungle and observe. Until we work out who or what the fuck we're dealing with no one is to engage. See hostiles, fade into the jungle. Observe, take pictures, report back." More murmuring.

"Are we staying here, squad leader?" asked one of the privates

"We came over a ridge – a ridge between us and the coast. Unless I'm mistaken, ma'am," this was addressed to the transport pilot, "we didn't get missile detections until we came over that ridge." The flight officer nodded. "Then we'll move over the ridge and whistle up a transport to come in low and radio silent for the wounded at least.

"Hightower, you, Pleasance and Gilbert check out where that missile just landed. I'm betting you'll find the wreck of the HWAS shuttle. Again, it's about looking for survivors, although equipment and supplies would be good, and we have to work fast. The rest of us 'll see what we can salvage from our own shuttle. Everyone remember to lock this position in your nav system and let's lock in a rally point over the ridge. Oh yeah, and don't mess with the wildlife if you can help it."

"Those spider monkey things?" said someone. These were little creatures that bore some resemblance to the monkeys of earth. They had re-emerged to chatter and run around the lower branches of the trees after the shock of the explosions.

"I was thinking more like that guy," said Gel pointing to a nearby tree. A large, python-like creature had wrapped itself around the trunk a little beyond man height and was now peering down at the remnants of three platoon to see if there was anything worth wrapping in its coils.

The platoon recoiled. Even the Mule-Synth took a step back. They had just been blown out of the sky and lost comrades, but a close-up view of a potentially person-killing snake was a new level of horror.



“Don’t kill it,” snapped Gel, seeing some of the platoon raise their assault rifles. “You’ll give away our position. Ignore those things and they’ll ignore you. Everyone get busy, and move fast.”

“After this is over,” said Alyssa Sampson, as the others moved away, “you and I are going to talk about who you really are, this murder investigation and about straying fiancées, and none of this not technically lying BS.”

“Alyssa, we just lost half the platoon,” said Gel, “But sure, later. I can promise you quite a story.”

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The first group to work out where Gel had got to was the last group he expected to hear from – the police. He was called in a conference room in the barracks administration block in the second week of his training to be confronted by two formidable looking detectives in business suits, one male and one female, and a scholarly-looking officer, a Major Adina, from the Assault Infantry advocate general’s office.

“Private Gellibrand Obsidian?” said the male. “I am detective inspector Burchill this is detective sergeant Regio. Come with us.”

“Where are we going?”

“We’re going to have a discussion down at police headquarters,” said the Inspector. “You should be familiar with the building. Its right next to Obsidian Tower.”

“It’s a fine building, Inspector, but why don’t we talk here?”

“In serious matters of this nature we conduct interviews in our own rooms.”

“I don’t see how I can be of help in any serious matter,” said Gel. “But I have no intention of going off base.” He had thought through various scenarios about how his mother could get him back into her clutches, and they mostly involved him first being lured off the Assault Infantry base.

“You’re not immune from arrest here,” said Major Adina.

“I’m not concerned about being arrested, sir,” said Gel. “I haven’t done anything – I don’t think anyway.”

“We can establish that in an interview at headquarters,” said the inspector, nodding.

“We can sort it out here,” said Gel. “I’m keen to get to the mess tonight. The chicken risotto they serve here is excellent and I’ll miss it if I go off base. You didn’t say I was under arrest.”

“At this stage you’re a person of interest in our investigation.”

“We always advise co-operation with the police in an investigation,” said Major Adina.

“I’m quite happy to answer any questions, sir. But unless I’m under arrest or the inspector has some form of a subpoena or court order requiring me to attend somewhere then I’m staying here to answer questions. For those last two you’d have to give me reasonable notice to comply, but you don’t have a court order do you inspector?”

“No,” the inspector conceded.

“Are you going to order me to go with him, major?”

“I’m not sure I can do that.”

“I don’t think you can either,” said Gel. “We’re chatting here, inspector. You’ll have interview recorders on you and that’s enough to make it official. Set up them up and we’ll start. I can’t imagine I know enough about whatever it is to keep you long.”

As the detectives set up their recorders with ill grace, Major Adina spoke to Gel.

“You seem to know more about the law than I do,” he said. “But your file doesn’t even mention a high school.”

Gel shrugged. "Picked it up, sir."

"Gellibrand Obsidian has an honours degree in science and a law degree from Green University," said the inspector.

The major's jaw dropped.

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"Sky high one, this is beta-ground three, over."

They had returned to the clearing caused by the shuttle's crash land and the missile strike for Dennehy to set up his comm dish. The jungle did not have any of the trees with immensely thick trunks like in the old-growth forests on earth, just countless smaller trees with ferns that wrapped around the trunks, but there were more than enough of these trees to form a canopy that blocked out the planet's sun, in the brief periods when it showed through the clouds. Apart from the spider monkey-things, there were the snakes that fed on the monkeys and, most loathed by those who fought there, several species of rats which seemed to thrive in the glutinous mud. The remnants of B Company condemned the area as a "muddy shit hole" at first sight, and never saw any reason to change their minds.

As it was still raining heavily the platoon had pulled down the hoods on their waterproof ponchos, which made them look like wraiths come to collect the souls of the fallen as they checked the wreckage of three platoon's shuttle.

"Sky high one, this is beta-ground three, over." Then Gel could hear Dennehy saying "Sky high one, we've got real problems here, we need to speak to an officer like right now. No, we can't call back in ten minutes, you gotta get someone off their calls now... this is urgent."

Gel took the comms headset. "This is senior squad leader Obsidian, who is this?"

"Hey, Gel, it's Jennifer Kratz, are you guys having trouble?"

"The whole company has run into an ambush that's what happened. Half of three platoon has gone."

"When you say gone.."

"I mean as in dead Private Kratz! I want you to stand up at your station and yell, really scream, that B Company's been ambushed, and they need to speak to an officer now."

"Oh boy," she said but did it.

That brought the battalion adjutant, a Captain Williamson, on the phone very quickly. He listened to Gel's tale for a few moments, before asking "are you sure of this?"

"Sure?" snapped Gel. "Sir, Sergeant Sefton died a couple of minutes ago, telling me I was now platoon commander. The last I saw of Lieutenant Aldis he had half the shuttle's fuselage sticking out of his skull. Do you think I'm making this up, sir? I have Flight Lieutenant Nilsen here, the transport co-pilot who'll confirm what I just said."

"Alright, alright, Squad Leader," said the captain, "give me a second." Gel heard him scream to the orderly room, "find the colonel now! He needs to get here! If he doesn't pick up, make a ship PA announcement." He turned back to Gel. "You've had no contact with major Tatcha?"

"No sir. I've sent parties to find what I expect to be wreckages. It could be that officers have made it out and just don't have comms. But, sir, I have to say I'm not hopeful for anything but a few survivors."

The captain sighed. "You will have to hold on to repeat all this to the colonel."

"With respect, sir, we can't stay on much longer at all at this location. Whoever is behind this is well armed, dangerous and organised. They're going to want to inspect their handiwork up close. I'm surprised that they're not already here. I'm sending what survivors I can find behind the ridge to our west – shuttles that come in low and radio silent should be

able to pick up the wounded. A small party is going to hang around here and see who turns up. We'll call back sir, and, hopefully, know a lot more when we do."

"Very well," said the captain, "call back as soon as you can and, squad leader.."

"Sir?"

"Good luck."

"I hope I don't need it, sir."

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"It took us a while to find you," said Inspector Burchill, glaring at Gel from the other side of the conference table. "Enlisting in the advanced infantry like that really threw us. You seemed to vanish."

"It's assault infantry inspector and I never intended to confuse the police. I still don't know why you want to speak to me."

"We are investigating the death of Mr Arvind Olsen."

"Oh right.. I knew the man, of course. He was a friend of my father's and a director of Obsidian Group. I should had gone to his funeral, but I've been here. Its news to me that his death was suspicious in any way. Wasn't he found at his desk?"

"You are one of the rich Obsidians," said the major.

"Well, yes sir. Bye the bye sir, you are here as a legal advisor, so attorney-client legal privilege should apply, is that correct?"

"Maybe for me, but not for the police. It's a police interview."

"That's fine. It's just letting the whole base know I'm one of The Obsidians, instead of a run of the mill Obsidian, would be a nuisance."

The major shrugged. "I guess it doesn't matter."

"Thank you, sir."

"When you have a moment," said the inspector. "We have reason to believe that Mr Olsen was murdered and that you are a suspect in that killing."

"Me? Why would I kill him?"

"We'll get to that. Where were you on the night of the 15<sup>th</sup> of April?"

"Oh, I remember that night," said Gel. "I don't think I'm ever going to forget it. I went to a Charity ball at Founder Hall, and the theme was 1940s swing."

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Gel and Private Theodore Turgenev watched two small, black scout units float into the clearing containing the wreckage of three platoon's transport. The rain had stopped, at least for a time, and the two salts could see the devices obviously searching and scanning. They reminded Gel of two beetles. The salts were lying half buried in mud under some bushes well back from the clearing, hands and face also covered in mud. They were cold and uncomfortable but would not be easy to detect in infrared scans.

"You're right, they've come," whispered Turgenev. Despite having a Russian name, he was more Mediterranean than Slav, with a dark complexion, black hair and a compact build. He was also a wicked shot with his assault rifle, carried himself confidently and had a hard and hungry look about him that the rest of the platoon did not, which was why Gel had chosen him to be the other half of the stay behind party. The rest of the platoon plus the few survivors they had been able to find was heading back over the ridge with the wounded, and the Mule-Synth. "Take out those things?"

Gel shook his head. "We won't engage unless we have to. In any case, they're probably disposable. Leave them."

After completing the scan without detecting Gel or Theo, as everyone called Turgenev, the two units perched on a felled tree trunk. Then they heard a whirring from the other side of the clearing. A dozen or so soldiers in black-grey armour and riding, of all things, electric-powered motorcycles burst into the open, promptly ditched the bikes and formed a defensive perimeter, taking cover behind trees and rocks, around the downed transport. Gel later read that motorcycles were used cross-country in jungles on earth, provided there was some sort of trail. During one of the wars on earth, the Japanese had even used bicycles with flat tyres to move far and fast through jungle. Part of Gel's mind also noted, and filed away for future reference, that the spider monkeys had stopped chattering in the treetops.

The newcomers scanned the surrounding jungle for several minutes but also failed to detect the two infantrymen while Gel used the binoculars he had taken from what was left of Lieutenant Aldis – he had come across the officer's remains by accident, and wished he hadn't – to search for clues about their enemies.

"Who are you guys?" he muttered.

Theo used the pause to return to his favourite subject – women.

"I bet you never had to pay for it," he whispered.

"Excuse me?" said Gel, without taking his eyes off the newcomers.

"Being a mega-rich Obsidian. Women must've been begging for it. You could probably even nail Alyssa Sampson, the flight lieutenant and that female squad leader if you wanted."

"Private Sampson is married to a sergeant in third regiment," whispered Obsidian thinking of Lucy angling for a payout from his mother from day one of their relationship. That hurt. He thought of Alison and that also hurt. "He's a big guy. I don't want him annoyed with me. The flight lieutenant is engaged to someone on fleet staff. I think they're getting married when we get back to Lighthold, and my understanding is that Squad Leader Hutchinson prefers her own sex. In any case I got disinherited. I'm just an ordinary guy like you. Now shut up, I'm trying to concentrate."

The newcomers remained watchful for a few more minutes, then seemed to relax. The two scout units took off again to settle into slow circles of the clearing, obviously on sentry duty. The soldiers stood up. They wore advanced, full-body armour which was a dull black-grey rather than a camouflage pattern but blended in with the jungle well enough and seemed as comfortable to wear as lounge suits. They lifted their helmet visors to reveal themselves to be somewhat older and harder than Gel's still raw Assault Infantry unit. Not people to mess with lightly.

Two of these soldiers exchanged a few words. Gel was too far away to hear anything, but they seemed to reach a conclusion and one moved off. A third figure, tall and broad and clad in the same type of black-grey armour stood behind them, but that figure did not speak, lift his visor, or move.

"I think the big guy at the back is a tank droid," whispered Gel to Theo. "Real advanced." Then he saw an emblem on the droid's armour. "Can you use your sights to make out what that emblem on big dude says. Keep the laser off."

"Some sort of fancy design," said Theo after a moment. The assault rifles used by the salts had excellent telescopic sights. "Underneath is the word 'Destroyers'. Isn't there a bunch of mercs who call themselves Destroyers?"

"Say, you're right," said Gel. "The Imperial Marines fight those guys and have their hands full. But their area of operations is with the Utrana on the other side of the Imperium, months of phase drive travel away. Why are they here tossing missiles at B Company?"

"What about the Dimarch Republic? Would they hire these guys?"

Dimarch, the next system along, had also claimed the planet. The Assault Infantry had been formed to counter the ambitions of regional troublemakers like Dimarch, while the Imperial Marines dealt with external threats like the Utrana. Gel shook his head.

"These guys would be big bucks to bring in. A lot of credits, and Dimarch has messed up its economy. If they are going to do anything like this, they'd use their own forces."

One of the mercs who had been conferring before now reappeared dragging two captives, hands bound behind their backs. With a shock, Gel realised that both – a man and women – were from two platoon. The man doing the dragging gestured at the captives and the other man by the droid tank nodded. The first man pulled out a pistol and before Gel even realised what he was about to do, had put his pistol to the side of the first captive's head and pulled the trigger.

"Theo, engage. Fire!" yelled Gel. Almost without thinking he rolled over into a kneeling position, Dart-Gun on his shoulder, armour piercing round loaded, and fired.

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Inspector Burchill had gotten Gel to the point when, on the night of the charity ball, he had opened the storage room door.

"You saw your fiancée with another man?"

"Yes, I did. Specifically, in the arms of another man. It was dark but I could see they were kissing. The straps of her dress had come off her shoulder."

"Did you know the other man?" asked Sergeant Regio. She was leaning forward absorbed in the tale. Major Adina was interested but Inspector Burchill just wanted to get to the point where Gel confessed to the murder. For his part Gel found that telling the story helped.

"I now know him to be Dwight Sullivan."

"You said you knew the face not the name," said the inspector.

"Let me finish the story, inspector, it gets better. I stood there opened mouthed. Alison screamed and pulled the straps back over her shoulder. Dwight said 'useless pest' or some such. Then someone grabbed me from behind. He put both arms under my arms then his hands on the back of my head. In wrestling it's called a Nelson hold."

"I know what a Nelson hold is," said the inspector. He looked to Gel as if he had done some wrestling in his time. "But to do it standing up outside a ring is asking for trouble."

"And I gave trouble, inspector. I went to an all-boys school and my grandfather was very keen that I do a lot of unarmed combat, and not just instruction. I got heaps of time in the simulation tanks. This guy pushed me inside the room. I heard Alison give another little shriek and heard her say 'Dwight what's Leo doing here?' Then I kicked back hard with my right heel into Leo's right leg just as weight came on it. He yelled, let go and fell to the floor clutching at his leg. I think this Leo gentleman was expecting some meek, easy-going private school guy."

"Quite a drama," said the Inspector.

"It gets even better, inspector."

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Gel heard the clunk of another rocket loading in his Dart-Gun his sight flashed green and he fired again before the first rocket had reached the droid tank target, then he switched to explosive war heads and fired twice more. Beside him, Theo was firing rapidly, sparing a couple of shots for the scout units. The Destroyer who had executed the B Company survivor

took a bullet in his exposed face and was flung against a tree. The rest dived for cover. The second B Company survivor was still on her knees.

“B Company, run!” screamed Gel. It occurred to the survivor that she should make an effort to leave. She got to her feet still doubled over and start running, only to fall flat on her face before she got out of the clearing.

“Oh for the love of.. !” muttered Gel. “Theo, keep ‘em busy, use grenades.”

He fired off a high explosive rocket, aiming just over the top of where he had last seen the other senior Destroyer then ran forward as it exploded. He heard Theo rack the grenade launcher and, grasping the situation, fired one after another as Gel rushed forward, doubled over – he did not want to catch any of the grenades in his back. Almost without conscious thought he had a throwing grenade, as distinct from the pump action grenades, in one hand – the Dart-Gun was in the other – flicked off the pin and threw it.

“Get up and move,” he said, grabbing the survivor who was thrashing in the mud, arms bound behind her back.

“I’m trying” she protested as the throwing grenade went off with a whump. The blast helped her totter to her feet as Gel heaved and they were off, the squad leader dragging the private through the undergrowth. He could hear one of the Destroyers calling for fire support.

“Theo we are leaving!” he said as he got back, “but that way.” He pointed to north rather than west, directly away from the clearing. “Fire your mag fast and follow.”

He heard Theo’s weapon chatter at auto and then they were well away among the trees and undergrowth, as the Destroyers emerged from cover and started firing back at empty jungle. A few seconds later shells arched overhead to land where they had been.

“Heavy mortars,” muttered Gel. “Where did they come from?” They kept running, not even pausing as Gel took out his service knife to cut the ties on the survivor’s hands. The jungle behind them exploded and they ducked behind a fallen tree trunk.

“What was that?” asked Theo.

“One of those tactical missiles they’ve been throwing around,” said Gel. “They wanted to make sure.”

“Plus the mortar fire? We really pissed them off, even when our bullets are worth shit.”

“Sorry what?”

“Your Dart-Gun works and I got that first guy in the face but two rounds I got against another guy’s armour didn’t do anything. Just bounced. Main ammo is no good.”

“These guys have got serious stuff,” said Gel. “Time to quit and find something better to bring to the party.”

After a few seconds the trio emerged from behind their log and, with a glance at the devastation caused by the missile which they could glimpse through the trees, faded into the jungle.

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The inspector was drumming his finger on the table. Instead of a dramatic confession to the crime he had come to investigate he had uncovered a tawdry domestic drama.

“I asked the usual question of Alison ‘How long has this being going on?’,” said Gel, “but before she could respond my new friend Leo screamed something uncomplimentary and got out a knife.”

“Knife!” exclaimed the sergeant. “What sort of knife?”

“It looked like one of those flick knives with a black handle, you press a button on the handle and the blade comes out, except I didn’t see the blade come out.”

“What was this person’s last name?” asked the inspector.

“Dunno,” said Gel. “A Nordic type with blonde hair, blue eyes, taller and broader than me. I heard Alison call the other guy Dwight and I knew I’d seen him at school, so I just worked through the class lists online to find the last name. He’s a nasty piece of work from what I could find out online. He runs some sort of IT consultancy. As for Leo, I only know the first name because Alison called him that. We were not formally introduced and didn’t get to swap life histories.”

“What was your fiancée doing with this Dwight Sullivan person?” said the sergeant.

“Ex-fiancée and I’d be interested to know that myself,” said Gel. “My understanding is that he’s a good looking guy. His consultancy had done some work for Founder Hall and Obsidian Holdings and Alison was a brand ambassador for a time for one of the Obsidian companies. I guess that’s how they met.”

“Then how did you meet Alison,” said the inspector, sensing an opening. “You said you’d never worked at Obsidian.”

“I met Alison socially, inspector, although we did talk about her being a brand ambassador. I don’t believe now that I know anything about her really. When Leo produced the knife, she screamed ‘Dwight, Leo is spoiling everything’.”

“Not the reaction of a loving fiancée,” said the sergeant.

“Nope,” agreed Gel. “No, ‘Gel watch out’ or anything like that. Instead, it’s Leo’s ‘spoiling everything’, as if I was being played. That was the point where I decided the whole scene should end. We were in some sort of store room. There was a mop to hand. I picked it up, jammed the mop end into Leo’s face and edged out past him. I paused long enough to tell Alison ‘keep the ring’ but then Leo slashed out blindly and just managed to get me with the tip of his knife. Blood everywhere.”

“You were seen with your trouser leg soaked in blood collecting your car from valet parking,” said the inspector.

“That’s right. I went to get it stitched. Happy to give you the name of the doctor and all that. Security cameras at Founder Hall should confirm at least a part of what I’m saying.”

“At what point that night did you go to the Obsidian building?” asked the inspector.

“I didn’t go near the building that night. I haven’t been in the place for a while now.”

The inspector shook his head. “You went there and let yourself in with your security card.”

“I’ve never had a security card to that building, inspector. I’ve never worked there.”

“You should have checked for security cameras when you went in. We have surveillance recordings of you entering the building, and the entry log shows a card in your name at that time.”

“Inspector, I’ve never had a security card for the building, and I haven’t been in the building a long time.”

“On the night of this charity event,” continued the inspector, “you let yourself in and confronted Mr Arvind Olsen in his office.”

“I haven’t seen Mr Olsen for some time. Why would I confront him?”

“You were concerned about this.” The inspector put a piece of paper in front of Gel with a flourish.

“This is a declaration throwing me out of the family trust,” said Gel after glancing at it. “My mother has been waving this in my face for years. Every time I wouldn’t do what she said she’d bring it out. Part of the reason I’m here is that I got tired of being pushed around by my own mother.”

“You wanted to prevent Mr Olsen from issuing this declaration,” said the inspector. “That’s billions of dollars’ worth of incentive.”

“Inspector, it’s no incentive at all,” said Gel. “Mr Olsen is not connected with the family trust. He’s a director of Obsidian Holdings. He doesn’t have any power to cut me out

of the trust. If I was going to murder anyone to stop the declaration it would be my mother, and, last I heard, she's still alive and well."

"It says it's his declaration," said the inspector pointing at the top line, "it says, 'I Arvind Pol Olsen declare that' and he's signed it."

"So it does, inspector, which makes it even more puzzling, because it says Arvid, not Arvind. Whoever put this together didn't proof it properly, and Mr Olsen was a lawyer, he would have known it was none of his business. Get your legal guys to look at the issue and ask the family lawyers. They'd at least confirm he was not connected with the trust. Someone at the company might also tell you he had a habit of wandering the building late at night, or so my father told me. It was his way of looking for waste and slack practice. Even if I'd know he was supposed to be in the building, I couldn't be sure he'd be at his desk."

"Then why were you at the building?" asked the inspector, nettled that his bright, shinning motive had been shot down so easily.

"May I see this surveillance material that shows me at the Obsidian building?"

The sergeant set up a tablet with the crucial couple of minutes of surveillance files showing Gel coming into the building dressed in his 1940s formal jacket, the only time he had worn that jacket had been that night, operating the security door with a card.

"I'm smiling and waving at someone," said Gel. "Who am I waving at?"

"We want you tell us," said the inspector.

"Why is my elbow well out like that? I never walk like that. Wait, look at the time on the file, 9.20."

"Yes, you got into your car at Founder Hall at 9.10," said the inspector. "The Obsidian building is a minute from the hall."

"And I went straight to a clinic to get my leg stitched up," said Gel. "They had security cameras in their waiting room, and I got into trouble for tracking blood on the carpet. It's a doctor's surgery and I'm not allowed to bleed there? Anyway, you said I was seen with blood on my leg, right? Look at the file. It shows full length at the start. No blood. My leg looks fine."

The sergeant said "Oh". The inspector grunted.

"I can hardly be in two places at once and there's an obvious, major inconsistency in the surveillance pictures. I dunno how or why the surveillance files for the Obsidian building shows me entering at that time, but I'd take a closer look at the evidence inspector. You have quite a puzzle on your hands."

"Umph!" said the inspector.

## CHAPTER THREE

When Gel finally made it back to the rendezvous point, he was surprised to be told by second regiment's commanding officer Colonel Murchison that the bedraggled remnants of B Company was to stay in place. Despite Major Tatcha, the regiment's second in command, being confirmed dead along with all the other ranks except for Gel's band plus a handful of survivors from the other transports, including several wounded, the tenuous foothold some distance from Walter's Find was to be maintained. The wounded, including one who was dazed and incoherent rather than physically hurt had been loaded onto a med-evac transport and sent away before Gel arrived.



"I have fifteen effectives, sir," protested Gel over the comm link. "Sixteen counting the flight lieutenant. These Destroyers are well armed and efficient, and the bullets from our standard weapon doesn't penetrate their armour. If they come this way looking to finish the job, I'm not sure how we'd go."

"All fair points, squad leader," said the colonel "but we're overstretched everywhere. We didn't come equipped for any serious fighting and can't spare whole companies to take out these guys just yet. In any case you took the fight to them. They won't be so keen on trying to find you. Good work."

"Yes sir," said Gel, subdued. He was not looking forward to telling his fellow survivors they were staying in the rain-soaked jungle, especially as it had started to pour down again.

In fact, the colonel was grateful to Gel for identifying his attackers complete with still pictures which could be uploaded and studied by analysts, his rescue of a prisoner, the sole survivor of two platoon's transport as far as she knew, and the fact that he inflicted casualties on the mercenaries. This put some spin on a total disaster, albeit one that was hardly the colonel's fault.

"By the way you're now a Brevet Sergeant," the colonel said.

"I didn't want to be squad leader, sir."

"I know that," said the colonel sharply. "I looked at your record. We have senior staff officers with fewer qualifications than you." After Gel's police interview the advocate-general officer had insisted that he fill in the blanks in his record. "Your comrades need you to lead them in what will be a difficult time and, apart from qualifications, you seem to have a talent for this."

Gel thought that he had been having a restful time not making decisions before the drop, but he was hardly going to have a restful time in the jungle whatever happened, so he might as well accept the promotion.

"Yes, sir."

"I'll send you an officer and a half squad which is all we can spare from reserves at the moment, but his orders will be just to patrol up to this settlement, avoiding all contact, and try to find out more about why these Destroyers are here and why they took such a set against B Company. About all anyone here can think of is that maybe they want to keep us away from the non-human ruin outside of the town for a while."

This thought had also occurred to Gel.

"Yes, sir," was all he said.

"The officer I'm sending, Captain Gentry, is a sharp man. Rest your people until then. On a personal note, and I guess it doesn't matter to anyone just now, I understand you're a rich Obsidian."

"Not any more, sir," said Gel, wondering who had told the colonel. "I've been disinherited."

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Where the police visit had been unexpected, the next visitor for Gel in the Assault Infantry barracks was unwelcome.

"Uncle Jerome, a long time," said Gel as he sat at the table in the base reception. "I didn't expect to see you." Gel's uncle on his mother's side, could have served as a model for a Hollywood gangster - the more youthful, smoother type who plots against the gang chief, complete with slicked back dark hair and poor taste in suits. He had always disapproved of his nephew as not being "manly" enough which, Gel suspected, meant not wanting to use the

family money to bully people. As a youngster, Uncle Jerome had scared the willies out of him. As an adult Gel thought of his uncle as little more than a cheap gangster, whom his father had refused to let work in the family business. He was also aware that his mother, who became chairman of the board when his father died, used him as a consultant, although Gel was unclear just what his uncle consulted on. Uncle Jerome, for his part, seemed to think far less of his nephew than his nephew thought of him. The older man's dark eyes smouldered with barely controlled fury.

"Your mother sent me."

"Oh okay." Gel had wondered how his mother would react to his rebellion. He was about to find out.

"She says you are to end this nonsense and come home, you little shit, or be cast out of the family and disinherited."

"Charming," said Gel. "I don't suppose you're familiar with the career of T. E. Lawrence, uncle?"

"What nerdy crap are you talking about?"

"He's better known to history as Lawrence of Arabia. Anyway, he was or had been a full colonel in the British army before deciding to enlist in the air force as an aircraftsman. He said later he found it restful. He didn't have to make any decisions and if he wasn't doing what he was supposed to be doing, his superiors assumed his corporal was at fault for not telling him what to do."

"What does this have to do with anything you shit?"

"It's how I feel here, uncle. Here no one expects me to know anything or is pressuring me to be someone. No meetings, no networking. If I do the training I'm not hassled. It's very restful. The pay is also good, now that it seems I have to rely on it, and the conditions are great. They use civilian contractors for the canteen here. I've become partial to their chicken risotto."

"You're going to turn you back on a multi-billion credit fortune for risotto?" Uncle Jerome was so indignant he forgot to add an insult.

"Not just risotto, uncle, the lasagne is also pretty good and the lamb kofta is to die for."

"Then I'm supposed to give you this, you disgrace."

His uncle flung at folded piece of paper at him. Despite all the advances in digital technology and interstellar travel, paper was still used on special, legal occasions. This was one of them. The paper was a letter from the family law firm saying that Mrs Obsidian had the power to declare that he was no longer a beneficiary of the family trust and she had exercised that power. The declaration was similar to the one the police had found on Olsen's desk, but this time it was being made and signed by someone who had the power to make it – his mother. That was it, he had been disinherited.

Gel took this calmly. He had been left odds and ends by his father and grandfather outside the family trust, including a very valuable sports car imported all the way from Earth and a disused warehouse on the edge of Green City's port district. He was not going to be broke, but he had already decided not to tell anyone this apart from a single, trusted law school friend who was now his legal advisor and would handle the details.

"You're now broke as you deserve to be, you weak-kneed panty-waisted fuck head. I hope the police get you for murdering Olsen, as I know you did."

"Poverty is liberating, uncle," said Gel. "Possessions can tie you down. And I didn't kill anyone. Before you vanish from my life forever why do you think I killed Olsen? I understand why the police might initially have thought so, but why do you?"

"You fucked up the leg of one of my guys who found you there."

“Wait, you’re not talking about a guy called Leo, are you? Blonde haired, Nordic type who likes to grab people from behind. I messed up his leg in Founder Hall, not the Obsidian Building. Did he say our little encounter happened in the Obsidian building? How come you’re in league with that thug?”

His uncle did not answer. Whether it was because he realised that he might not have the whole story, or that he had said too much in admitting that he knew Leo, Gel never found out. Instead, he glared at his nephew. Gel had the impression that if a meat hook had been handy, his uncle might have tried impaling him with it.

“Little shit,” he breathed and left.

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Captain Gentry turned out to be a beefy, red-haired, round faced, jovial man who seemed to know his business, although there was a death or glory gleam in his eyes that caused the newly promoted sergeant some concern. Gentry got Gel to go over his encounter with the Destroyers and examined the pictures taken automatically from the sights of Theo’s assault rifle and Gel’s Dart-Gun.

“Heavy mortars as fire support out here?” he asked.

“I’ve heard mortars and howitzers fired during training, sir. They weren’t light pieces but not howitzers. Then they followed up with one of their tactical missiles. Very accurate. Wickedly effective. Our new friends have brought a lot of toys and like playing with them.”

“I don’t doubt it, sergeant.” That was the first time Gel had heard himself referred to as ‘sergeant’. “But where would the heavy mortar rounds have come from? This Walter’s Find is thirty kilometres away.”

“Best I’ve been able to think of, sir, is the recon photos show an identifiable track here.” They had an interactive, changeable display of the area constructed from satellite pictures taken in the rare moments when there were few clouds in the way. The display was about the same size as the large, military maps used by armies of previous eras and folded up like one. “They could get small vehicles up there and most of this area would be in range, depending on how far those things can reach. This jungle may be on a different planet but it’s just like the French and Americans found in Vietnam, sir.”

“You need some sort of clear way for vehicles, even if they’re tracked,” said Gentry. “A lot of local porters will do at a pinch but I’m guessing that there are no porters out here.”

“No civilians at all, sir, but the interesting part is that track is not the only one in the area,” said Gel. “There are several coming out of Walter’s Find.” He pointed at the thin lines on the display. “The intel guys missed them because they just weren’t looking for stuff like that. They weren’t expecting any opposition at all.”

Gentry looked at the pattern for a moment, frowning.

“The Destroyers have been preparing for some time,” he said. “They cut the tracks to move their support weapons. The cycle-mounted troops will engage any threat to pin it while they call in fire support. Then it’s a matter of accepting the surrender of the dazed survivors, except these guys don’t bother with prisoners.”

“No sir. Private Karen” (that was the woman private Gel had rescued) “says she doesn’t know why she and the other private were kept alive as long as they were. The Destroyer guards said they were to be sacrificed.”

“It’s a ritual thing with those guys,” said Gentry. “Prisoners have to be executed at a place of death. The Destroyers are part synthetic, part human and mostly nasty – at least that’s what I could find out about them from the reference stuff on the mother ship. No one knows why they’re here except that they must be protecting that archaeological site. If so,

why and what's the end game? They must know we'll get in there eventually, and these guys aren't into suicide missions."

"My guess, sir," said Gel, "is that when the place becomes too hot they'll simply fade into the jungle. Dunno where they'd go but it's easy enough to fade, as we've found. In the meantime, sir, if we encounter any Destroyers we're going to have a tough time."

They talked tactics for a while, eventually agreeing to split everyone into half squads of four each spread out in a line. The individual groups could still support one another or, more likely, fade into the jungle faster than a single group. They would hike all the way to the non-human ruins, whatever they might be, avoiding engagements or any trails and obvious places where alarms and traps might be set. If they were spotted they would blast the Destroyers with Dart-Guns, throw grenades and run away fast, changing direction once out of sight so that the Destroyer would call in fire support on the wrong spot.

"It's not called 'running away', sergeant," said Gentry cheerfully. "It's tactical displacement to the rear."

"Yes, sir," said Gel.

More Dart-Guns and ammunition for them had been brought, so that each half squad had one. Gentry had brought four privates with him – school leavers who looked both scared and excited over the possibility of action. Gel ended up with Theo, Alyssa and Flight Lieutenant Nilsen. The Mule-Synth was given to Squad Leader Parkinson who lead the rear-most group.

"Surprised you're still here with us dirt kickers, ma'am," Gel said to the flight officer.

"If they have to bring in transports under fire, they want someone to co-ordinate," she said.

"Lucky you. You've got grenades?"

"Whole bag, and I can throw them."

"You can run away with us?"

"Just watch me. Running away from men who want to kill them is a skill every woman should have."

\*\*\*

After getting his leg stitched, Gel's first call was to the family mansion where he went straight to the walk-in pantry next to the kitchen, the usual off duty post of the butler. This was an android called Stebbins although he did not like the terms android or synth, or having his status as an artificial person referred to in front of others. Gel had respected those foibles from the moment he had met the butler model years previously. He was not the type of boy or man who annoyed people simply because he could. As a result, the pair had gotten on to the point where Gel regarded him as a friend who had to be farewellled, but Gel also knew that Stebbins could not lie. He had to be careful what he told the butler.

"Good evening, sir," said Stebbins rising. He looked like the aging English butler he was intended to be. The only real indication that he was synthetic was that his face seemed waxen and his eyes had a pronounced green glow. "Mrs Obsidian has called to find out if you've been here, so has Ms Greenway" (that was Alison). "And the leg of your trousers is covered in blood. Is everything alright sir?"

"I've had a doctor see to a cut on the leg. It's been stitched. As for my mother and Alison I regret I must disappoint them, Stebbins, as I am leaving for a time."

"I'm sorry to hear that, sir. Is all well between you and Ms Greenway?"

"Unfortunately, no. There was a sordid encounter this evening when I found Ms Greenway in a compromising position with another man."

Gel spoke formally when he was with Stebbins as that was the way Stebbins spoke.

“Oh.. I’m sorry to hear that, sir. I would like to think it’s all a misunderstanding.”

“I doubt it Stebbins. An associate of the other man gave me this leg injury – as I said, it was a sordid encounter.”

“Oh my, sir, that does sound serious.”

“You remember the Bugatti in the garage? I own that if you recall.”

“Yes of course, sir, your father left it to you. It’s not part of the trust.”

“I will drive away in it and leave the keys to my car with you.”

“Yes sir.. it does sound as if you will be gone a long time. Am I allowed to know where you are going?”

“Best you don’t know for the moment,” said Gel.

Genevieve burst in. She was fourteen, showed signs of having enough of her mother’s beauty to drive men wild, was energetic and liked nothing better than verbally sparring with her brother. “I thought I heard your voice..” then she shrieked “and why is there blood on your leg?”

“A nasty incident tonight, it’s been stitched and bandaged,” said Gel.

Genevieve instantly got down on her knees, pulled up his trouser leg and clicked her tongue over the bandages “How did you do this Jelly, you idiot.” Genevieve had always called Gel Jelly ever since she was too young to pronounce his name properly. The family, in turn, had always called Genevieve Jenny.

Gel told Jenny what had happened leaving her round eyed.

“So, it’s all off between you and Alison,” she said. “No wedding?”

“Yep and nope, no wedding.”

“I don’t get to be a bridesmaid or an aunt?”

“Your brother ’s just had a nasty life shock and all you can think about is you don’t get to be a bridesmaid?”

“Or an aunt, and I had a really great bridesmaid dress. As for Alison I never clicked with her – she was mother’s choice not mine.”

“She chose her? I thought I had chosen her.”

“Mother said something at the time about how men are easily led.”

“Well, I’m leading myself away, and I came here to grab a few things before I go.”

“Where are you going, Jelly?”

“Never mind that now. As I said I’ve just got to grab a couple of things.”

“Excuse me, sir,” said Stebbins, “might I suggest you change your clothes, particularly your pants.”

“Good point, Stebbins. There are clothes in my old room?”

“Of course, sir.”

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They moved up the ridge in the direction of Walter’s Find as a line of half squads keeping just in sight of each other, silent and watchful, face and hands covered in mud. It had stopped raining, for once, so they could hear the spider monkeys chatter in the tree tops. Bright green and gold birds fluttered back and forth above the jungle canopy calling to one another. But ominous clouds looming over the jungle promised an end to those noises and another drenching for B Company.

One of the big pythons raised its head above a group of palms, momentarily startling the Salts, inspected Gel’s band briefly and then went about its business.

“Horrible things,” Gel heard Alyssa mutter.

Then Gel noted that the birds above the jungle off to his left, which he could glimpse in gaps between the bean pole trees, were being disturbed. He could also just see the monkeys shift away from something. Destroyers on the move? A handful of short-range comm units had been sent down with Captain Gentry. These were designed to co-ordinate work teams aboard ship in emergencies, but they worked well enough in the jungle. More importantly, they used a very different frequency and were far less powerful than the standard comms gear. That meant the Destroyers would take longer to work out what was happening, or so they hoped. Lieutenant Nilsen carried the set for Gel's squad.

"Prime this is second, over," whispered Gel, taking the set. "Prime this is second, over." Gentry finally picked up to listen to Gel's suspicions and estimate that there were enemies maybe one hundred metres away through the jungle to their left.

"Great," whispered Gentry on his handset. "Let's check it out."

"We're not meant to engage, sir," said Gel.

"I'm aware, sergeant," said Gentry cheerfully, "but I want a look see at these ferocious Destroyers All units turn left, head north, parallel with the ridge face. Move cautiously. Do not engage. All acknowledge."

The remnants of B Company turned to face the suspected incursion. Then, after a couple of minutes cautious moving through the jungle, Gel realised that he had lost sight of Captain Gentry's party.

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The car auction owner thought that if he could advertise the Bugatti the price would go through the roof.

"It's a Bugatti La Voiture Noire in pristine condition, sir," he said, "an original collector's item out here in the rim where everything is a copy. We'd get coverage in the news feed."

"I don't want coverage in the news feeds," said Gel. "The less people know about my activities the better. As number one auction house, as you've just been telling me, you must have a line to most of the buyers who'd be in the market for this item in any case. Time for a little leg work to earn what will still be a fat commission."

"But sir, a top line Bugatti like this was worth millions when new on Earth. I can guarantee at least a doubling of the reserve price you've put on it, if we do some marketing and an open auction."

"And I guarantee I'll withdraw the car from sale if there is so much as a peep on the news feeds," said Gel. Apart from not wanting to draw attention to the fact that he had some money, Gel was concerned about what his mother might do. Mrs Obsidian was unlikely to notice that the car was missing but might try to block the sale somehow, if she realised he was selling it. Gel saw no reason to give her the opportunity.

As he argued with the car auction owner Gel noticed one of auction's employees, a mechanic to judge from the overalls, approach the Bugatti's radiator. As he and the auctioneer watched, the mechanic spread his arms and turned his face to the heavens, then fell forward to wrap his hands around the hood.

"You will make sure the car is cleaned before sale?" said Gel.

"Of course, sir," said the owner.

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Drifting storm clouds turned the half light that filtered down to the jungle floor into a gloomy twilight as Gel's group picked up their pace to try to get back into contact with the

lead band. They paused for a moment to put on rain ponchos then marched on. Even without rain the ponchos were a good idea. Every salt who brushed past a bush dislodged what seemed to be half a bucketful of water, along with the occasional creepy, crawly which they either flicked away or left to be brushed off by the next bush depending on personal preferences. Gel could hear Alyssa cursing these worms softly.

He gave up trying to catch Gentry's group and radioed the captain.

"We can't see you, sir. Where are you?" He said.

"We got eager," said Gentry, then chuckled. He didn't seem apologetic. "We'll slow down for you guys. Wait.."

At the last word Gel heard the shout "contact" and all hell broke out on their right front, well ahead of them in the jungle, weapons chattering and more yelling. Abandoning caution Gel raced through the jungle, the rest of his party hard behind him. He saw a Destroyer between two trees, stopped, sighted and fired, knocking the figure into the jungle. He saw Gentry grappling with two Destroyers. One of the school leavers with Gentry fired into the back of a Destroyer, only for the bullet to bounce off harmlessly, and the firer to fall dead with a destroyer bullet in his brain. Gentry got one hand free, pulled a grenade from a pouch, stuck it against the visor of one of his opponents, right where the edge met the armour, smashed his combat helmet against it, pulled the pin and hugged both Destroyers tight.

"No!" yelled Gel and ducked.

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Gel's next visitor to the barracks was Alison. She had the sense to dress down for the occasion, as well as wear a scarf and sunglasses so reflective that Gel could see himself in them. Even then the base staff who admitted Alison asked Gel about her. He told them she was a cousin off to earth on a modelling contract. She sat across the visitor's table from him and removed her sunglasses.

"The police came to see me," she said.

"They wanted to charge me with murder. I had little choice but tell them about our interesting scene with Dwight and Leo."

"An interesting scene? Is that what it was?" asked Alison.

"I'm the aggrieved party in this, Alison, and that's what I'm calling it as other words just don't seem to cut it. What would you call it?"

She shrugged. Her eyes seemed to melt to powerful effect as Alison no doubt intended. Gel had always been partial to those eyes but now he found that he could resist them. "I was trying to end it, for what that's worth."

"It didn't look as if you were trying to end it when I blundered in and, anyway, we were to be married in, what, three months or so, invitations about to be issued, venue booked, the whole thing and you're fooling around with Dwight Sullivan."

"You knew who he was?" she asked, astonished.

"He was at my school, a couple of years ahead of me. I'd forgotten his name but worked it out afterwards because you called him Dwight."

"Oh," she said. "I wondered how the police knew his name."

"I seem to recall speaking to him a couple of times back then. He didn't mention that we knew one another by sight?"

Alison shook her head.

"But what I don't get is this Leo character suddenly appearing. How come he got past security and what was he doing there, with a knife?"

"Dwight had a spare pass somehow, but I swear I have no idea why he wanted Leo there. You fractured his shin bone by the way."

“I did some good that night, at least, and he cut me with that knife of his.”

“Oh yes,” said Alison. “How did that go?”

“Lot of blood, four stitches, all to spoil things for you.”

“Spoil things?” repeated Alison.

“When Leo got me with that knife, you told Dwight Leo was ‘spoiling things’.”

“Did I?” said Alison, innocently. “I don’t remember what I said. It was a stressful moment.”

“Stressful for me, too,” said Gel.

“What about this Arvind Olsen guy,” said Alison. “The police said your pass card and the surveillance cameras shows you were in the Obsidian building when he was killed – did you kill him?”

It crossed Gel’s mind that Alison might be wired to record the conversation and had come to see him at police request. If that was the case the detectives would be sorely disappointed.

“You really think I’d kill that man, Alison,” snapped Gel. “For what reason? The only motive the cops could think of was a declaration that Olsen had no power to make. It was to do with the family trust, and he’s not involved in that at all.”

“Oh,” said Alison.

“As it happened, I had to get the knife wound your lover’s associate gave me stitched up, and I was trailing blood on the clinic carpet just about the same time as I was supposed to be at the Obsidian building murdering people.”

(The police had since re-interviewed Gel, admitting that there seem to be a problem with the evidence showing him to be in two places at once.)

Alison shrugged. “When you say ‘your lover’ you make it sound so sordid.”

“I was the one who got cheated on and knifed, remember? I like the word ‘lover’. It makes the whole thing sound dramatic, and drama is all I’m left with. I got disinherited.”

“I could get you back again,” said Alison, quickly. “I’ve already talked to your mother. She can put you back again in the trust. You come back and everything returns to the way it was.”

“With us, engaged?”

“Well, yes, with us engaged,” said Alison, looking abashed. “Dwight is no more – he’s gone totally.”

“That’s a shame. He’s not into politics?”

“Don’t be like that Gel,” Alison said, exasperated. “What we had was real.”

“I thought it was real, but then Dwight also thought it was real, no doubt.”

Alison sighed. “Look, it was a mistake. It just happened. I’m sorry, I love you Gel. I want you to come back.”

She put her hand on Gel’s arm and did the eye melting trick. That was the first time Alison had used the ‘L’ word since they got engaged. The rest of the time, Gel now realised, he had been a hindrance to be tolerated. When in bed she did what was expected of her to keep him happy. Gel now suspected that Alison might not be wired so much as trying to recapture an important piece in a much larger political chess game.

“How can I return now and have any credibility with mother?” was all Gel said.

“Anyway, I like the chicken risotto here.”

“Risotto?” said Alison, surprised. “I’ve never known you to think much about food before.”

“They keep us hard at it, and I think the food tastes better after a day’s training,” he said.

“But Gel you’re training to be a soldier,” said Alison. “To kill people. You’re an easy going guy. Can you really see yourself killing people, I mean up close?”



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The grenade went off with a whump killing the two destroyers as well as smashing in Gentry's head, despite his combat helmet. Then Gel was up and charging again. He sighted and fired at a nearby Destroyer who had just picked himself up, the armour piercing round blowing a small black hole in the man's armour. He fell and lay still. To his left, just beside him, Theo had drawn his combat knife and flung himself on another destroyer who had just killed one of the school leavers. He jammed the knife under the man's helmet visor, and they fell back into the undergrowth.

Another Destroyer rose up in front of Gel bringing his own weapon around, far too close for the sergeant to use his Dart-Gun. One of the school leavers of Gentry's party fired a full burst from behind a tree. The bullets bounced off but they distracted the Destroyer for a crucial second as Gel, dropping his Dart-Gun, rushed up and knocked his opponent on his back in the mud, Gel on top. They grappled for a moment, the Destroyer trying to draw his pistol before the sergeant, thinking of Theo, drew his combat knife and, filled with a rage of battle he had never known before, rammed it as hard as he could into his opponent's armpit, the gap between the armour on the chest and arm. He felt it slide in the gap, penetrate flesh, then he twisted it for all he was worth. His opponent screamed and flailed. Gel stabbed again and stood up, knife covered in blood, shocked at what he had done. Blood flowed down his opponent's side. The destroyer thrashed again and then lay still. Theo rose from the undergrowth. Beyond him, blood spurted from underneath the helmet visor of his opponent as the Destroyer clutched vainly at his neck.

Alyssa was checking bodies and the Flight Lieutenant was throwing grenades, softball style, from behind a tree. The remaining school leaver was also firing grenades from his weapon, off to their left. Why was everyone throwing grenades? Then Gel became aware of firing. A bullet thumped into a tree just beside him.

"Theo! Guys! We are leaving," yelled Gel, crouching again. Lieutenant Nilsen had thrown two more grenades, both going off with whumps and the firing had momentarily died down. "Alyssa, wounded?"

"Just this guy," said Alyssa, kneeling beside one of the school leavers, "and he's bad."

"Gotta go," said Gel lifting the soldier up in a fireman's lift. "Theo grab the radio set from this group then move. Everybody, throw grenades to cover and follow me. Flight tell the other sections to run."

The others threw grenades and fired them from the launchers for all they were worth then ran, doubled over, abruptly changing course when they were out of sight. They were long gone by the time the mortar fire and missile blasts flayed the jungle where they had been.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Months after the desperate scrap on Outpost-3 the incident was mentioned at a briefing in an Imperial Marine HQ on the other side of the Empire.

"For the next item people," said a Major speaking from a podium, "we're grateful to the Lighthold sector Assault Infantry for passing on a lot of information about our old friends The Destroyers. One of their companies ran into a unit of Destroyers on what they thought was going to be a milk run and paid a heavy price. The Destroyers didn't have powered suits, but they did have the new Mark IV armour." The major pressed a button and a picture of the

armour without a Destroyer in it appeared on the screen behind him. His audience murmured. "The infantry found that bullets from their main infantry weapon could not penetrate the suits. However, the armour was not proof against Dart-Guns, grenades held up close or knives."

"Excuse me, sir, did you say knives?" said a lieutenant in the front row.

"I did indeed. The infantry got up close and personal. Some of you may recall two companies of marines stationed on Lighthold were withdrawn when the sector infantry was formed. There was some concern at the time about whether the infantry had the competence and determination to defend the sector against anything more than minor threats. Those doubts would seem to be answered.

"When moving around a jungle one detachment hoping to sneak up on some Destroyers for a look see – their orders were to just to observe – got too far ahead of their supporting groups and ran straight into a number of Destroyers. They don't know what the Destroyers were doing there. Maybe they were meant to be scouts, or they were waiting for something. Anyway, the encounter group were too close for Dart-Guns or grenades from the launchers on their weapons. One captain jammed a live grenade, here," the major used a laser pointer to show the tiny gap where the visor met the armour, "and rammed his own head against it while grappling with two Destroyers. Needless to say he paid for this act of bravery with his life and won the Stellar Cross. We do not recommend this as an option.

"While grappling with another Destroyer a sergeant jammed his service knife in the armpit. As you can see," the major brought up another view of the armour with the arm raised, "there is a distinct gap there to leave the arm free to move. It was the same with the medieval knights, incidentally. Knights of the time were sometimes killed by a knife thrust through there. A private also got close enough to thrust a knife under the visor, about where the captain put his grenade, and got the Destroyers throat.

"We don't recommend that marines get that close or start knife fighting with Destroyers, but the option is there if you are forced into such an action. Armour designed to keep out bullets, incidentally, won't necessarily keep out knife thrusts. It depends on the design. The mark IV suits can do both but not everywhere and, again, we're indebted to the Lighthold sector for what amounts to field stress testing on the suit's vulnerabilities."

"Sounds like the infantry got into a real fight," said a colonel in the audience.

"They got down and dirty and the story gets wilder, sir," said the major. "Much wilder."

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Colonel Murchison was just as taken aback as the Imperial Marines were going to be, when Gel eventually told him about the skirmish and loss of Captain Gentry. Battles had not been that personal for a long time.

"You said knives, right?" he said.

"Yessir, our service knives, myself and Private Turgenev. He told me that where he comes from getting stabbed in the throat is a signature move of a certain group. We were too close for the Dart-Gun when we got up there, and we didn't have anything else."

"I guess you didn't," he said. "And poor Captain Gentry paid the ultimate price."

"He seemed like an excellent officer in the brief time I knew him, and it was a very brave act," said Gel. He privately thought that Gentry could have waited until his group had arrived.

"I'll certainly see about a decoration," said the colonel. "In the meantime, you'll need an officer and more bodies. We're scraping the bottom of the barrel here, but I'll see what I can find."

"Yes sir."

Not knowing what else to do with the Destroyers still looking for them, Gel thought that keeping well out of the way was a good, interim strategy. He abandoned plans to patrol up to Walter's Find in favour of marching his band well to the North and closer to the coast. As they retreated the storm clouds burst and the wind picked into a gale. Rain lashed them as they slipped and slid in the mud. The Mule-Synth took one end of a stretcher improvised out of waterproofs and the local equivalent of bamboo poles for the badly wounded Salt, but that still meant other Salts had to take turns carrying the other end. Another infantryman, one of the B Company survivors, had not been fast enough in getting away from the Destroyer's missile blasts and now hopped along with them, one hand on Alyssa's shoulder, his leg fractured.

Gel and Theo plodded along side by side for a time.

"Interesting work with the knife," said Gel, speaking loudly to be heard above the storm.

"You too, sergeant," said Theo. "Where I come from a knife to the throat is part of the deal. I used to do enforcement work down in Five Ways." This was a catch-all term for a notorious slum area on the West side of Green City, where criminal gangs ruled. "Good money. Women were impressed."

"I see. How did you end up here?"

"A judge offered me a choice between jail or the infantry. The infantry ain't been so bad. Almost felt like home back there."

Gel was not quite sure how he felt about his comrades being supplied by the Lighthold justice system, but he was glad that Theo was along. While he was mulling over this revelation, still plodding through the rain and the mud, the surviving, unwounded school leaver who had been with Captain Gentry's group, a Private Aiden Parkinson, caught up with him.

"Sergeant?"

"Thanks for the assist with that Destroyer, private," said Gel. "If you hadn't distracted him with a full burst I would have been in real trouble."

"No problems, sergeant, but I was wondering why my grenades wouldn't work at first? I hit one twice up close with grenades, but they didn't explode."

"You should have paid more attention in training. You were too close. The grenades fired from the launcher on your weapon don't arm, so they don't explode, until at least a few metres away from the firer. It's so you don't blow yourself up."

"Oh."

"Same reason I couldn't use my Dart-Gun when I got in there," said Gel. "I was too close, and it came down to knives."

"More personal than I thought it would be," said Parkinson.

"That's a problem?"

"No, sergeant, just not what I was expecting."

"Same here," said Gel.

They found a clearing which a small transport was able to use to carry away their ..... wounded in exchange for a resupply.

"You guys going to stay out in this?" said the transport co-pilot, who came down the loading ramp to gaze in awe at the torrents of rain sweeping across the tiny clearing.

"We're going to sing songs around a camp fire," said Gel. "It'll be fun. You're welcome to join us."

"No thanks," said the co-pilot. "I'll leave Nilsen here to show you guys how to kick dirt in style."

"Thanks a bunch," said the Lieutenant.

“Was a shame about Jackson though,” the pilot said to Nilsen. Jackson had been Lieutenant Nilsen’s pilot in the transport coming down to the planet’s surface which seemed so long ago now. “He had a wife back home?”

Nilsen nodded. “And a girlfriend I’m pretty sure in the HQ staff, but maybe his widow doesn’t need to know that now.”

“I guess not,” said the co-pilot and left.

The remnants of B Company then explored the surrounding jungle until they found a place where the jungle canopy made a natural roof to keep out the worst of the rain, chased out the local wildlife, including one of the large snakes, dug a small trench to divert the water from their camping area, and wrapped themselves in waterproofs. Tents would have just blown away. They were not exactly comfortable, but they were not miserable. They also found that they could also use the tree trunks and roots for back support while sitting on piles of the local bracken to sit and talk for a time before hopefully falling asleep despite the weather. Gel set guards more for form’s sake than with any expectation that the Destroyers would be causing trouble during the storm, and they ate rations cooked on small camp stoves carried by the humanoid Mule-Synth. B Company was getting used to the jungle.

Gel and his subordinates chewed over the details of the day’s events.

“I caught sight of a few Destroyers just before we ran away – sorry, displaced to the rear,” said squad leader Hutchinson. “They seemed to be small parties in a line, looking for us.”

“Looking for us?” repeated Gel. He thought about that for a moment. “Maybe they don’t realise we’re still a relatively large party? They think they’re dealing with two or three people who’re stuck here with no access to comms gear.”

“Speaking of that,” said Nilsen, looking at a tablet she carried, “I got the tech guys on the ship to give us our own comms/surveillance platform. It uses lift crystals so it can sit on station forever. They’ve parked it above the storm for now, but they took some pics of Walter’s Find before the storm set in.”

Gel was shown an aerial view of several buildings – extended huts – plus a taller building that might be the smart crystal mine. Two vehicles were parked by them, pointing down an access trail that led in the general direction of B Company’s area of operations.

“These must be the heavy mortar vehicles,” he said.

“And that,” said Nilsen indicating a large square platform to one side, partly covered by another structure with a dome on top, “must be the missile launching installation which caused us so much grief. See the two big tarpaulins? One’s covering the SAMs which blew us out of the sky. The other is over those surface missiles they’ve been throwing at us. A synth would load the missiles in the launcher and the dome on top must be their detection and guidance gear.”

“Efficient set up,” said Gel, a plan forming in his mind. “Can we tell where their control people are?”

“Should be in the building opposite the launcher. You can see where they have a cover over the control and power lines between the launcher and the building. What were you thinking?”

“Not sure yet. It may depend on them. What about this non-human ruin outside of town? We got any pictures of that?”

“About two hundred metres Northeast of town. There’s an access track.”

All Gel could see was a circular roof of what looked to be metal with a slight peak in the centre. It was like looking at the top of a metallic Mongolian Yurt, a tent.

“Okay, it’s a round building. We won’t know much else until we go look for ourselves,” said Gel. “No one spotted this before the settlement was built?”

"It was covered in jungle and there were no systematic surveys in this region. Miners at the settlement found it by accident and cleared away some of the jungle. They couldn't open the door they could see and didn't want to force it."

"This is all useful stuff ma'am," said Gel. "And thanks for the assist with the grenades back there, keeping the Destroyers away."

"You're welcome," said Nilsen, "but call me ma'am one more time and I'll use one of those grenades on you. It makes me feel old."

"Okay, I don't want to be blown up," said Gel. "As you're a superior officer using your first name doesn't seem right somehow. What about Flight? That's a hard wearing name and can be yelled during a crisis."

"That'll do," said Flight.

"When you two have finished gabbing," said Alyssa who was also in the group along with Theo and Parkinson. "We want a bedtime story, sergeant."

"Bedtime story?" Gel asked. "Do sergeants tell bedtime stories?"

"Yeah, a story," said Alyssa. "You promised one about straying fiancées and murders, and we don't have to keep quiet 'cause of the storm. Tell us now."

"Sounds like my kind of story," said Hutchinson.

"I guess I can tell it now," said Gel.

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"You know Amelia has a thing for you," said Alison.

"Amelia?"

"You know, Amelia, my friend. You danced with her at that party the Saturday before the Swing Night."

"I know who Amelia is," said Gel. "Really hot and a BFF of yours. I just don't know why she's suddenly in the conversation."

"I mean if you were to come back and spend some time with her while I faded away for a while, I would understand."

"I should have a revenge affair?" said Gel, thinking that the conversation was getting weird. In Gel's opinion women like Amelia who seriously expected a useful result from contacting a psychic relationship advice service should be locked up rather than taken to dinner, but the male part of him had to admit that she was a hot, available option.

"Revenge isn't how I'd put it," said Alison, obviously choosing her words. "We would both have episodes in our lives we could look back on and maybe laugh about later."

"Laugh about later? Alison, I'm no marriage counsellor but is that any way to a lasting union. I thought we had something before I discovered that Dwight was in the mix, not to mention his friend Leo."

Alison pulled a face. "I never had anything to do with Leo in that way."

"I'm not saying you did but Leo attacked me directly after I discovered you with Dwight. In my mind they are associated."

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"Wait – hold-up," said Alyssa. The storm was still raging in the jungle around.

"I agree, time out," said Flight, making the T sign with her hands.

"Your fiancée," said Alyssa.

"Ex- fiancée," said Gel.

“Ex- fiancée suggested you have an affair with one of her BFFs in exchange for maybe forgetting about you finding her with this Dwight person, and eventually marrying her.”

“About the size of it,” said Gel.

“Sounds pretty good,” said Theo who had been listening.

“Did the BFF in question know about this offer?” asked Flight.

“I didn’t ask,” said Gel, “but I don’t think Amelia is that cold blooded. She’s certainly a nice enough person, don’t get me wrong. The offer had certain attractions...”

“I bet!” said Alyssa.

“...However, she’s as nutty as a fruit cake. She has her own media channel Crystals and Club Wear.”

“Crystals and Club Wear?” said Flight. “How do those fit together exactly?”

“I dunno,” said Gel, “but I do know guys subscribe to the channel just so they can watch it with the sound turned off.”

“I think I’ve seen the channel,” said Hutchinson.

“I guess the guys aren’t interested in the fashion side of club wear,” said Flight.

“About as much as they are interested in crystals,” said Gel. “She also has a line in swim wear try-ons.”

“Ha!” said Alyssa.

“But I could see Alison’s reasoning. We’ve seen the cycle in her boyfriends. I succumb to her charms but then she drives me crazy wanting me to undergo aura therapy sessions..”

“Is that a thing?” asked Alyssa.

“Yep, heard her talk about it once. Or have my future foretold by the casting of rune sticks or some similar garbage, and I dump her to fall back in the arms of Alison.”

“Maybe this Amelia is not cold blooded, but your Ex- fiancée certainly is,” said Flight. “That’s quite a scheme, especially as she didn’t seem to care for you that much.”

“You can work it your way,” said Theo. “Dump Amelia and go off with someone else entirely.”

“True,” said Gel, ignoring Theo. “But there was the pre-nup.”

“Ohhhhh!” said the ladies together.

“She has to go through with the wedding to get any money, then remain married for several years to get serious dough. Plus, she’d be the wife of an Imperial Senator, or so it was hoped. Then she’d go to Earth with me, meet the major players attend all the best parties and strut on the galactic stage.”

“Doesn’t sound so bad,” said Flight.

“Doubtless she would relieve the tedium of handling her nerdy husband by an occasional affair with a handsome naval officer or film star.”

“Sounds better,” said Flight. “

Don’t think I’d put up any of my friends for what she was suggesting to you, but I can see why she’d make the offer.”

“You’d have a good time too,” said Alyssa. “While Alison is cavorting with officers and stars you can pick out a cute office staffer who’s really impressed by you being a youthful senator. It can work both ways.”

“That sounds really good,” said Theo.

“Maybe, but I’m not really into politics or into having a wife who thinks of me as a nerdy puppet,” said Theo. “I could always do the cute office staffer thing without the need to pretend my wife doesn’t know or care. Instead, I could marry the staffer.”

Later they drifted off to sleep as best they could, but Alyssa had the last word.

“If you hadn’t nailed that HK drone the moment it showed up,” she told Gel, “and got us out of the transport before that missile hit, we’d have joined the ghosts of the rest of B Company. Maybe Alison hurt you, but she and your mother did the rest of us a real favour.”

That praise helped Gel sleep despite the occasional splatter of rain that hit his poncho during the night.

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Gel did not tell his B Company audience everything. After suggesting that Gel have an affair with Amelia but without getting the reaction she hoped, Alison tried another approach.

“Well, think about it. There is also this.” She put a business card on the table and pushed it across to Gel. It had the word ‘Athena’ in a flowing feminine script on it and a number underneath. “She knows you as Gel and the first session with her is paid.”

“First session of what?” asked Gel, although he suspected that he knew what that first sessions involved and, if those suspicions were true, the conversation had jumped from weird into the realm of the totally bizarre.

“Call her and find out,” said Allison standing up to go.

“It’s appropriate, you know, that she should be called Athena, given what I do now.”

“Why is that?”

“Athena was the Greek goddess of warfare.”

“You know, Gel, you’re about the only person I’ve met who would know that,” said Alison with a sigh. “Just think about it. You can’t keep running all your life.”

“I dunno about that,” said Gel, remembering again that Alison was always dismissive of him, and his nerdy ways. “Running away is an underrated stratagem.”

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At dawn, with the storm having blown itself out, leaving rare clear skies above the jungle, Gel and Nilsen emerged from B Company camp to find a landing spot and greet the new officer they had been told was coming.

“You recall the platform I had set up just below cloud cover?” said Nilsen.

“I sure do Flight. All good stuff.”

“Well, the guys in orbit moved it up above the storm last night. Now they’ve moved it back and worked out a way to track the Destroyer’s platform.”

“They have a platform?”

“Oh yes. It’s much lower than ours – they launch and retrieve it from ground - so its observational footprint was around Walter’s Find, probably up to about where we were wrecked, but its moving.”

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

“We were safe bringing in transports before but pretty soon they’re going to see the landing spots on this side of the ridge. I’ve told the crew of the incoming transport and they’re going to dump the Lieutenant and two others on the shore line and get out of Dodge. We can now also keep an eye on the launching site. If the Destroyers start loading missiles we’ll know, and we can warn our people.”

“That’s something at least,” said Gel.

The pair waited in cover by the shore. There was no sandy beach, just jungle which stopped at the waves kicked up by last night’s storm. The selected landing site was a gap in the jungle at this shore where the newcomers could land without getting very wet. Gel

wondered whether anything like crocodiles or sharks lurked in the waters and that thought led him back to the discussion of observation platforms.

“Is there any way to knock out their platform, flight?”

“Been working on that sergeant,” said Nilsen. “One of the gunships in orbit say that they can try something with their lasers the next time they’re overhead. They’re bored up there it seems. Gives them something to do.”

“Don’t suppose they can do a ground bombardment?”

“Nope,” said Nilsen. “No orbital bombardments. Raises ethical issues.”

“We can beat up each other if both parties are on the ground but beating up someone from space is unethical?” said Gel.

“You’ve got it.”

The transport came into view, skimming low over the waves, far lower than any of the old-time helicopter pilots would have dared take their craft. The pilot turned his craft around and dropped the rear ramp so that the three newcomers only had to do a small jump to get to dry land.

“All down,” said Nilsen, into her helmet comms. “Go, go, guys. Looks like a missile is going to be launched.”

“Just have the transport wait,” said the new officer. The ramp closed and the transport sped off. “I told the transport to wait,” he said indignantly, rounding on Nilsen.

“The transport has been detected by our friends in Walter’s Find and a missile has been launched, Lieutenant,” said Nilsen. “It has to go.”

“You call me sir!” said the new officer. He was a dark-haired, fresh-faced newly minted product of officer training school. If he had been told that for the first few months in the field he should be guided by others he had chosen to ignore that advice in favour of throwing his weight around. The name badge on his breast pocket read Mihocek.

“Actually I don’t lieutenant,” said Nilsen, “I’m the same rank as you but in flight. See the badges and uniform.”

“Excuse me, Lieutenant Mihocek,” said Gel breaking in, “I’m brevet sergeant Obsidian, I see you’re in full comms mode. You really have to switch to protected mode, sir.”

“I don’t have to do anything, sergeant,” said the lieutenant. The other two newcomers, Gel noted, switched to protected mode when he spoke. “I give the orders around here.”

“I understand that sir,” said Gel “but the Destroyers have an effective short range tactical missile and they can now see to this area. Their electronics are excellent. They’ll lock onto your suit.”

“How do you know that they can detect suits in full comms mode.”

“Well, I don’t exactly, sir,” said Gel. “But it’s a good bet they can, and you don’t want to risk one of their missiles down your throat, sir.”

“When you know for certain then start issuing orders, not before,” said Mihocek.

“Shit, the scanning AI says they’re loading one of the tac missiles,” said Nilsen, looking at her tablet.

“Sir, I wasn’t issuing orders,” said Gel. “Please switch out of full comms mode, or you will find out the hard way about the capabilities of their electronics.” To emphasise his point a missile from Walter’s Find trying to catch the transport streaked passed, making them all look up. “They’ve certainly detected the transport.”

“I’ve been on the surface elsewhere and there was no nonsense about switching into protected mode,” said Mihocek, still making no move to change.

“We’re facing the Destroyers, sir, not local militias,” said Gel. “They have advanced stuff. You really should switch to protected mode.”

“Who are the Destroyers for pity’s sake...”

“Missile launched,” screeched Nilsen.



“Sir, you really have to switch to protected mode,” said Gel, he could not keep the panic out of his voice.

“Have you lost your nerve, sergeant,” said Mihocek, evidently disgusted. “I was told you’re recently promoted. This is not the way to keep your stripes.”

“Over ridge,” said Nilsen.

“Everyone run!” screamed Gel.

He heard Mihocek say “I will report..” before stopping in astonishment as his audience vanished into the jungle. Gel was aware of Nilsen and the two other newcomers sprinting hard near at hand. The jungle glowed red for a split second then Gel heard a Whump! and felt the shock wave push him off his feet, head first into a tree.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Gel knocked on the apartment door. It was in a pleasant if not remarkable building in a mid-scale suburb, a couple of suburbs along from the base where he had been training. The corridor was deathly quiet, the lighting subdued. The light under the door darkened as someone on the other side looked at the screen for the security cam in the hallway. After a pause the door opened, and a very pretty girl looked around it to gaze at Gel in astonishment. She had high cheek bones and delicate, symmetrical features; her brown hair cut to a short bob. She wore long earrings which matched a silver-speckled dress. Gel gulped. It was the first time he had been off the base in months.

“You are Athena?” he asked. Gel had wondered about the wisdom of using the number on the card given to him by Alison, but in the end base instincts had won. Humans may explore the galaxy and colonise distant planets, but human nature remained the same.

“Well, yes,” she said, still mostly hiding behind the door.

“Is there a problem?”

“I just didn’t expect you to be so young?”

“I’m older than you, I think.”

“It’s not that, I just prefer older men as clients. Young guys get ideas and cause problems.”

“I’m not about to get ideas,” said Gel. “I’ve had a few problems of my own of late, caused by women. But I can see why guys would get ideas about you.” It had crossed his mind that Athena was beautiful enough to be a Synth, but he had grown up with synthetic people as servitors around the house, and he knew a Synth would not have talked about preferring older men.

The mention of trouble caused by women and the compliment was rewarded with a tiny smile, a small movement of the lips, and Athena pushed the door open.

“Just remember I can call people who will come if there’s trouble.”

“Understood,” Gel said, stepping through into a comfortable although unremarkable apartment.

“Corridor on the left,” said Athena. “Door at the end. There’s a screen. Please take off all your clothes and put on the bathrobe there.”

Gel did as he was ordered, taking off the civilian clothes he had put on for the occasion. A uniform would have drawn too much attention. As he changed behind the screen he was aware that Athena had come in.

“This is already paid for?” he said.

“That’s right.”

He came out.

“Okay, she said. She undid a bathrobe she had put on and let the garment drop to the floor, revealing a tight body of soft curves and pert breasts. She pulled back the covers of the bed and slid in, motioning for Gel to do the same on the other side. It was the first time he had felt the softness of a woman for months, but he was careful to do a little stroking first and a whispered compliment before turning Athena on her back. She moaned as he worked but Gel knew it was an act. It occurred to him that Alison had done something similar.

“No need to act. I’d prefer if you didn’t,” he said, mouth close to her face. “You’re good enough for any guy without that.”

“Oh, okay,” she said, looking at him in surprise but she stopped moaning. After he had finished and rolled off, she allowed him to put one arm around her and lay her head on his shoulder. “Always twice, if you can manage it,” she said. “I’ll wait for you to recover. The money is for a session not a bang.” A standard speech for new clients.

Gel looked around the room for talking points, as he thought they should have some conversation while waiting. In addition to the screen on one side, there was a bookcase on the other – despite all the advances in digital media people still read hard copy books - and a chest of drawers facing the bed with a large teddy bear on top of it propped up against the wall.

“Your teddy bear is glaring at me. I think he disapproves.”

Athena made a “humph” sound which, as he discovered, was the closest she came to a giggle. “That’s Oscar. He disapproves of everything.”

“You have Jane Austen in your bookcase.”

“Austen?” she said looking.

“Sure, the very big book, second shelf down. I can make out *Emma* on the spine. I think it’s an illustrated version.” He thought, but did not say, that it was an odd choice for the bookshelf in a sex worker’s place of business. Athena rolled out of bed, giving Gel another glimpse of her glorious body, then brought the book back to bed, blowing dust off the top.

“A costume thing,” she said looking at the cover. “How did you know it was this Austen person?”

“*Emma* is a very famous book. There’s a film adaption every few years. There was even a zombie mutant ninja version a while back. You don’t see films much?”

“Watch drama series mainly,” she said. “Not really into the historical dramas but I watch them sometimes.”

“It wasn’t historical drama for Austen. She was writing about her own society, sort off.”

“With these dresses?”

“Look at the copyright date.” Gel reached over with his free hand, the other still around Athena, flicked through to the front page and pointed to the year.”

Athena peered at it then said “wait,” got out of bed again, stark naked – another bonus as far as Gel was concerned - and walked out, to reappear a few moments later wearing glasses. “Hope you don’t mind the glasses.”

“Not at all, they’re charming glasses,” said Gel, thinking that if he had to discuss Jane Austen this was the way to do it.

She smiled slightly again, got back into bed and looked at the date. “1816 – holy stars and crap, but this is really old.”

“Yep, a form of immortality for the author, I guess.”

“What’s it about?”

“The heroine is a spoiled, snobby girl who meddles in other people’s love lives with the best of intentions and gets it all wrong – including her own love life. It all comes out right in the end, but it can be a tough read if you’re used to modern books.”

Athena was not used to any books but she did not say that. She asked a few more questions about Austen then put the book and glasses to one side saying that they should finish up. Afterwards, Gel left some additional money in the form of a plastic reusable card on the chest of drawers next to Oscar and asked if he was allowed to come again.

“Guess that’s okay,” she said. “But I’m expensive.” She told him how much.

“You are expensive but I’ll cope,” he said.

“And if there’s any trouble you’re out.”

“Gottit.”

As he walked out, Gel noted the security camera in the hallway but was unconcerned. It was nobody’s business that he was going to see Athena. However, a photograph taken by that camera was examined and discussed by a man and a woman elsewhere in the building.

“Young for us?” commented the woman. “Is he going to be of any use as a target?”

“Booking just says Gel,” said the man. “He didn’t use the car park, so we don’t have plates.”

“Worth tailing, do you think?” asked the woman.

“Seems too young to be in any position of influence, and the occasional run-of-the-mill client makes useful cover. Just make sure Athena has read him the riot act about causing trouble.”

“I’ll check,” said the woman.

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They found the mangled remains of Lieutenant Mihocek well inside the missile blast area. If he had run, or switched his helmet’s electronics into protected mode, he had left the decision too late.

“You idiot,” Gel told the body. “You should’ve listened to your sergeant.”

Nilsen, who had run further than Gel and had spent a few anxious seconds reviving the brevet sergeant, took the dead officer’s tags.

“Are we going to call it in?” she asked.

Gel thought that he did not care to tell Colonel Murchison that he had lost another officer, albeit through no fault of his own or of the colonel.

“Did that other missile we saw hit the transport?” he said.

“No, they got away,” said Nilsen, “but it’s now a no-fly area down here. They won’t send transports. We’re cut off unless we hike well out of range.”

“Hmmm! There is another option.” He looked at the two privates who had come with Mihocek, and now returned to stand in the jungle on the edge of blast area. They both had had the sense to switch to protected mode when Gel had told them and had run when he said, and that gave them points in Gel’s book. One was a gigantic private with the face of a stone statue, whose name tag said Cliffe. The regimental designation on Private Cliffe’s uniform collar was a ‘3’ rather than the ‘2’ everyone else had.

“You’re third regiment,” said Gel. “How come you ended up with us?”

“In cells.” His voice was deep and guttural.

“I was in the cell next door,” said the other private, whose name tag read Hartmann. “Colonel Murchison told us we could get out if we came down here.”

“Ooookay.. this campaign is getting weirder,” said Gel.

“I’ll say,” said Nilsen.

“Did the lieutenant also come from the cells?”

“He was from the general’s HQ staff, sergeant,” said Hartmann, by far the more talkative of the two. “From what I heard he wanted to get down to the surface, to the action.”

“Well, he got closer to the action than he wanted. I have to ask Private Cliffe, what were you in the cells for?”

“Hit officer.”

“We won’t hold that against you, but don’t hit officers or anyone else on our side unless I tell you.”

“Okay.”

“What’s the weapon you’re holding? It’s not standard.”

“Heavy rifle.”

“Heavy rifle? I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“Heard the Colonel say it’s from stores,” said Brinkmann when Cliffe did not reply. “An experimental anti-armour weapon. Rounds are different but he was able to find some ammo for it, now in Cliffe’s backpack.”

“This is because I complained about how the standard infantry weapons didn’t do anything against the Destroyer’s armour, I guess,” said Gel. “I see its bolt action, which is very rare now, and it’s got no grenade launcher, but the sights look useful. Can you work it, private Cliffe?”

Cliffe nodded.

“Is it going to be effective against the Destroyers’ armour?”

Cliffe shrugged. “Find out, sergeant.”

“A born orator too, I see. You’ll fit right in. That leaves you,” said Gel turning to Hartmann. That individual was much smaller and rounder than Cliffe. His large head was topped with ginger hair and he wore glasses. The overall effect, Gel thought, was that of an owl in a bullet proof vest. “Did you also hit an officer?”

“I hacked the football pool game they run onboard.”

“What? You mean the pool where the players put in a certain amount each week and whoever has the best score at the end of the season wins the pool?”

This was for the main soccer league played back on Lighthold. Gel had never bothered with it himself, but he understood it to be very popular, albeit with strict limits on the amounts that could be put in.

“That’s right, sergeant.”

“Couldn’t add up to more than a few hundred. Hardly seems worth it, and you got caught.”

“About two thousand and I was in the digital section with administrator access that they didn’t know about. I was going to split the winnings with a sergeant who played the pool, but he boasted about it to one of the women privates who turned him in. He got out of going to the cells by naming me.”

“A colorful tale of intrigue, sex, betrayal and football,” said Gel. “Except for the football part I can empathise. You’ve done basic and battle school, right?”

“Yes, sergeant. I kept up but I dunno how much I remember.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. But while you’re with me you don’t do dumb stuff like hack football pools unless I tell you to do dumb stuff, or I’ll be around asking why. You will not like the manner of my asking.”

“Yes, sergeant.”

“Now that show and tell is over,” said Nilsen, “what’s our next move, sergeant?”

“Our next move, Flight Lieutenant, is hard marching to pick up the others. What’s our overwatch showing? What’s happening around Destroyer HQ in Walter’s Find?”

Nilsen looked at her tablet and tapped it a couple of times. “The vehicles, the fire support mortars, are moving followed by a lot of smaller dots.”

“Those would be those electric bikes they use.”

“Electric bikes, sergeant?” said Hartmann.

“Explain later. We’re going to attack.”

“We are?” said Nilsen.

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When Gel visited Athena the second time she had questions.

“How come you’re seeing me?” she said, again permitting his arm around her, and putting her head on his shoulder as they lay in bed. “You could get a girl friend easily enough. More fun for both and cheaper, I would say.”

“That’s a compliment, I think,” said Gel. “Thanks for that but this is more convenient for the moment, unless you object.” She shrugged the one shoulder Gel could see. It was all the same to her. “I had a fiancée until a few months back.”

“Really?” she said. “What happened with you two, am I allowed to ask?”

“I found her with another guy.”

“Ouch! Did you know the guy?”

“Not really,” said Gel.

“Have you spoken to her since? Did you try to get back together?”

“Didn’t think her cheating on me during the engagement was a good sign for the marriage.”

“Guess not,” said Athena, “but did you speak afterwards? Did she apologise or explain or anything?”

“She suggested I have an affair with one of her friends and then we get back together.”

“No, get out! Did she?”

Much later, in the jungle of a different planet, Gel thought that the women of B Company reacted to the tale of Alison’s offer in the same way Athena had, and that maybe there was a conclusion to draw from that. He also thought at the time, with Athena, that the topic was more successful than the previous week’s discussion of *Emma*.

“Then she handed me your card and said the first session was paid.”

“Noooo!” Athena pushed herself up letting the bed covers fall to expose her body. Gel thought that the effect was interesting. “She paid for me?”

“How do you think I got your card? This seems like top rank exclusive service. I wouldn’t have known about it otherwise.”

Athena nodded and brushed a strand of hair back from her face – an action that stirred Gel. “But how did your fiancée know about the service?”

“Good question, I have wondered about that myself. I didn’t ask at the time and now I’m not sure I care. It has been good to meet you.” He put his hand on her waist.

His reward was one of her tiny smiles.

Later, as Gel was leaving, he tipped her again and handed her a small memory stick.

“What’s this?”

“One of the adaptations of *Emma*, the book we talked about last time, as a drama series. I saw it online. It cost just a few credits.”

“Clients have given me expensive gifts,” she said, looking at the memory stick.

“I’m sure they have but I’m giving you a drama series. Can I come next week?”

“Sure,” she said.

Two days or so after Gel's second visit Athena met with a few of her colleagues to drink coffee and chat in an apartment at the front of the building. These meetings of whoever was available at the time and in whatever apartment was not being visited by a client, were a regular feature of the facility encouraged by management. Each lady received clients alone and lived alone, and management was anxious that they not feel isolated.

"Who got the young guy I saw coming in off the street on Saturday," said the host. She was a Latin type with generous dark hair, dark eyes and a full figure, lounging on one of the living room's easy chairs. All of the building's staff had been chosen with care. "Sports coat on tee shirt. He was hot and he looked fit."

"That's mine," said Athena who was sitting at the table. "His name's Gel. Seems okay, actually."

"Makes a change from what we usually get here," said the Latin type. "How come he got in? I didn't think management took younger guys."

Athena then told them about Gel's ex- fiancée handing him Athena's card and paying for the first visit. The ladies were suitably astonished.

"That's a new one," said Helena. She was a tall, imperious Hitchcock-blond with high cheekbones, flashing blue eyes and hair pinned up at the back. She was mostly an escort but occasionally received clients.

"What's he like as a tipper?" asked the Latin type.

"He's alright. Only been here twice, but the second time he gave me this drama series. *Emma*."

"*Emma*?" said Helena. "Seems odd given what you do."

"It was the book in the bookcase in my client room," said Athena. "You gave me a bunch of books to put in there. One of them was called *Emma*. He saw it and we talked about it. It's really old – I mean written a long time ago. I was surprised."

"It's Jane Austen," said Helena. "You hadn't heard of Austen?"

Athena shook her head, frowning.

"Well, she's not for everyone," said Helena hurriedly, "but that means it's a thoughtful gift. I have an idea, why don't we have sessions where a few of us watch it together. Then you can show off your knowledge of the series to this youthful client."

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Squad Leader Hutchinson had B Company remnants ready to go when Gel arrived. Having seen the rockets arch overhead and one explode about where they expected Gel and Nilsen to be, the salts were relieved to see their sergeant and the flight lieutenant safe. No one was bothered by the loss of an officer they had never met, but they were curious about the newcomers.

"I met my husband in third regiment," said Alyssa to Cliffe, when it was explained just how the newcomers had been recruited. "Which officer did you hit?"

"Malouf."

"Good call," said Alyssa, without hesitation. "And I like the football pool story. Welcome to B Company and fun in the jungle. What's next sergeant?"

"We start marching," said Gel, "hard."

March they did, North or roughly parallel with the coast, at a blistering pace. Gel thought that the Destroyers would make for the place where the missiles had hit but do so in an extended line and moving cautiously, considering what had happened on previous encounters. Given what Hutchinson had told him about the tactics used by the mercenary group on the previous day, he also thought the Destroyers believed they were looking for maybe two or three survivors. Gel had deliberately left Lieutenant Mihocek's body unburied

– that was against procedures – to confuse things. He hoped the Destroyers would find a body and assume the survivors had panicked and gotten away on the transport they had fired at. That was one part of the plan. Another part was marching his command around the force looking for them, while staying out of contact and out of sight. They came to a river marked as a creek on the map but transformed into a raging torrent by all the rain and turned inland, more or less in the direction of Walter's Find.

Hacker Hartmann caught up with Gel. "Excuse me sergeant, I'm told you're one of the mega rich Obsidians."

"I was, I got disinherited."

"Okay, I mean, I'm pretty good at the digital stuff, sergeant. If you ever get re-inherited, I could be of use in your business interests."

"You're angling for a job? If you're into information systems getting a job shouldn't be a problem. How come you ended up in the infantry?"

"A judge gave me an option, this or jail."

"Another one. Private Turgenev here," Gel jerked a thumb in Theo's direction, "got a similar offer he couldn't refuse. What brought you before the judge?"

"A misunderstanding with my employer over the placement of certain company funds."

"Oookay. You got caught twice? That doesn't look so good on resumes."

"Someone else was doing my scam but he messed it up and the checking caught us both. That time the other person went to jail, and I ended up here."

"Lucky you. I might have a military application for your talents soon, but until that time you avoid dumb stuff with computers, as I said before, and look to your weapons."

"Yes, sergeant."

They marched on, keeping the rushing water of the river to their left but drifting further away from it, Gel occasionally checking their course on the overhead view on Nilsen's tablet. Finally they stopped. Gel crept forward with Theo until they could glimpse, through the trees and undergrowth, two military vehicles. These were large, bullet proof vans on very heavy industrial tyres with two large tubes protruding out of open tops.

"What the fuck..," whispered Theo inspecting the vehicles through the sights of his rifle. "Those are the heavy mortars that have been giving us grief at every contact."

"Uh huh," said Gel. "They run them out of Walter's Find along previously cut access tracks. The navy guys have got an observation platform up so we could see where they are. But the main Destroyer force, I hope, is on the other side of the ridge looking for us."

"We can take these guys?" said Theo still looking through his sight.

"The big question is what guards have they left with the trucks. They'd have crews, but any infantry and perimeter alarms?"

"Nothing on this side," said Theo. "No alarms I can see, and none of those flying sentry bots they use."

"Work around and check out the other side then come back here. Be sneaky now. Don't tip them off."

"Sneaky is what I do, sergeant," said Theo and moved off in a crouch.

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"You know this trust declaration doesn't mean anything," said Arch.

He was a red-haired, freckled man with a studious air, and one of Gel's closest friend. They had met in law school but, unlike Gel, Arch had gone on to one of Lighthold's major firms. Now, however, he had decided that the long hours and the hierarchy of a major firm was not for him and thought he would strike out on his own.

Gel was able to give him some work managing his affairs which included a major redevelopment of the disused factory site he owned, courtesy of his grandfather, using the money gained from the sale of the Bugatti. At Gel's request Arch had spent a couple of billable hours looking at the declaration handed to Gel by his uncle.

"How come it doesn't mean anything?" said Gel. He had never bothered to look at the legal aspects of the issue himself.

"I mean your mother doesn't have the power to boot you out," said Arch. "Your father set up the trust deed for you and your sister. As trustee she can use the money that might come to you as income for other things, but the trust has been doing that all along. Nothing much has changed."

"That is interesting," said Gel.

"You can challenge her ruling and even take control of the trust if you want. Your mother was only really meant to control it until one of you came of age, but you have to assert your rights. You haven't done that, so she's still there."

"Hmmm!" Gel thought for a few moments. "You know what, I don't mind being considered poor for a while. Once the redevelopment happens and these apartments are let I'll have enough money for my needs. In any case, mother will fight to the last lawyer to keep control, and as the incumbent she'll have access to a lot more resources than me. We'll watch and wait on that one."

Arch shrugged. "You'd have more if you leveraged up on the factory site, knocked it down entirely and put up swanky new apartments."

"No, no, I prefer what we discussed. Renovate the old site and go for mid-scale. That seems to suit the area, not to mention my now more limited means. The area's not Five Ways but it's still pretty run down. Speaking of business how's your affairs going?"

"I've found someone to share my offices with," said Arch.

Gillian, a bustling round-faced brunette, came in. She had also been at law school, two years below them, but unlike Arch and Gel had studied law as part of a mission – to fight for the rights of women. Both men had long agreed that they would not care to face Gillian in a court room. Now she had graduated, been admitted to the bar and was looking for work. She handed Gel a card.

"You're filling up the spare office here?" said Gel, looking at the card.

"Got a good deal on the rent," she said, smiling.

"That means she doesn't pay until she gets work, and I still have to buy dinner," said Arch. They were dating.

"Maybe Gillian can take on my mother," said Gel.

"Your mother, no way," said Gillian who had met Mrs Obsidian. "She's way tougher than me and she can hire every lawyer in town. Give me a nice, juicy abused wife case any day. Keep me in mind for that."

"I treat all the women I know with care, as I know you'll beat me up if I don't," said Gel.

"Damn straight," said Gillian.

"But if I find out about any abused women, I'll tell you," said Gel.

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Gel got the others and lead them forward so that they were in a line facing the trucks, then went along the line explaining what the trucks were and that B Company was going to take them. Up to that point, the Salts just thought they had been marching to dodge the Destroyers. But they got the idea quickly and, like Gel, thought they had a good chance to grab the vehicles.



Theo returned.

“Four guys and the bikes they use on the far side,” he whispered, “but their helmet visors are up and they are doing stuff on tablets, mostly.”

“Stuff?” said Gel.

“I think one’s looking at porno. He’s off a little way, his back to a tree.”

“You’ve got something in common with this guy,” said Hutchinson. As next in command, after Nilsen, she had been listening.

“Don’t think it was girls,” said Theo.

“Oh!”

“The other three are sitting with their backs to the vehicles. One’s dozing and the other two are on tablets. Another two guys without armour are also sitting looking at tablets. Think they’re the drivers.”

“Can the navy guys take out the Destroyer’s platform?” Gel asked Nilsen.

“About half an hour and they’ll be in position,” she said.

Gel spent the time briefing each of his half squads on what they were to do. Each was given a different objective. This time, instead of sneaking off into the jungle they would strike, he told them. It was also important that all the Salts get up as close as possible without giving the alarm, and that the assault should happen in one charge. That meant halting within rushing distance until everyone was ready. Theo was told to work around to the other side and deal with the porno watching sentry. None of The Destroyers should be given time to think.

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“This *Emma* person in the series you gave me,” said Athena on Gel’s next visit, her head again on his shoulder while he recovered, “messes with her friend’s lives for something to do.”

“That’s right,” said Gel. “Austen herself said that she didn’t think anyone would much like her main character. She’s spoiled and snobby. She messes with lives, as you say, at her whim and gets it all wrong. Glad to hear you’ve been watching the series.”

“Something to do, I guess.” On strict instructions, Athena didn’t mention that she had colleagues in the same building. The less the clients knew about the nature of the building, so the managers reasoned, the better it was for the building’s dark purpose.

“Get very far?”

“Just the first one, but I see that there are only four.”

“Yep, that’s the whole story. Those were the days before they wrote sequels. The real big one, however, far bigger than *Emma*, is *Pride and Prejudice*. I see it’s in your bookcase too.”

“Really,” she said, lifting her glorious head.

“I just didn’t see it before. Bottom shelf at the end.”

Athena rolled out of bed stark naked, which Gel had hoped would happen when he mentioned the book and fetched it. This time she had her glasses in a drawer next to the bed.

“Same sort of thing,” she said, after getting beside Gel and looking at the book cover.

“But Elizabeth Bennet is a much more attractive heroine than Emma,” said Gel. “She still gets things wrong – that’s one of the themes of the book – but she doesn’t meddle, and she has a lot of sense.”

“Humph,” said Athena flicking through the pages.

“If you’ve not looked at the book before you should read the first sentence. It’s one of the most famous first lines in the English language.”

“It is a truth universally acknowledged,” read Athena, after leafing through the scholarly introduction, “that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife. That’s a famous line?”

“Oh yes, often quoted,” said Gel, thinking that discussing Jane Austen with a naked Athena was entertaining. “The first line in *Emma* is also often quoted. They are memorable and set up the story. I can find one of the better adaptations for *Pride and Prejudice* if you like.”

“Another expensive gift,” said Athena although she also gave one of her little smiles.

“Nothing but the best in drama series,” said Gel.

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Gel’s pleasant memory of discussing books while in bed with Athena, her warm body against his, was abruptly replaced by the harsh reality of a hot, humid jungle where he lay in the fast drying mud just out of sight of the two mortar trucks, heart thumping. He had to wait for Theo to get into position and for the Navy to prepare to knock out the other side’s observation platform, which all added up to a long time to crouch within rushing distance of an enemy, even one that was proving unwary. The first car, the one Gel crouched beside, was likely to be the control vehicle as it had a comms dish on top. But what if they were wrong? More importantly, what if the van doors were locked? The sergeant recalled reading years ago about a special forces team back on Earth that had to take out a mobile surface to air missile launcher. This was basically a truck with a missile mounted on the tray at the back. At one point the team was discussing whether an inspection hatch they might need to open to plant explosive charges opened to the left or the right. His little unit had no time to work out such details. They did not know whether the van doors would be locked or not, although it was unlikely that they would be. If the doors were locked, Gel had told his soldiers, they were to make their displeasure known with the Dart-Guns, after ensuring that there were no friendlies in the line of fire.

Gel’s helmet alarm buzzed. Watching her screen, Flight raised her hand then dropped it. The rival observation platform had been killed.

“Everybody, now, move,” said Gel, standing up. They started running towards the trucks.

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“I want to join up too, Jelly,” wrote Jenny in a text to her brother after he enlisted. “Mother is being a pain. She is cross over you running away like that, as well as breaking up with Alison. She had it all planned. They both asked where you’d got to but I looked innocent – you know I’m good at that – and said you’d only told me you were going away. I miss you Jelly. I have no one to argue with.”

“As far as I’m concerned you can join up and we can argue,” replied Gel, “but there may be a problem with your age, and they won’t allow horses in the barracks.”

Jenny had three horses – plus two ponies which she rode until recently - in their own stable with a Synth stable hand to look after them, and large grounds in which to ride.

“Why not allow horses in your army?” she shot back. “You could have a horse squad. I could get some other girls from the club and we would ride around on the battlefield looking mean.”

“Won’t work from a military point of view,” replied Gel, “my side wouldn’t shoot at you, but the other side might. It could make them laugh a lot, I guess. Anyway, one of your horses might get hurt.”

“If they hurt one of my horses then they’ll really have a war,” she said.

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On Gel’s orders B Company remained silent as they rushed those last few metres. The Destroyers’ comms would be open, and it was important that they suddenly go silent.

He reached the truck. No alarms. Gel touched the key panel on the door as comrades stormed passed him, holding weapons. The doors popped open. Not locked. Inside were two operators amidst a sea of screens and control panels, a male and female, both with their head sets off talking to each other, when Gel’s party stormed in. Their mouths dropped open. The male grabbed for his headset, but Gel ripped it from him then unplugged it from the wall socket. Parkinson, the school leaver who had been with Captain Gentry, did the same for the other operator.

“On the floor, now,” said Gel. “Hartmann!” The football pool hacker had followed them in and was now examining the screens with interest. “You’re up. Change all the passwords on this stuff and make sure we’re not transmitting audio.”

“You got it, sergeant,” said Hartmann sitting in one of the chairs. He seemed to come alive sitting at a computer screen. “Can the flight officer come in? I may need to link with our platform?”

“Yep, hold on.”

Parkinson and Gel got the two operators on the floor, hands behind their backs and put the plastic ties they carried with them – much lighter than handcuffs and almost as effective – around their wrists.

“Major Murtagh is gonna be real pissed,” said the male. “I wouldn’t want to be you when he gets back here.”

“Shutup,” said Gel, pushing the barrel of his pistol into the back of the man’s skull, “or I’ll forget I’m a nice guy. Parkinson, see if you can find some duct tape to keep our new friend’s mouths closed – and keep an eye on them.”

“Yes, sergeant.”

Gel stepped out to find the four Destroyers who were supposed to be on guard plus the vehicle drivers face down on the ground. Theo’s target was the last man to be put on his face, with Theo handing the tablet the man had been looking at to Gel.

“Whoa!” said Gel, looking at the screen. “Pretty graphic but not my scene. For the ladies I think.” He handed it to Alyssa who had no casualties to keep her busy.

“Oh, my lord!” she said, looking at the screen. “That’s new – disturbing but new.”

Parkinson emerged from the control truck with a roll of duct tape in hand.

“Hartmann says there’s no audio feeds, sergeant.”

“Good. Tape up the others. Hutchinson, get your squad on those bikes. Work out how to use them and follow us. People, we need to get the vehicles working, now. The rest of us plus prisoners are somehow going to pack into these two vehicles. It may be a squeeze, but it’ll beat walking.”

“Sure will,” said someone.

“What’s next, sergeant?” asked Theo.

Now after a quick, significant win over an opponent who previously had been pushing them around, Gel’s command had become interested to see what would happen next. The sergeant was reminded of an assessment of a military officer’s leadership of many years ago, which read “his men will follow him anywhere, even if only out of a sense of morbid curiosity”.

“What’s next,” said Gel, “is that we drive straight up to Walter’s Find and take it.”

## CHAPTER SIX

Having seen some more of the Jane Austen series Athena was intrigued enough to discuss it with Gel. Her head was once more on Gel's shoulder, her body pressing against his, while he recovered from his first effort.

"Emma complains when that Mr Knightly dude arrives on a horse to a dinner party," she said.

"Yep, because he sent his carriage for the Bates' mother and daughter. She was being snobby in thinking that a person of his social standing should not arrive on a horse, but he was being a gentleman in ensuring the poor Bates couple could get to the party. He was thinking of others."

"Humph."

"You started the *Pride and Prejudice* series yet?"

"We've decided we'll get through *Emma* first?"

"We?" said Gel looking at her. "You're seeing this with friends?"

"They're just friends," said Athena, aware that she slipped in saying "we".

"Of course," said Gel, reminding himself that Athena was paid and paid well for her attentions. "In fact, throughout *Emma*, Mr Knightly shows himself to be a gentleman. Although there is some argument that he's no angel, he certainly shows a lot more sense and consideration for others than Emma."

Later, Gel thought about what friends Athena could have and that she had mentioned, when they had first met, that "people would come" if there was trouble. He had begun to realise that there must be an organisation behind the sex worker, and that organisation would at least be aware of his visits. Perhaps they might even keep records. Neither he nor Athena were breaking any laws of the time and place, and Gel had no significant other of any kind to answer to, but the thought that the visits might be noted unsettled him.

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"The platform going down has thrown the Destroyers," said Hartmann, bringing Gel back from his memories of Athena. The hacker had been working the truck's digital systems while it was being turned around. Now they were heading towards Walter's Find with the bulk of Gel's small command, plus prisoners, crammed into them. The remainder followed on The Destroyers' electric bikes. Conditions in the control vehicle were cramped with Gel and Hartmann the only two persons seated.

"They now have a direct link with their base but they're trying to contact here. See?" the pools hacker said. He unplugged the headphones he had been using and turned up the volume.

"Fire support, this is rover one," said a voice. "Fire support, this is rover one, acknowledge."

"Any indication that they think their platform's been taken out by the Navy?" asked Gel.

"Doesn't seem so," said Hartmann. "They think it's some sort of failure. The rover one dudes have asked base for the backup platform to be launched, but base says that it'll take a while to get on station. In the meantime, check this out sergeant. I can use the system

here to link with our own platform to get this.” He pressed a button and a map of the area appeared on one screen. “Those are the rover one dudes, near the coast.” He said pointing to a row of dots.

“That’s about where we left Mihocek’s body,” said Gel. “They’re looking for us.”

Hartmann pointed to a few squares on the display. “That’s Walter’s Find. I dunno about these dots below the ridge line.”

“It’s their bikes,” said Gel after a moment’s thought. “They’ve left them well away from where they think we’ll be and then walked, spread out, to catch us. This is great.” Gel slapped Hartmann on the back, startling the pools hacker. “Well done. We’ll keep you out of the hands of the provosts and the football pool avengers for a while yet. And well done to Flight too, of course.”

“Thank you,” said Nilsen, still studying her tablet. “I was wondering when my valuable contribution would be acknowledged.”

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“Jelly, mother says I’m going to inherit everything and you’re going to be poor, and have to beg for scraps,” said another note from Jenny. Genevieve Obsidian may not have been able to argue with her brother in person, but she could still bombard him with text messages.

“Not poor, maybe,” replied Gel in a message, “but I’ll have to look for a job when I get out of the infantry. Maybe you could hire me as your chauffeur?”

“What would I need a chauffeur for? If I wanted to go anywhere, I would ride my horses.”

“But you get taken to school by a chauffeur every day,” said Gel. “Why couldn’t I take you?”

“I don’t want to put Morgan” (that was the chauffeur, another Synth) “out of a job. I’m good friends with him.”

“Maybe I could be Morgan’s assistant? I could get out and open the door for you.”

“I can always open the door for myself,” Jenny shot back. “But I don’t need to, its automatic. The door opens itself. No need for a brother door opener.”

“You wouldn’t hire your own brother as assistant chauffeur?” asked Gel. “I’m supposed to be surviving on scraps, remember? So much for family loyalty. What about a job in your stable? I could brush the horses down or whatever it is you do to them.”

“I wouldn’t let you anywhere near my babies,” wrote Jenny. “Qualified people only for my precious babies.”

This went on for some time with Jenny finally saying she would consider hiring her brother as a probationary garden figurine.

“I would wave to you as I ride past,” she told him.

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Gel stopped the trucks just out of sight of Walter’s Find and went over the plan of attack. The truck drivers were given the hats and jackets of the Destroyer support people – the drivers did not wear armour – and told to keep their heads down. The prisoners and the bikes were left behind under guard as the trucks rolled forward.

Walter’s Find was a collection of huts built of some form of grey composite material that looked like concrete but felt like plastic to touch. The main drag, a jungle track, had three huts in a row on one side and what amounted to a missile launch pad on the other mostly made of the same material but with missile ramps on rotatable mount, plus another structure

that housed the detection and electronics hardware. A few metres away, down an intersecting track on the other side of the shacks was the two-storey smart crystal mining facility. Beyond that was a clearing to land transports.

"Total dump," declared Alyssa later, after a brief inspection. The rest of B company agreed.

When the captured trucks rolled in, a Destroyer in armour but without his helmet came out of the hut opposite the launch pad.

"Stop so that guy is at the back," whispered Gel to the driver. "I'll take this Destroyer," he told the others. "The rest of you ignore us and hit the buildings hard and fast like we discussed. Check everything, inside and under. No one hiding, no surprises. Gottit?"

"Sergeant," they whispered back. There were a few grins. A slow smile spread over the statue-like face of Cliffe, cradling his rifle. This half platoon was considerably more capable than the one that had been shot out of the sky a few days previously.

"What are you guys doing here?" demanded the Destroyer officer, as he reached the back of the truck. He shut up when Gel emerged, his Dart-Gun strapped across his back but his sidearm out pointing at the officer's forehead. Assault infantry poured out of both trucks, kicked open the hut doors and started yelling "Hands up!".

"Don't try me, I've had a real hard week," said Gel to the officer.

"There were only supposed to be a few of you," said the officer holding his hands up, shocked.

"Someone miscounted," said Gel. "Now move!"

They went into the hut the officer had emerged from to find it firmly under Salt control, with the captives being laid on the floor hands bound behind their backs. The officer joined the other prisoners. Hartmann was already at what seemed to be the main control panel, typing.

"Cool setup sergeant," he said, grinning. "They weren't expecting any external hook ups or visitors, so they haven't bothered with most of the security stuff you'd expect. I'm already in."

The sound of two shots came from around the back of the hut, followed by a loud bang. Gel's Dart-Gun was in his hands without him even thinking about it.

"Stay here, guard prisoners," he snapped over his shoulder as he dashed outside. There was a gap of about one body length between the control hut and the next. In that gap at the far end was a large form which Gel guessed was private Cliffe. At that moment Cliffe fired. Another bang from the heavy rifle – a different sound to the firing of the standard assault rifles. Someone screamed.

Gel came up behind the giant private.

"Talk to me Cliffe, what's happening?"

Cliffe looked around, smiled and stepped out of the hut's cover. Beyond him Gel could see the smart crystal mining building, a taller version of the other huts. In front of it was a Destroyer in full armour lying spread eagled, a hole in his torso. Another was writhing by the side of the hut, alive but clearly out of the fight.

"Rifle works, sergeant," said Cliffe holding it up.

After glancing through the mining building and at the landing field Gel returned to the main hut to find Alyssa tending to casualties, which included one of B Company shot during the brief scuffle in front of the smart crystal mine building. That casualty would have to be shipped up to orbit for surgery, as would the Destroyer seriously wounded by Cliffe's rifle. Now that they had control of the missile launch site as well as a landing field, they could ask for another med-evac.

Hutchinson came in to report that the place had been cleared of hostiles.

"Okay, good work everyone," said Gel. "Go and get the group we left down the road and shift all prisoners to the other hut."

"There's a first aid room with medical supplies in the last hut. Seems to be the mining site office," said Hutchinson.

"Alyssa can shift over there and have someone stay with that wounded Destroyer, just in case he recovers."

"Yes sergeant."

"Base, this is rover one, we heard shots," said a voice on a speaker in the control panel. "What's going on over there. Where is fire support?"

"Can they hear us?" Gel asked Hartmann.

The private shook his head and pointed to a headset. "Plug that in. You know, sergeant, I think I can fire the missile they've got loaded."

"You can?"

"It's real simple. Just use this joystick to set where you want it to land on this map." He pointed to a screen which showed the same view as the one Gel had admired in the truck. "You can expand the view at a touch."

Hartmann touched the screen and Gel suddenly saw a close up map-view of the coast and the Destroyers, twenty or so in groups of four, spread out along the coast, still about where he had left the lieutenant's body.

"The tool tip on this system even tells you how to launch," said Hartmann. "It's a beginner's guide to missile launching. I think someone has to load each missile though."

"Okay, let's play with the missiles, but before we do quickly check the launch pad and work out reloading. Parkinson go with him and stay there if need be. I want to launch several quickly."

They left Gel to the control panel and the voice on the speaker, which was becoming more strident.

"Base this is rover one! When I get there someone better explain!" The prisoners were being taken out at that point and the officer, Gel noted, blanched when he heard the voice. Maybe he thought he was better off as a prisoner.

"Base this is rover one!"

Hartman came back in.

"The loading stuff is simple too. Just someone needs to stay with the Synth."

"Base this is rover one. Someone had better answer."

"You can see they're heading back," said Gel, looking at the screen. "It's what, a minute or so flight time? Set the impact point about where they are likely to be then. Maybe, four in a pattern after that. Then I want several on the bikes. Destroy them all."

"You gottit sergeant."

"Base this is rover one." The voice had risen to a shout.

Gel grabbed the comms headset and spoke in his best telephone manner. "Rover one, base is not here right now." Then screamed "YOU FUCK!" before switching back to his phone manner. "Can I take a message?"

"Who is this?"

Hartman gave the thumbs up.

"Go," mouthed Gel.

Hartmann pressed the trigger on the control stick. Outside a missile launched with a woosh and dense plume of gasses.

"Ambushing us in transports is part of the deal, Major Murtagh," said Gel. He was aware that the members of B Company still in the shed were listening intently.

"How did you know my name?"

“It’s part of war. But what I don’t understand is you killing prisoners in cold blood where the transport crashed. I just had to spoil your party.”

“That was you!”

“I’d never kill prisoners but I’m allowed to repay the ambush with interest. Remember B Company.”

“Major,” screamed someone on the speaker.

Silence. Several dots blinked out.

“Is this the end of The Destroyers?” asked Nilsen.

“We should be so lucky,” said Gel as Hartmann locked in another strike point. “Their armour is way better than ours remember, but we’ll get a few and wound others and the wounded can’t be left behind. That’ll slow them up. We’re also going to smash up their bikes, and that’ll slow them up a lot more. That means we have a little time to get a transport in, get rid of wounded and prisoners and go check out the ruin. Maybe we can find out more about why the Destroyers wanted to defend this dump.”

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Athena faced a dilemma. She had finally given in to her mother’s pleas that she come to dinner, and she knew it would be better if she went with someone. Beautiful as she was, there was no one in her life who could take her to dinner with her mother.

“You could always go alone?” suggested the Latin-type colleague, whose name was Camila. “You don’t need a man to define you.”

Camila, Athena and Hitchcock-blond Helena were having a chat session in one of the other apartments in the building.

Athena shook her head. “Her boyfriend is the reason I left home and don’t go back. He’ll be drunk, he’s mean, and he’s interested in me.”

“Okay,” said Camila. “But that leaves only one possibility. This Gel person with the cheating fiancée. Did he get back with her?”

“Don’t think so and he’s been coming to see me regularly for a while now, but you can never trust what guys say.”

“Agreed, but you were saying he’s alright and he’s presentable,” said Camila. “Give him a call.”

“He’s a client. Isn’t the house against us dating clients?” said Athena.

“A one-off if it involves safety can be sold to management,” said Helena, who was the contact point for management. “Seeing him as a client afterwards may be difficult. I don’t know how that will work out. You can’t come back here after dinner, either. Get him to take a room for the night.”

“Maybe,” said Athena.

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The circular metallic structure a little over man height, set on a raised and probably much older stone platform, loomed out of the jungle before them. Gel could see the remnants of stone walls and columns, in gaps in the foliage. The circular structure and the platform on which it sat was one part of what appeared to be extensive ruins – the non-human ruins which Major Tatcha had mentioned in the briefing on board the mother ship what seemed like an age ago.

Theo had scouted ahead of the main party - Gel, Alyssa, Cliffe and Hartmann - on the narrow jungle track and reported that the place seemed dead. He had adopted a captured Destroyer assault rifle for his own, as it could put holes in the Destroyer armour. The weapon



did not have the integrated grenade launcher of the infantry's assault rifle but had better optical and infrared imaging, which was saying a lot. Gel had kept his Dart-Gun, Cliffe clung to his rifle, and Hartmann kept his standard issue weapon with extra grenades for the launcher. Everyone was happy.

A door which might have been taken from one of the settlement huts was set in the stone platform. They checked as best they could for traps and trip wires. Gel noticed smoke coming from a small outlet near the top of the structure.

"Generator going in there, I'd say," he whispered. "Cliffe, you've got the longest weapon, use the butt to push the handle down and shove the door open. Don't stand in the doorway."

The door opened with no dire results and they went in, Gel leading. Inside, down an enclosed stairway, was a large, underground chamber filled with equipment. To one side was a field hospital operating unit with an operating table, monitoring instruments and trays covered in green cloth, all behind heavy, translucent plastic sheets. On the other side were banks of screens and in between was a hospital bed with someone in it, hooked up to a monitoring unit. The monitoring unit was being closely watched by two individuals with their backs to the newcomers. Both wore white coats, but the tall, thin figure on the left, closest to the patient, also wore a white hood as part of his coat.

"I told Major Murtagh that the Destroyers were to keep out of here," barked the hooded figure without turning around.

The eyes of the individual in the bed snapped open to stare ahead. He said "ooooohhh" then "aaahhhh".

"It works," shrieked the hooded figure, raising his hands as if he was a sinner asking for redemption. "It works. The Gagrims rise again!"

Gel put the Dart-Gun on his back and racked his trusty nine millimetre side arm. The pair turned. The shorter one was a scared-looking youngish male human, the other was of human form but with a bulbous, elongated skull which made him look as if he'd stepped out a 1950s science fiction magazine cover.

"Who are you?" demanded this creature. His voice was harsh and grating.

"We have the guns, we ask the questions," said Gel. "Theo and Cliffe, check down there." He pointed to an archway beside the bed, the only other way out of the circular room he could see. "Be careful now."

They moved off.

"Where is Major Murtagh?" demanded the hooded figure.

"He won't be joining us," said Gel. "The question is who the hell are you?"

"I am an intelligence far in advance of you," said white hoodie. "I am not going to divulge labels."

"Fine," said Gel and nodded at the other figure. "Who are you?"

"Ryan Mattox. I answered an ad in Sylvan, the settlement thataway I think." He pointed East. "You are assault infantry aren't you, from Lighthold? Major Murtagh said he would keep you out."

"Silence!" thundered Hoodie.

"Whatever your name is," said Gel, pointing his pistol at Hoodie. "Your head makes a large target and if you're keeping up with current events you'd know you ain't in charge here any longer."

Hoodie shut up but glared at Gel and Alyssa who was now inspecting the man in the bed. That man, Gel noticed, had two wires running from the side of his head down to a small box in a leather pouch around his neck.

Cliffe and Theo returned trailing a group of humans they had freed from a cell, a lone Destroyer out of armour who had been asleep at his post and two survivors from B Company.

“You’re three platoon,” said one of these. “Are we glad to see you guys. We thought the whole company was gone.”

“Most of it has,” said Gel. “Just half of our platoon, plus a few others.”

The rest of the small group were civilian miners, the former residents of Walter’s Find.

“Jerrold?” said the one female of the group looking at the person on the bed.

“Oooohhhh! Aaaaahhhh!” said Jerrold, looking around the room, a strange, yellow gleam in his eye.

“Is that his name?” asked Gel.

“Jerrold Grainger,” said the female miner. “He’s a smart crystal expert, or maybe was.”

“The lights are full on in there,” said Alyssa scanning the displays on Jerrold’s monitoring unit, “but I dunno who or what is at home.”

“Aaaaahhhh!” said Jerrold, moving his head and arms.

“In my professional opinion,” said Alyssa, “real crazy shit has been going down here.”

“I’ll ask the obvious question,” said Gel, turning to Hoodie, “what have you done to this guy?”

Hoodie looked defiant. Gel turned to the assistant

“Ryan, what do you call Evil Hoodie here?”

“Boss or sir,” said the assistant. “He never gave me a name.”

“From now for convenience we’ll call him Dr Evil, and if he doesn’t like that name he can give us another. Do you know anything about what’s been happening here?”

“Well...”

“Say nothing,” thundered Dr Evil.

Gel pointed his pistol at the creature’s head. “Speak out of turn again, and low intellect me will use my primitive weapon to blow the brain containing your advanced intelligence all over the room. I apologise in advance for the noise and mess, people.”

“No problem,” said one of the miners.

“Why wait for him to speak?” said the woman.

“You were saying?” said Gel to Ryan, holstering his pistol.

“It’s about injecting the persona of a different creature, one of these Gagrim, into a human brain.”

“What?”

“The human brain can’t handle the injected intellect, so it has to be boosted. That’s the reason for the box and connection,” said Ryan.

“An external second bio-processor for the overload?” said Gel.

“Guess.” Ryan shrugged. Only it isn’t easy to do. Jerrold here is the third...” He trailed off.

“Found two more bodies set up like the dude in the bed in a freezer, sergeant,” said Theo in Gel’s ear, “plus another body which has been shot to shit, and some other stuff you’ve just gotta see for yourself.”

“Yeah?” Gel looked at Theo and Cliffe.

Cliffe nodded and indicated with his thumb. “Look,” he said.

“Private Sampson, we’re moving to a different section of this circus,” said Gel.

“Bring your fun meter. Ryan, come with us. Hartmann, get on the computers there,” he waved a hand at the other side of the room, “see what they’ve got, download whatever you can find to go. Change passwords.”

“Gottit, sergeant,” said Hartmann.

“Turgenev, Cliffe, keep an eye on Dr Evil and Jerrold here until we get back. Miners, we’ll be with you in a minute or two.”

“How come you’re using last names now?” asked Alyssa as they moved off.

“Just show for the miners,” said Gel. “More professional. Makes them think we know what we’re doing.”

“They’re going to be real disappointed,” she said. “Anyway, I ain’t got a fun meter. I’ve got a crazy shit meter and it’s in red line.”

A short walk through the archway was a room set up as a freezer with three bodies in it on shelves, covered in sheets. Two were set up like Jerrold but eyes and mouths wide open, as if screaming in horror.

“When they came out of the anaesthetic they just started screaming and wouldn’t stop,” said Ryan. “Dr Evil zapped them with a device he has – we couldn’t even close the eyes.”

The third body, another miner, had a big hole blown in it.

“He had a disagreement with Major Murtagh,” said Ryan.

“You didn’t know what you were getting into?” asked Gel.

“I was just blowing through that tin-pot Sylvan republic, the money they were offering was good and the person who interviewed me was a quiet guy. The only weird part was when he scanned my skull.”

“That didn’t warn you?”

“I figured whoever was behind it was eccentric,” said Ryan. “What could my skull size have to do with anything? By the time I met Dr Evil it was too late and I had to co-operate, although I was pretty sure my skull was going to end up like his, once they had enough of these guys with the external bio-processor arrangement.”

On the other side of the passage was a door leading to the cells where the prisoners had been kept. A little further on from the cadaver room, on the same side was another, larger room containing row upon row of transparent tanks filled with liquid. In each liquid-filled tank a brain floated.

“My crazy shit meter just busted,” said Alyssa.

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Gel picked up Athena from a club-restaurant precinct close to her building. His car was a mid-range, locally-made model known as a Jewell, but it met with Athena’s approval.

“This is good,” she said. “It fits in.”

Athena was wearing sunglasses, although it was almost sunset, a stylish grey dress with matching accessories and touches of make up. The overall effect, achieved seemingly without effort, was breathtaking.

“You look great,” he said.

She smiled – a much better effort than her usual slight movement of the lips.

“First time you’ve seen me with clothes on, I think,” she said.

“You look good without clothes too,” he said, “but let’s not go there.”

“We just have to make one stop before we go to my mother’s. A bar down here to the right.”

The bar was dark and out of the way but still fashionable. Athena led Gel to a table at the back where she introduced Helena, the Hitchcock-blond type from her building, as “a colleague”.

“I can see this establishment of yours has very high standards,” said Gel shaking her hand. “I am impressed.”

Helena smiled far more brightly than Athena. “Thankyou. The reason we’re meeting is that Athena here is an important part of our little family – a star – and I was asked to talk to you before you went on this date.”

“Okay, I understand, I’m not to get ideas.”

Athena noted that Gel looked at Helena for a moment, gave her another searching glance then drew back in surprise. Helena did not seem to notice.

“That’s it,” Helena said. “Relationships are not impossible in our line of work, but they can be difficult. Sex still costs money.”

“Sure, I get it. I didn’t start this but then I guess that Athena, beautiful as she is, was still stuck for someone presentable to take to this dinner.”

“Humph!” said Athena, then her phone rang, as it sometimes did when she was with Gel. “Sorry, I have to take this. Gotta smooth things over.” She got up, stood to one side and turned away from them.

“I didn’t think Synths could be used in this work,” Gel said, lowering his voice. He knew Synths could be sensitive about discussing their nature with strangers.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re a Synth aren’t you? The eyes have a slightly different glow to them. It’s very slight in your model and I wasn’t looking for it, but the light in here is poor so the glow is easier to spot.”

She rolled the glass of wine she was nursing between her hands.

“You’re the first person I’ve met for a long time that worked it out, and so quickly.”

“I’ve been around Synths all my life,” said Gel. “In earlier models the light glow thing is more pronounced. The manufacturers are getting better it seems, but even so you’re a real beauty and a work of art on a lot of levels. I’m impressed to meet you.”

She smiled. “Thank you but.. are you going to mention this to Athena?”

“You mean, she doesn’t know?”

She shook her head. “None of my colleagues know, just management and, you’re right, it isn’t strictly legal. In any case, I like to pass for human.”

Gel shrugged. “It’s no business of mine one way or the other, but it is interesting.”

“If you’ve been around Synths all your life, you must be from a rich background.”

“Fair point,” said Gel. “I also want to keep a low profile. You keep my secret and give me a pass for the evening, and I’ll keep yours, no problem.”

“Deal,” she said, and smiled.

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Gel and Alyssa stared at the tanks for some time, mouths open, before Gel noticed that the brains were different.

“These aren’t human,” he said to Ryan. “They’re bigger and they don’t have the two halves – the left and right brain - thing.”

“They’re Gagrims brains,” said Ryan. “This business with the booster processor being connected to a human brain is an interim step, as I understand it. But the boss had to do a few of those to help out with the next step, which is to alter the brain cavity – make it bigger, dome it up.” Ryan gestured with his hands. “He’d graft one of these into the altered body then inject a Gagrims personality into it. The boss is one of the domed up ones – a second phase from somewhere else. The first phase, using a booster box, is a lot easier but took a few goes to get right, as you saw.”

“Quite a program, but he’d have needed a lot more bodies to house all these,” said Gel.

“Few more prisoners, some from the Sylvan Republic. Bodies would be found.”

“Dr Evil sounds like one really charming guy,” said Alyssa. “Maybe Cliffe and Theo can arrange an accident for him?”

“It’s a tempting thought,” said Gel, “but what I don’t get is why all this has to be done here? The planet is swarming with Assault Infantry. Granted they can massacre a company or

two but it's still odds on they'd be interrupted, and interruptions during brain surgery is not a good thing."

"Moving the stuff holding the intellects is hard," said Ryan. "And transmitting them through any kind of link would take too long."

"Stuff holding the intellects?"

"Next passage along."

The next passage was lined with shelves containing row upon row of rectangular slabs, standing on their ends as if they were large, library books with writing in gold letters on the spines.

"Each one of those things is a form of pure smart crystal and heavier than lead, or seems like," said Ryan. "We had to get one up from below for Jerrold and that was a major effort."

"Below?"

"Stairs at end."

Sure enough, there was a hole in the floor with a circular staircase leading to another chamber. They stopped at a landing perhaps a single storey below floor level and Alyssa switched on the torch she always carried. The shelves, accessible by metal walkways, stretched out into the distance and below them as far as they could see in the torch light.

"Impressive isn't it," said Ryan who had followed them down. "The slab needed for Jerrold was another level down and four rows across. I had to set up winches to get it upstairs."

"Where is the slab now?" asked Gel.

"Plugged into a machine at the head of Jerrold's bed the boss uses for transfers. The transfer takes a whole day plus."

Without a pebble to hand or a coin, Gel took one round from the spare clip of his pistol and dropped it over the side. After what seemed like an age they heard a faint clink of metal hitting a stone floor far below.

"There must be thousands of these slabs down here. A whole people imprinted themselves in these slabs to be, what, woken up later?"

Ryan shrugged. "Guess so."

"Transferring all this would take years."

"They were going to do what they could and come back. The slabs are hard to destroy and erasing the personalities on them is tough unless you know how. Major Murtagh and Dr Evil talked while I was around, as they thought I'd end up like Jerrold. Dr Evil needed bodies – the original Gagrims were no good, it seems – and he was pretty sure that asking nicely wouldn't work."

"He got that right," said Alyssa.

"I've seen enough for now," said Gel. "Let's get back."

Returning to the main chamber, Gel, Alyssa and Ryan found the colonists and soldiers milling around, looking at the equipment and screens.

"Okay people, listen up," said Gel. "We're going to box up what we can of this freak show including Jerrold here..."

"Gaaaa," said Jerrold, then "hoot.. hoot."

"..And go back to Walter's Find. You miners can always stay but we're still in a war zone and with any luck a transport will be leaving real soon."

"We'll take it," said the woman. "We just want to go home."

"Let us pick up our stuff and we're gone," said one of the men.

"Turgenev and Cliffe, as this is a medical facility there should be a stretcher somewhere," said Gel. "It's not far to Walter's Find. We'll stretch Jerrold back. Is he alright to go Sampson?"

Alyssa looked at the monitors again and edged closer to Jerrold.

"Near as I can tell," she said. "But this is usually the part in the films my husband likes to watch where the medic who tries to help gets torn to shreds."

"I've seen that film," said Theo. "The whole first encounter team gets wiped out."

"Gaaaa – ooooh, hoot," said Jerrold.

"Is there any duct tape in this facility?" Gel asked of Ryan.

"I have some sergeant," said Hartmann. "I put some of the rolls we found in the truck in my pack."

"Then bind Jerrold to the stretcher before he starts to rip us to shreds and let's go. It'll start raining again soon."

"You can't leave the brains unmonitored," said Dr Evil.

"Just watch me," said Gel. "I'm also leaving three dead bodies, for now. You can tell your problems to the people in the ship in orbit where you're going. I'm told that there are people there whose job is to ask questions, and even listen to the answers. Sometimes they ask politely. Sometimes they're not so polite, or so I'm told. You can dazzle them with your higher intellect."

"Sounds like fun all round," said Alyssa.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Athena's mother was half an hour's drive from the entertainment area – long enough for she and Gel to get their stories straight and consistent.

"Am I supposed to call you Athena in front of your mother?" asked Gel.

"No that was just a name they gave me – sounded better than my real name, Heather."

"Your name is Heather?"

"Yes, Heather Barton. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing at all," said Gel. "It's a nice name, it's just that it's a girl next door name. Not one you'd link to an exotic model type."

"Humph! Nice save, Gel," she said, as if they were a couple.

"My full first name is Gellibrand, if the issue comes up."

"That's unusual. I've never heard anyone called Gellibrand before."

"Some place on Earth my mother had fond memories of. My last name for the evening is Brandon."

"That's not your real surname?"

"Nope. If you get further into Jane Austen you'll recognise it. I have reasons for not giving my right name. Where are we supposed to have met?"

"Don't worry about that," said Athena. "My mother knows what I do and knows you're a client – an unattached one. Do you have a girlfriend?"

"Nope. I told you I had a fiancée a ways back and now no-one. Haven't dated at all or tried to for almost a year now. What about the boyfriend?"

"He knows too. Piece of shit that he is. Last time I was there he asked to fuck me at a discount. He may be drunk tonight, too."

"Sounds charming. I'm along as a counter to this guy, in other words?"

"About the size of it. If it had been just mother, I would have gone just myself. You understand."

"Of course."

"Helena really boosted you to me," said Athena.

"She did! I'm flattered, she is a very good looking woman. Almost as good looking as you."

Athena smiled again. Another reasonable effort. "You're being diplomatic tonight, Gellibrand. You know she has a son?"

"She does?" Gel could not hide his astonishment.

"What's wrong with that? Women have children, it's what they do."

"Nothing at all – it's... just children are a commitment. How does she care for the child? Does she keep him with her?"

"That's not possible. The boy is with his grandmother, and she goes to see him when she can."

"How old is he?"

"Still pre-school. School next year. Four maybe."

Gellibrand was almost going to ask how old the supposed grandmother was but stopped himself. He had made a promise and would keep it.

"Raising children can be very difficult," was all he said.

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Jerrold thrashed around so much that eventually they let him up, taking all the tubes and monitoring devices out of him, and binding his hands behind him, with difficulty. Dr Evil's preparations for brain surgery had not extended to more than taking the boots off the human host body and shaving the relevant parts of the skull. With his boots back on Jerrold almost looked as if he was ready for a day at the mine, but for the fact that he had electrodes planted in his head, as well as looking around wildly and speaking nonsense.

"Allway nona gump!"

"He's trying to speak," said Dr Evil delightedly. "It's working! It's working."

"Great!" said Alyssa. "Is he going to start making sense or isn't that part of the program?"

"Give him time," snapped Dr Evil. "He will speak when he learns how to operate the body."

"Is there anything left of the original Jerrold in there?" asked the woman miner.

Dr Evil shook his head. "No. The personality is largely overwritten. The new Gagrism entity will have access to many of this Jerrold's memories. These will decay over time, but they will help him adjust to this new life in a new millennium."

"New millennium, doc?" said Gel.

"The Gagrism are an ancient people," snapped Dr Evil. "We were travelling between the stars before your ancestors had climbed down out of trees."

"Well my primitive intellect boot will connect with your ancient intellect backside if you don't get out into the jungle for the walk back," said Gel. "Bind him up, Turgenev."

"Tape on the mouth as well, sergeant?"

"Not for the moment, we may want to hear him scream later."

"You're just a sergeant?" said Dr Evil as he was bound up. "That's a lowly rank."

"Brevet Sergeant. Your Destroyers killed every single officer in the company and then the two replacements," said Gel. "I wasn't even a sergeant when this started."

"You fellows had a tough time getting here," said one of the miners.

"It's been a hard week all round," said Gel. "If everyone's ready we'll go. Your former party hosts may come calling tonight and we have to plan for them."

"Someone must stay here to monitor the generator," said Dr Evil.

"I'm not leaving anyone here. I'm short of people as it is."

"My brains, my beautiful Gagrims brains, will be at risk."

"Can you believe this guy," said one of the miners who had also done a quick tour.

"Three bodies in the cold store and he's worried about cloned organs."

"The generator's on auto control isn't it?" asked Gel.

"Yes," conceded Dr Evil reluctantly.

"Ryan, how much fuel in the tank?"

"A few hours – I think it can go a whole day on a full tank."

"Fill it up, close up this facility and follow us, close behind. More than a few minutes delay and I'll come looking and I won't be pleased."

"Yes, sergeant."

Out on the track Jerrold tried to shake free of the restraining hand Cliffe had clamped around his upper arm with little success.

"Stop," growled Cliffe at one point.

"Jarwol, jubbah, oooha," said Jerrold. "Hoot! Hoot!"

"Hard to tell if he's making more sense," said Alyssa.

Then, about halfway to Walter's Find, Dr Evil, who had just walked quietly beside Hartmann up to that point charged Cliffe, kicking the gigantic private in the leg.

"Ouch," said Cliffe who turned. His grip on Jerrold slackened for a moment and that was all the altered human needed to break free and dash into the jungle, vanishing from sight in an instant. Unable to grab his prisoner, Cliffe hit his superior-intellect assailant on the jaw. Dr Evil fell as if poleaxed

"Hoot! Hoot! Byhoot!" yelled Jerrold some distance off in the jungle.

"Don't shoot," said Gel to Theo who had brought his weapon around. "Jerrold's still a civilian."

"He's already gone anyway," said Theo.

They heard a distant "Hoot! Hoot!" then silence.

"More crazy shit," said Alyssa.

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Mrs Willow Barton, obviously a beauty in her day although that had been some time ago, lived in a quiet but run down suburb with boyfriend Boomer - a large, balding man with a receding chin and mean eyes. These glared at Gel until he noticed the bottle of wine Gel had brought. Willow had a mark under one eye which Gel decided not to ask about.

"I can see where Heather got her looks, Mrs Barton," he said, handing her the wine.

"Oh please, it's Willow," she said, laughing "it's been a while since any man complimented me. This is Boomer."

"Uh," said Boomer, eyeing the wine. He had already had a few, Gel guessed.

"And this is good wine," she said.

"Local I'm afraid, but the Lighthold vineyards have their moments."

"Good wine," said Boomer, who grabbed it from Mrs Barton. He was going to try it then and there but realised it had been properly sealed.

"I'll unseal it," said Gel, taking it off Boomer, without seeming to grab it back and almost succeeding. Boomer glared at him, then followed him out to the kitchen.

"Didn't like you taking it off me," said Boomer, quietly, looming over Gel. The boyfriend was a little taller than Gel and a lot heavier. But the soldier had been training for months, and had been schooled in unarmed combat, at his grandfather's insistence, since primary school. Gel bent his knees then thrust his head into Boomer's face and shoulder into



his chest pinning him against the pantry. At the same time, Gel quarter turned and caught both Boomer's arms before the boyfriend could use them. The boyfriend tried jerking his knee into his opponent's testicles but found that blocked as well.

"At dinner you will have one glass," said Gel, quietly, moving his head away from Boomer. He found the man's smell stifling. "Or I will take the glass off you in front of the others. I am curious, also, about the mark on Willow's face. Did you put it there?"

"None of your business, asshole," said Boomer.

"But it is," said Gel. "Let's all have a nice dinner and I won't need to do anything. Mess up this evening, or I see another mark on Willow's face then I'll feel the need to do stuff. You don't want me to do stuff, Boomer." Gel stood back, releasing Boomer, and picked up the bottle again. "We understand one another, I hope?"

"Umph," said Boomer, glaring at Gel.

"Is everything okay?" asked Willow, anxiously, coming into the kitchen.

"Everything's fine Willow," said Gel cheerfully. "I was just showing Boomer here the best way to unseal these bottles."

After that, with Boomer alternately glaring at Gel and eying Athena/Heather lustily but otherwise ignored by the others, the dinner party ran along civilised lines. A safe topic was that of Jane Austen.

"What gets me is that the dudes in those stories don't do anything," said Athena.

"The guys sometimes do things," said Gel. "They might be ministers of religion or manage estates. But the women don't do anything except wait around to be married or manage households with servants. That's about it."

"Servants, sounds good," said Willow.

"In the book *Mansfield Park*," said Gel, "the heroine Fanny is horrified to be back with her mother who has only two servants and a small parlour."

The evening concluded without Boomer causing any scenes, Gel and Athena/Heather drove back to the hotel room Gel had taken for the night.

"What happened with you and Boomer in the kitchen," asked Athena on the drive. "He was quiet after that, I thought."

"We did some male bonding over how to open a wine bottle. He is your mother's choice, of course, but I'm not real impressed with the man. She could do better."

"She sure could," said Athena. "Was that stuff you said to my mother about being a patent attorney true?"

Gel had thought it better to say that, than he was a soldier. He had spent part of the evening explaining what that type of lawyer did, with Boomer looking both puzzled and bored.

"I was a patent attorney, or a sort of intern attorney one for a time, after university," he said. "But I'm not now."

"After university," said Athena quietly in a mock upper-class accent. "What did you do at university?"

"Science and law," said Gel. "it's what you need to be a patent attorney."

"You're a surprising guy, Gellibrand."

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"He went off into the jungle hooting?" said Colonel Murchison. This time the conversation was face to face on a captured Destroyer screen in the bunk house/control centre at Walter's Find. Two civilians crowded in front of the same camera with the colonel. One

was a medico of some sort, hair tied back in a bun, who peered at Gel through thick glasses. The other was an intense type with black eyebrows and bald head. A researcher.

“Yes sir,” said Gel. “And I don’t mean hooting as a code word for anything else or that he was making noises, I mean that he was hooting as in the sound an owl makes.”

“I see. You guys are having an interesting time down there,” said the colonel.

“Interesting is not how I’d describe it sir, and there is still some fun on the agenda.”

“We’ve seen the material you’ve sent,” broke in the woman medico, “but we need to examine one of these brains.”

“You have one up there, inside Dr Evil,” said Gel.

“Dr Evil?” said the researcher.

“The guy with the altered skull. He wouldn’t give us a name so we called him that. He’s a phase two model of what we could call the Gagrims Rises Again project.”

“What project was that?” asked the medico making notes.

Gel told them what he knew and about the slab storage facility.

“There are thousands of these Gagrims intellects imprinted on these slabs?” asked the researcher.

“’bout the size of it,” said Gel.

“Why are they being revived now? What do they hope to do?” said the researcher.

“No idea,” said Gel. “Why don’t you ask Dr Evil? He’s one of them. You could start with Ryan – the young guy we sent up in the same transport. He was an unwilling assistant and knows something about what Dr Evil was doing. Much of what I know comes from him, and he’d have more time to talk to you.”

“Ryan,” said the medico, writing. “Last name?”

“Dunno. He told me but I didn’t write it down. He’ll be up there, ask the provosts for Ryan. Now ma’am if you don’t mind,” said Gel hastily when he saw the woman open her mouth again, “I’ve got stuff to do, and there’s plenty in hand for you to investigate. Colonel, sir, are there any more soldiers in the cells you intend sending down here?”

“Oh yes, sorry, it was the best I could think of,” said the colonel. “Pity about the lieutenant. How did the two jail birds go?”

“Very well as a matter of fact. Hartmann, the pools hacker, has proved useful in taking over the Destroyer systems and Cliffe, that’s the officer assaulter, has used that heavy rifle you sent with him to kill one Destroyer and wound another.”

“Excellent,” said the Colonel. “It does penetrate their armour. As for the two privates I’m sure the provosts can be persuaded to forget about them. What are your plans now?”

Gel told him.

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The day after dinner at her mother’s Gel drove Athena to her place. She declined lunch as she had “appointments” and told him that she would have to see him at his usual time next weekend – as if they had not spent an energetic night together. Gel thought that he got the message. She then asked to be dropped off around the corner from her building to avoid drawing attention to the fact that she had been on a date. When they stopped she gave him a quick peck on the cheek to head off any more intimate contact and started to edge out of the car. Gel handed her a long jewellery box.

“Meant to give you this before,” he said.

“What’s this?”

“A parting gift. I won’t around next weekend. I’ll be off-world for maybe three months, maybe longer.” This was the expedition to Outpost-3 which included the ill-fated B

Company. “Who knows what’ll happen in three months. It’s a gift to show my appreciation of your company.”

“Oh right.”

On an impulse she leant forward and kissed him on the mouth, then leapt out of the car before he could respond.

“Three months is a long time,” she said from the curb. “We’ll see what happens then.” She closed the door and was gone.

Gel drove off, wondering whether he would contact Athena again. But who knew what would happen in three months?

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Gel thought of Athena’s parting kiss as he waited, lying flat in the mud of the jungle on Outpost-3 in the dead of night to ambush the surviving Destroyers. As per his instructions his small command was also lying flat in the mud, hands and face covered in the stuff to defeat any infrared sensors The Destroyers might have. The night was warm but the mud was cold, and they had been in it for hours as it rained, albeit a light rain rather than the downpours of previous days.

The moment the Destroyers had realised the tables had been turned they had switched off their external comms so that they could not be tracked. But Hartmann had noted that one of them still switched on for a few seconds every half hour or so.

“Sergeant, see, I left the earlier contacts on the display,” he had said. “Looks as if they’re going to give Walter’s Find a miss and try for the Sylvan Republic place.”

“I don’t buy it,” Gel had said. “These Destroyers don’t seem like the type of guys to abandon the base so rudely taken from them. Why the regular transmissions, anyway?”

“Maybe, checking to see if their platform is back up. They still wouldn’t know it’s been taken out by our navy.”

“Or maybe just to fool us into thinking that they’ve given up on their base,” Gel had said. “At some point they’ll abandon the pretence of heading East and strike for here. Maybe a couple of guys would sneak here directly and make nuisances of themselves, distracting us, while the main force abandons the movement East and strikes for here. The question is which of any number of tracks the main force will take?”

Gel sent out two-person scout teams to find the main column with strict orders not to engage. Assault Infantry training stressed sneaking around, that is stealth and cunning, over the shock and awe firepower which was the hallmark of the Imperial Marines. With the opposition’s overwatch platform destroyed, they could also stay in full comms mode, be directed from back in Walter’s Find and talk to one another. One team found the main force and was able to shadow from a distance. Good work! Gel left a half squad under Hutchinson in the jungle outside the base with Hartmann and Lieutenant Nilsen as the only people in the huts. With the lights still on Nilsen’s main job was to wander around, showing herself at windows to give the place a lived-in look. Suggestions that she should occasionally appear wearing only a bath towel, to add to the interest, were dismissed as inconsistent with the traditions of Assault Infantry’s flight arm.

Then it was a matter of getting into position in the mud and waiting.

Through the undergrowth, Gel could just see the Destroyer column scouts moving carefully, sweeping the jungle on either side with their weapon scopes. The Outpost-3 jungle was not as noisy at night as a jungle on Earth, but the spider monkeys still chattered in the trees. Well off to the East there was screeches of alarm as a monkey was caught by one of the local constrictors. Then the main force could be seen on the track. All had their visors closed

and weapons at the ready, scanning the jungle. One taller individual with a different shaped helmet and two red stripes on the arm of his armour passed. Major Murtagh? Two improvised stretchers with two bearers each on the narrow trail followed him. Gel muttered the alert into his comms mike and along the line soldiers adjusted sights and put their fingers on the trigger. They had mostly discarded their standard issue weapon in favour of The Destroyer's assault rifles, which would put holes in their opponent's armour.

Time for payback.

Gel fired.

The jungle came alive with the chattering of weapons and mussel flashes. The line of soldiers vanished. The scouts turned around, threw themselves on the ground and fired at the flashes only for the lead scout to have her head blown off by the sole Dart-Gun operator, the school leaver Parkinson, who had been kept back for that purpose. The other scout tried to vanish into the jungle but was caught by a second dart.

"Cease!" yelled Gel.

The ambushers stopped firing. By then the Destroyer survivors had recovered enough to return fire but found they had no flashes to fire at and not much on the IR scans. The bullets mostly went wild – one hit a tree to Gel's left, snapping it in two. About all the return fire did was to give the IR sensors of Gel's soldiers something to lock on.

"Fire only at targets," said Gel into his comms. Through his own sights he glimpsed a shadow of a part of an arm, perhaps, and fired. The shadow stopped moving. Then he backed away. Fire and move. Never stay in the same place after taking a shot. The mantra had been drummed into them in training, in any case he had to call Hartmann.

The firing stopped and Gel got the sense that The Destroyers were about to melt into the jungle, just as Gel and the others had melted, but he hoped that his opponents were going in the wrong direction – that is, in a predictable direction, directly away from their ambushers.

"Not that way," Gel heard someone call as he spoke to Hartmann.

"Fire away," he said.

Back at Walter's Find, Hartmann touched a switch and a pre-loaded missile whooshed on its way. The loading Synth put on another and that launched too, just as a firefight erupted in the jungle outside the hut. Both Hartmann and Nilsen dived for the floor as a shot smashed the glass in one window then went straight through the wall on the opposite side. Hartman reached up and switched off the room lights.

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The ladies of Athena's establishment, at another of the house's gatherings, examined Gel's gift of a silver pendant on a fine silver chain and pronounced it "sweet".

"Its good workmanship and in good taste," said Latin-type Camila, a self-declared expert on jewellery. "It's not cheap but it's not so expensive that you can't wear it without the wrong types targeting you, or make the giver think he's bought a piece of you. As a token of appreciation it works."

"I like it," said Athena. "I think I will wear it if I'm out without a client."

"Gel won't be around for three months?" said Helena.

"Yes, off world, he said. He left me with an email in a note saying I could use it if I had questions about Jane Austen."

"Questions about Austen," chortled Camila. "As if that's what he's interested in with you, but that's not a bad cover story. He has personality this guy."

"I think he's going on this expedition to the Outpost system," said Helena. "That's due to leave soon and it's expected to be away three months or so."

"You know he was surprised when I told him you had a son," said Athena.

“Oh yes,” said Helena guardedly. “Why can’t I be a mother?”

“He said that raising a child, considering what we do, can be very difficult.”

“It sure can,” said Helena, glad that Gel had covered his surprise. He could be trusted.

“What is this expedition going to be doing?” said Athena.

“At Outpost? Bringing the place under Lighthold sector control,” said Helena. “The terraforming proved a lot faster than they thought and all these other groups started to settle on it. Maybe your guy is a soldier. Lots of soldiers going.”

“He’s not my guy,” retorted Athena. “I won’t see him for months. But he’s got the build and muscles for a soldier. He handled my mother’s boyfriend easily.”

“Muscles! Sounds interesting,” said Camila.

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Hartmann and Flight lay flat as another bullet smashed through the side of the hut and whined overhead. Hartmann thought to put on his combat helmet.

“Hartmann check,” he said.

“Hartmann come out,” said Squad Leader Hutchinson, breathlessly. “Make a break for the launch pad and block that line. I’m trying to corner one.”

“Oookay,” said Hartmann trying to let the concern show in his voice as more shots sounded from the jungle, followed by a burst of automatic fire. “Ma’am can you cover me?”

“You got it,” said Flight crawling into position. “Go, go.”

Hartmann put one hand on the door handle, thought that he’d really like to be back sitting at his computer screen on the transport, turned the handle and rushed out – the door opened outwards - straight into a destroyer who was had been reaching for the door handle on the other side.

“Wha.?” exclaimed the Destroyer, who went over, Hartmann on top.

Flight was there in a moment, pointing her pistol at the destroyer’s helmet visor.

“It’s one of your pistols, arsehole,” she said. “It’ll go through the visor. Don’t move.”

The Destroyer went still. Hutchinson came up a moment later pushing another Destroyer, his hands up, in front of her.

“Hartmann, Flight, well done guys,” said Hutchinson. “You’ve taken a prisoner.”

“We have?” said Hartmann, getting up and shaking himself. “Why so we have,” he said, looking at the Destroyer on the ground.

“Bastard!” snapped the Destroyer.

While the brief fight around Walter’s Find spluttered to a close, Gel searched the jungle about where Major Murtagh would have been when the ambush had been sprung, conscious all the time that the major might be in some overlooked patch of the undergrowth aiming a rifle at him. But then the major did not know what he looked like, they were all equally filthy and Gel carried a Dart-Gun as if he was still an ordinary ranker. He did not see the distinctive armour he had noted either around the trail or in the blast areas of the missiles Hartmann had sent over.

Major Murtagh was still out there somewhere.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Gel managed two hours of fitful dozing wrapped in his poncho, sitting with his back to a tree, his combat helmet still on, visor up, to keep track of the action calls, when the call chime from the comm platform link woke him.

“Sergeant Obsidian please hold for Colonel Murchison.”

“Obsidian here,” said Gel, automatically, before even opening his eyes. When he did open them he found himself staring straight into the face of a huge constrictor snake.

“Gaahhh!” He grabbed his Dart-Gun, which he had propped on the tree beside him, and knocked the snake hard to one side. “Getaway!” It slithered away. When Gel stood up he realised it was raining again; another day on Oupost-3 had started. It was the end of the second night after the ambush.

“Is everything alright there?” asked the colonel.

“Yes sir, sorry sir, one of the large local snakes was checking me out to see if I was edible. I didn’t want to be eaten.”

“I can imagine not,” said the Colonel a note of amusement in his voice.

Gel thought that it sounded as if he was on a conference call then he heard two shots. “One moment sir.” He switched to the unit net with the colonel also listening in. “Sergeant here, I heard shots. Who’s up?”

“Gilbert, sergeant, with Jeffries.” After Gel had snapped at him for complaining on the first day, Gilbert had put his head down and done his job with only the occasional grumble. “We’ve nailed one. He’s down but still moving. Can’t see anyone else.”

“Okay, good work, approach with caution. Sampson, you’re up.”

“On it sergeant,” said Alyssa over the net.

“A teams stand down and return to base, the closest team help out Gilbert and Jeffries moving the casualty. B teams up.” Gel switched the colonel’s connection to private but kept the unit net link open for himself. “Sorry, sir, operations going on there. You wanted something?”

“No need to apologise,” said the colonel. “Operations take precedence, and it sounds like you’re having a busy time. I have some people here with me, but I just need a quick sitrep. Where have you got your unit?”

“I’ve got two person teams combing the jungle looking for remaining Destroyers, sir,” said Gel. “I’ve got Flight Lieutenant Nilsen and Hartmann, that’s the pools hacker, back at base co-ordinating with a group on the transport about analysing disturbances in the jungle canopy to track groups. They say that when it’s not raining they can track groups, occasionally even groups as small as two persons, depending on conditions. From that we think that there may be four or five Destroyers left, all heading in the direction of the Sylvan Republic. We might try to catch a couple of these, but it might be better to grab the rest at that settlement if that’s diplomatically possible, sir.”

“General McMahon here, sergeant,” said another voice in Gel’s ear. “First I’d like to say very well done. B Company has staged quite a comeback.”

“Yes sir, thank you sir.”

“We’ll see what we can do about access to the Sylvan Republic,” said the General, “in the meantime I have scientists and researchers here who have a request direct from Imperial intelligence about this non-human ruin. They looked at the material and prisoners sent so far

and want more. You seem to have security at Walter's Find well in hand, but I am concerned that you haven't left anyone in or around the ruin itself."

"Squad leader Hutchinson has four people to cover both the settlement and the ruin, sir. But they are lurking in the jungle, rather than waiting in the buildings. We're also setting up surveillance and perimeter systems. They saw off one group the night before last, and it's been quiet since."

"I saw a note on it," said McMahon, "Hutchinson took one Destroyer prisoner by herself and chased another so that the people in the control hut could grab him."

The fact that Hartmann had knocked over the second Destroyer by accident had been glossed over in the report.

"Yes sir. She told me she was thinking of a remark I made about taking prisoners if possible. I told her that I would have forgiven her if she'd taken the safer route and just shot both of them on sight." The colonel and the general laughed. "I request that she be bumped to senior squad leader."

"I will arrange that," said the colonel.

"It sounds as if things are well in hand, sergeant," said General McMahon. "But I direct you to leave someone in the ruin itself."

"Pardon me general," said another person in a dry, precise, humourless voice, "this is Dr Seth Addanc, you spoke a day or so ago to my subordinates about these non-human brains in tanks in this ruin and told us to speak to the person called Ryan."

"Yes sir. Ryan was helpful?"

"He was, but we're now very anxious about these brains in tanks. They should not be left unguarded."

"One of my people checked on them a few hours ago and refuelled the generator. As far as he can tell they're doing fine. At least there are no alert lights on the control panels."

"That's not good enough. There must be someone there. It is possible that this Major Murtagh may try to get back there rather than go to this republic."

"Um, yes sir. I'll see to it."

"Also, we are concerned that you let the altered human go, and haven't tried to get him back," he said.

"Let him go?" spluttered Gel. "Sir, he escaped despite our best efforts." It occurred to the brevet sergeant that the person criticising him was sitting on a comfortable chair with a coffee machine down the hall, while he was filthy, unshaven, dog tired and standing in a jungle in the rain fending off giant snakes, without the benefit of morning coffee. "I dunno if you've been keeping up with the geographical situation but it's a jungle here. Take a few steps and it's difficult to see someone let alone catch them. It's not as if we can chase him down over the broad prairie, and we've been sorta busy. If you're unhappy with my efforts to find Jerrold, you're welcome to come down here and try yourself. Maybe you can adopt one of the snakes as a pet."

The colonel and the general, who detested Addanc, both laughed, to the scientists' evident puzzlement.

"Okay, sergeant Obsidian, we get the idea," said the colonel, amused. "What Dr Addanc is trying to say is that we seriously want this Jerrold back. That means you want to make it your next priority after seeing off the last of the Destroyers."

"Yes, sir," said Gel, subdued.

"Why is the alien called Jerrold?" asked Dr Addanc.

"Because that's the name of the human body," said Gel. "Jerrold Granger, a smart crystal mining expert. Whatever alien intelligence is in there now will have access to Jerrold's memories for a time."

"How do you know this?" said Dr Addanc, sharply.

“One of the miners, the woman miner we sent up, asked Dr Evil – that’s our name for the guy with the altered skull – whether Jerrold was still alive. That was his reply. If you want more details ask her or Ryan about it. He was present too. Come to think of it, send Ryan back down and he can keep an eye on these brains. He worked there, so he’ll know something about it. In the meantime, do you have anything useful up there like a tranquillizer gun, or maybe a taser you can send down?”

“What do you want a tranquillizer gun for?” asked Dr Addanc, puzzlement evident in his voice.

“You said you wanted Jerrold back, sir, remember,” snapped Gel, thinking that he was beginning to dislike this man. “And a tranc gun is one of the few ways I can think of doing it without seriously damaging the man. One of my teams spotted him briefly a couple of hours ago. He screamed something about ‘the Gagrims will rise’ then vanished again. I dunno what the original Jerrold was like but the altered Jerrold is fast and he’s got rid of the duct tape bindings we put on him. My guys also found the remains of a snake he had disembowelled and eaten.”

“Not a fussy eater, also, it seems,” said the colonel.

“No sir and he will keep until we get to him, now colonel, sir, general, sir, was there anything else? I think I’m going to have a busy day?”

“Nope, that’s it, young man,” said the general cheerfully. “Well done, again and do what you can to find this Jerrold person once you’ve dealt with the military side.”

“Yes sir.”

Gel broke the connection.

“You were giving grief to the guys up there sergeant,” said Theo. He had been a few paces away, scanning the jungle while Gel had been talking. They were one of the teams combing the jungle.

“Just some civilians up there who want Jerrold back. They accused me of letting him go.”

“Yeah? We knock over a whole unit of The Destroyers, a hard bunch, after most of our company is killed and they’re complaining because one lunatic gets away? How are we supposed to get Jerrold back anyway – at least without killing him?”

“That’s a good question, but I think I’ve found a use for those electric bikes of the Destroyers. I’ve just got to deal with something here. Hartmann do you copy?”

“Oh yes, sergeant, give me a moment... Okay.”

Gel was suspicious about this pause. He had often asked people to wait while interrupted during the middle of a game. “Were you saving a computer game?”

“Oh no, sergeant.”

Gel sighed. “Your own or is it something on the Destroyer system.”

Hartmann hesitated for a second. “There’s a good one on the Destroyer system. Been meaning to buy it.”

“I may check it out myself later,” said Gel. “In the meantime, quit playing on company time and get back out to the ruin.”

“Is there a problem, sergeant?”

“Nothing specific but the higher ups are onto me about not leaving anyone in the ruin itself. They have a point. They think Major Murtagh may try to go there, so get up there and someone will relieve you later. You set the door as I told you?”

“Yes, sergeant.”

“Go tactical and be cautious. If Murtagh has doubled back he is the most dangerous of them all.”

“Yes, sergeant.”

“Hutchinson, you copy?”



“Yes, sergeant. You heard me talking to Hartmann. Get two of your guys up in the jungle around the ruin, moving quietly.”

“Yes, sergeant.”

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“Now I understand the name Brandon,” said Athena in the first message between the pair since their ‘date’, which Gel got while he was still on the transport bound for Outpost-3. “He is the dude chasing one of the sisters in Sense and Sensibility.”

Gel had considered asking how the Jane Austen sessions were going but thought that if he did so it would look as if he was angling for free sex when he got back, which wouldn’t be far from the truth. In any case, Athena had made it clear that his status was still that of a client. As he was going to be too far away to buy her services he did not need to communicate or, at least, not be the first to communicate. If she didn’t make the first move, he thought, then he would let the matter drop.

Much the same reasoning, but from the opposite direction, was kicked around by Athena and her colleagues before she decided to send the message. It was something to talk about. Helena had given a good account of Gel, so the ladies thought that Athena should favour the soldier.

“But it’s been more than two weeks, now,” said Athena in one of the gatherings when the subject of Gel was brought up, “and I haven’t heard from him.”

“You told him basically he was still a client, didn’t you,” said Annie, the Asian dream.

“Well, yeah.. management said I had to.”

“Then him sending the first message looks like he wants freebies. If you go first that’s less of a problem.”

“The real question is how do you feel about this guy?” said Carmen. “Do you like him?”

“I like him a lot,” said Athena. “I’m not in love with him - hard to go there doing what we do - but he’s real nice and treats me right, and I want to see him again.”

“Can’t ask for more,” said Carmen.

“If you really want to see him as a non-client, you can meet him outside the building,” said Helena. “Just like I go to see my son between appointments, but in your case you can’t tell management.”

“Hmmm!” said Athena. She was not quite sure how Gel’s status had suddenly changed from someone she had to keep at a distance to a relationship prospect, but then she decided that it made a change from having no one in her life except older male clients.

“You’ve got quite a while to make up your mind about seeing him as a non-client,” said Annie. “And management can discourage this guy if that has to be done. Send a message.”

In the end Athena commented on the name Gel had used, that of Colonel Brandon in the novel *Emma*.

“Colonel Brandon was a steady, trustworthy guy,” replied Gel. “But the other sister” (Gel had to look up the name) “Marianne Dashwood, thought him an old guy with no emotion and fell for the dashing but bad Willoughby instead.”

“I never thought of you as old or bad,” Athena replied. “You need a different category.”

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Hartmann stopped short of the door to the ruin's underground facility. The door could not be locked or even latched and, as per instructions, after his last visit he had left an ordinary broom – the facility had a broom cupboard - propped up against the closed door. It was gone. Looking about, the hacker realised that it was lying against stonework maybe two metres away as if thrown with some force.

“Sergeant, Hartmann here,” he said over the unit net. “Outside the ruin now. Someone's been through the door since I was last here.”

“Shit,” said Gel. “Go through the door but go through as if the Devil himself is on the other side. Hutchinson! Forget caution, double to the ruin.”

“On it, Sergeant.”

Hartmann had been trained in how to open doors in potentially hostile situations and remembered his training even if he had spent most of the campaign to date at a computer screen. He stood to one side of the door pulled it open slightly then poked his weapon through, holding the butt tight against his shoulder. The sights showed an empty stone stairwell. He pushed the door open, remembering to switch the weapon, one liberated from the Destroyers, to automatic – he was not a good shot - and moved down slowly.

A hand in Destroyer armour holding a grenade appeared, but Hartmann had just been playing computer games which involved blasting away at almost anything on screen and he touched the trigger. He saw the shots flash heard someone yell then the grenade went off blowing him back against the steps. Hartmann felt as if had been trampled. His ears rang. In fact the grenade had been dropped at the bottom of the stairwell because he had hit the arm of the thrower, and his own bulletproof and helmet visor had taken the brunt of the explosion, but it was bad enough.

He got up, leaning against the wall and yelled “grenade”. Both the sergeant and Hutchinson were yelling in his ear, he did not know what. Some muddled idea from training that he must not stay still penetrated his consciousness and he stepped forward, then there was no stopping as he staggered down the stairs one arm against the wall as he tried to keep upright, to fall flat on his face on the stone floor. His helmet and bullet proof again saved him from the worst of it, but he yelled with the pain.

Someone else grunted and Hartmann turned to see a figure in Destroyer armour, visor up, clutching at his right arm, blood flowing through his fingers to drip on the stone floor. The armour had three red stripes on one arm. Hartmann did not realise it at the time but the older, bearded man he faced was Major Murtagh.

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The police found Willow still clutching the bloody carving knife, her back to the sink, in shock. Boomer was on the floor, shirt red and dripping with his blood. Fortunately for all he was still alive but unfortunately that meant he could shout, as the police arrived, “the bitch knifed me. I didn't do anything cops and she knifed me”. The first respondent police noted that Boomer was much bigger than Willow and that there was an empty bottle of Whiskey on the living room floor.

The woman police officer gently asked for the knife.

“He was coming for me,” said Willow, seeming to register the policewomen for the first time. “I had to do it.”

She handed over the weapon, an ordinary kitchen knife, which was put into an evidence pouch.

The policewoman led her away gently.

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Hartmann gulped, eyes goggling, then he remembered that he was still on unit net.

“Sergeant, a Destroyer is here,” he yelled. “I’m looking right at him.”

“Sergeant!” exclaimed Murtagh obviously in agony from the wound in his arm. “My opponent is a sergeant!”

“Sergeant Obsidian, arsehole,” said Hartmann, raising his weapon.

“Hartmann,” shouted Hutchinson from the door to the ruin, “you in there?”

“Here!” said Hartmann.

Murtagh looked around at the sound of Hutchinson’s voice.

“Suit, flash,” he said. A pellet ejected from his belt and burst in a bright flash that dazzled Hartmann. When his eyes opened again the major was no longer to be seen. The hacker got to his feet, groggily as Hutchinson again yelled “Hartmann” from the stairwell.

“Wait!” said Hartmann. He glimpsed the major at the far end of the chamber and raised his weapon again. The major threw something, underarm with his left hand – a cylinder which bounced once on the stone floor.

“Grenade!” yelled Hartmann.

The hacker realised he was still standing and he was close to the explosive. Not good. His mind muddled by being blown up and then falling down the stairs, Hartmann dimly recalled being told in training that grenades could always be thrown back and lunched forward. He stumbled, put his arms up while they were still holding his weapon. The grenade bounced off the weapon and back across the room. Just as Hartmann fell flat on his face again it went off with an ear shattering thump.

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Gel was still chasing Destroyers around the jungle when he got a panicky voice message, instead of text, from Athena.

“Gel, you remember my mother Willow,” the message said. “She knifed Boomer, and the cops have arrested her. You said you were a lawyer. Do you know anyone I can call? I don’t know what to do. Management doesn’t want to get involved and I’m not allowed to contact clients with something like this.”

Gel told himself he should be like management, whoever they were, and not get involved. He and Athena had been exchanging messages off and on but not in the past few days as he had been busy staying alive, and he was not sure about what would do when he returned. But then an image came to him, standing in the jungle, of how Athena looked sitting up in bed holding the bed clothes around her and of her wearing sunglasses, riding in his car. Okay, he was a dumb male. But there were other reasons for helping out a really hot woman, such as being able to give contract work to friends, namely Arch and Gillian. The case was right up Gillian’s ally.

The message had to be sent at once - it would take hours to reach Lighthold by squeezed light link.

“Theo, got some admin to take care of,” Gel said. “Go ahead and meet up with Cliffe and Parkinson. Check out that valley and stream that’s supposed to be just ahead of us. We might call it a day then. I’ll catch up.”

“Personal message, directory Gillian Messenger,” said Gel into his comms when Theo had gone. “Message is as follows. Gillian, the mother of a friend of mine Heather Barton, has knifed her partner. I don’t know the details, but I’ve met the partner and he deserved whatever he got. Go check it out as the mother’s legal rep but invoice Arch for the work from my funds. This isn’t a blank cheque,” Gel added hastily. “I’m no longer mega wealthy. See

what needs to be done and let me know. I've attached Heather's number. The connection between us is none of your business. She doesn't know my real surname and I want it kept that way."

Gel dictated another note to Athena/Heather, saying the Gillian was good at such cases then heard a rustle in the bushes, quickly switched his comms to the unit net and looked up to see a Destroyer, helmet visor down, pointing an assault rifle at him. The Destroyer lifted his visor to reveal a beefy, red face and eyes that glinted with black mischief.

"Why don't you want the girl to know your real surname?" he asked.

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Hartmann was aware that he was being shaken.

"Hey, Hartmann, you okay?" It was Hutchinson, one hand holding a Destroyer-liberated weapon and the other shaking his shoulder.

"Waa? I'm okay," he said, head ringing. "That grenade was the second for me."

"Which way did the Destroyer go," asked Hutchinson, "it may be that Major Murtagh dude the sergeant's been asking about."

"That way," said Hartmann pointing. "Toward the stone book library thing."

"I dunno what that means," Hutchinson said. She had not been in the ruin before.

"I'll show you," said the hacker, leveraging himself upright. "Just give me a second."

"Is there any other way out of there?"

"Shouldn't be," said Hartmann. "It's just a really big, dark room, full of these crystal slabs."

They moved off, Hutchinson checking two of the doors leading off the main passage. The one containing the brain tanks made her do a double take.

"Stars! Is that why Alyssa was saying there was weird shit here?"

"That and other stuff," said Hartmann. "Look! I got his arm when he threw the first grenade." He pointed to a big splotch of blood on the floor.

"You did too," said Hutchinson, slapping the hacker lightly in the shoulder. "Good for you. Way easier to track."

They followed the blood trail, Hutchinson in the lead, treating each corner as if the major was just on the other side, until they got to the main spiral staircase of the intellect library.

"This place is huge," whispered the squad leader. "How far down does it go?"

"We didn't check, but the sergeant said it was deep."

"At least we can see which way he went," said Hutchinson. Visors down and use the infrared scanners. If he's waiting for us, he'll show up on that."

They moved down, following the drops of blood. Ten levels down with no sign of a bottom the blood trail left the spiral staircase and moved onto one of the parallel walkways. After a few minutes cautious tracking Hartmann sensed that the air had changed.

"Do you feel that?" he said through the suit comm link.

"Feel what?" said Hutchinson.

"There's a breeze."

She lifted her visor for a moment then shut it again. "So there is. What's going on do you think?"

"There's another way out of here and this Murtagh character is taking it."

Ahead of them they heard something, a hatch perhaps, slam shut.

"Maybe he's gone already," said Hartmann.

"Maybe, but we can't stop taking precautions," said Hutchinson. "Keep scanning."

After ten minutes and more of cautious travel through the endless array of shelves with stone slabs, they came to the side of the chamber in which a hatch, like the pressure hatch of a spaceship, had been set. Hutchinson tugged at the hatch wheel to no avail.

"There's a control panel here," she said. "Can you get this open?"

"Don't have any of the equipment," said Hartmann. "Just lemme see." He prised off the front of the panel with his knife and examined it by torchlight. "Never seen anything like it. One way is to just blow out the whole thing. With any luck it'll go manual and we just turn the wheel."

"Or it could jam solid," said Hutchinson.

Hartmann shrugged.

"Best I can do, squad leader. Your call."

"Blow it."

They retreated down the walkway and Hartmann aimed at the part that he thought was key with his rifle. The sights on the Destroyer assault rifle would make anyone look good on a range. He fired. The bullet drew sparks from the control panel then ricocheted off into the vault's blackness. Something clicked and the hatch started to swing open. Then a booby trap set by Major Murtagh exploded, the blast blowing both Salts over. Hartmann had to stop himself going over the side by grabbing a railing. Hutchinson pulled him back.

"I should've stayed at my computer," he said.

An explosion and a rumble from somewhere in the darkness beyond made them both stand up. Abandoning caution the Salts raced past the newly opened hatch, now leaning drunkenly on one hinge, up the tunnel to a large chamber, the side of which had been blown out to reveal a rainswept jungle landscape. Just as they arrived, a small troop transport lifted up then shot out over the jungle before either soldier thought to use their weapons. Major Murtagh had escaped.

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"You know how it is," said Gel to the Destroyer who had confronted him. He dropped his gun and raised his hands as he understood that was the etiquette for such occasions. He was also aware that what he said was going out on the unit net. "My ex-wife took me to the cleaners in the settlement and the other women doesn't need to know where to serve the writs."

"I know how that goes," said the Destroyer. "But you said mega-wealthy and to pay legal fees out of funds?"

"We're coming," said Theo quietly through the link. "Keep him talking."

"I said no longer mega-wealthy," said Gel. "If I was really wealthy, what am I doing in the jungle chasing you guys around as just a Dart-Gun operator." There was nothing on Gel's suit to mark him as a sergeant, and anyone of rank would not be using a Dart-Gun.

The destroyer thought about this for a moment. "Fair point, but if you've got nothing I want why should I keep you alive?"

"You want to reach this Sylvan Republic place don't you?"

"'bout all I can do."

"I can help you get there. You let me loose at the outskirts and we go our separate ways."

"Sounds good," said the Destroyer smiling slyly. Gel knew the man would accept his help and then kill him the moment he was no longer useful.

"Can see you and him," said Cliffe. The longest sentence Gel had heard the man speak. "Need clean shot."

"Of course, we've been talking all this time on unit net," said Gel.

The man's smile faded.

"And one of my comrades has you in his sights, over there." He pointed off the left, although he had no idea where Cliffe was standing.

It was an old trick but the Destroyer's eyes wavered for just a second, and Gel threw himself to one side. The man's weapon chattered briefly. Cliffe's rifle cracked. When Gel looked up again the Destroyer was lying in the jungle, blood seeping from a hole in his armour.

Cliffe walked up, carrying his heavy calibre weapon.

"I like this rifle, sergeant," he said, and grinned.

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Back on the transport, Dr Addanc told the colonel and the general firmly that the situation was intolerable.

"I'm only finding out crucial facts about this altered human through casual conversation," he said. "And now I find that your people overlooked a huge part of the base from which a senior officer of these Destroyers made his escape. I should be down there, interrogating these people and thoroughly investigating that ruin. An officer should be put in charge to inject some professionalism into the operation, as well as rein in this Sergeant Obsidian's attitude."

Both the colonel and the general knew full well that Gel had put the whole operation back on track, boosted the Assault Infantry's reputation as a fighting force and gathered serious intelligence for the Imperium all in one operation. In any case Addanc regularly declared that sections of the operation were being mishandled, then made things worse by interfering. Both men were heartily sick of him. However, as they were also sure that the scientist was the local head of Imperial Intelligence, often known simply as The Eye, and not just the Imperium's field observer as he claimed, they tried not to let their total lack of interest in his opinions show.

"You have no say in military matters," said General McMahon quickly. "Sergeant Obsidian has our full confidence. But you can check out the ruin all you like. What's left of B Company can garrison Walter's Find and the ruin, unless Colonel Murchison has other uses for them."

"I'd ask no more of them," said the colonel. "There is a problem of accommodation, as there's nothing beyond the bunk houses which B Company is already filling up. We'll have to send down pre-fabs, for which a site has to be cleared. B Company are not combat engineers, but Sergeant Obsidian has proved resourceful."

"This is not good enough," said Addanc. "An officer should be sent down to oversee the work and keep this company up to the mark. I will ask the staff here for one."

"No officer we have could have done better than Sergeant Obsidian," said the colonel. "You would do well not to underestimate him."

"All appointments must come through me and Colonel Murchison," said the general.

"Of course," said Addanc, giving one of his rare reptilian-like smiles. "I always pay attention to your precious chain of command general. You know that."

## CHAPTER NINE

When Gel finally emerged from the jungle at Walter's Find with the last of B Company's hunting teams all he wanted was a meal, a shower, a change of clothes and, best of all, a night's sleep in an actual bunk instead of a jungle floor in the rain with constrictor snakes as bed companions.

As they walked in escorting one prisoner, Gel saw a figure on the veranda in front of the administration office gesturing at him. This figure had an officers' cap rather than a combat helmet and held an umbrella as opposed to the ponchos with hoods used by Gel's group to keep off the steady rain.

Gel veered towards this apparition who proved to be a short, tubby, round faced, blonde-haired, neatly dressed officer – at least he was neatly dressed until his shoes encountered the mud of Walter's Find. Two companions stood behind him in the tiny veranda although they at least acknowledged that they were out of the rain by taking down their umbrellas. One was a young, blonde woman in a uniform who smiled vaguely, and the other a much older man with a hawk-like face dressed in a leather jacket which did not conceal an under arm holster with a pistol in it. That man later told Gel that he and his soldiers seemed to loom out of the rain, faces hidden by the hoods of their ponchos, as if they were jungle ghosts.

If the officer thought they were ghosts, however, he did not show it.

"Finally, I've got someone's attention," he snapped. "I'm the new base commander Captain Edge, guards' regiment."

"New base commander, sir?" asked Gel, bewildered. He was aware of the guards' regiment which had heavier equipment than the run of the mill assault infantry units, including armoured droids, but he had never encountered any guardspersons before.

"That's what I just said, and what is this? You soldiers are filthy. There is mud all over your ponchos."

"We've just come in from the field, sir," said Gel. "None of us have changed clothes for days."

"We'll discuss this later," said Edge, dismissing that excuse with a wave. "In the meantime show me to my quarters."

"Quarters, sir?"

"Must everything I say have to be repeated. Show me to my quarters, I'm soaked." As one, Gel's group, who had forgotten what it was like to be dry and were not standing on a covered veranda, looked at the captain's pants. They later agreed that the pants were a little damp in patches. "And have Lieutenant Mihocek sent to me. I will discuss the disgraceful state of the base and standard of dress of the men, with him."

"Lieutenant Mihocek was killed several days ago, sir," said Gel, thinking that Captain Edge was a new horror he did not need.

"He.. he was?" For the first time, Captain Edge, Guards Regiment, seemed taken aback. "Then inform your present base commander."

"I guess that's me, sir, for want of anyone else; brevet sergeant Obsidian."

"Brevet sergeant? What happened to all your officers?"

"We're mostly what's left of B company second regiment, sir. We were ambushed while still in transports and all the officers were killed. We were sent two more. The first died heroically fighting The Destroyers, the mercenary outfit that ambushed us, and Lieutenant Mihocek was blown up by a tac missile after refusing my advice to switch out of full comms mode."

“None of your officers survived?” said Edge, apparently unsettled by the notion of commissioned ranks being killed.

“No sir. Now if you don’t mind, sir, I’d like to go change, shower and eat. You can tell me about the state of the base tomorrow.”

“I’ll tell you about the state of the base when I’m ready,” snapped Edge. “But is there any danger now?”

“This prisoner here,” said Gel, gesturing at the Destroyer standing behind him, although there was little to mark him out from the other poncho draped figures in the rain, “is the last of the enemy we have been able to find.”

“Prisoner?”

“Which reminds me,” said Gel. “Guys take our friend to the transport. They’ll be waiting for him. Then get yourself to the bunk house and clean up.” He switched on Comms. “Flight do you copy?”

“Yes, sergeant.”

After being blown up three times, Hartmann had been allowed a few hours of bunk time.

“Is anyone now using the shower in the office?”

“No sergeant we’re all back in the bunk houses,” she said.

“The building behind you, sir,” Gel told Edge, “is the mining site office. There are small living quarters in the back with two bunks. Best we’ve got. The third person can come and get bedding off us, or even bunk in with us. We aren’t absolutely sure we’ve accounted for all The Destroyers, but we’ve set up perimeter alarms and security systems to protect this base. Cams and sensors are monitored by a control panel in that building.” He waved at the hut next to them. “There will be someone in there all night, if you need to speak to anyone. We are bunking in the hut on the other side. Please don’t venture outside these huts and the missile launching platform over there for the moment.”

“You’ve built a missile launching platform?”

“We didn’t build anything, sir. It was built by The Destroyers and uses their missiles which can be very effective, as we found out the hard way. Good night, sir.”

“But look here, I have to be shown over the settlement,” said Edge, as Gel turned to go. “Where is the mayor and where is the city centre?”

“The few civilians that were here have gone, sir, and as for seeing the town you came in from the landing field?”

“Yes, of course, man.”

“Then you’ve seen it. This is the city centre.” Gel looked around. There was no one else at all. “And its rush hour. Good night, sir.” He stomped off, leaving Captain Edge to survey his new domain. Once he had claimed his shower, with some difficulty, and a meal he called Colonel Murchison.

“A Captain Edge says he’s the new base commander, sir.”

“I only just found out about this myself,” said the colonel. “Dr Addanc insisted on an officer to oversee matters down here, especially as it’s an important site. We told him it could wait until you set up the new pre-fabs we’re going to send you, and he could go down himself. Then he went over our heads to the government at home. They ordered the staff here to send someone. The result is Captain Edge. You’ll have to make the best of it, sergeant, with my apologies.”

“Yes sir, although they could have made more an effort at briefing him,” said Gel. “He asked for Lieutenant Mihocek and wanted to meet the mayor.”

The colonel started chuckling then stopped himself with an effort. “Sorry, sergeant, none of it was my doing, and you have to tread carefully. Any problems will probably go



straight back to the government. However, you've proven yourself resourceful, see what you can do."

"Yes sir. Thank you, I think."

"Best of all would be to get Jerrold back. You did well in finding him in the first place, I'm not saying you were to blame in any way for losing him, but to get him back would avoid a lot of trouble."

"Yes sir," said Gel, which was about all that could be said.

The next day, and feeling somewhat better for a night's sleep, Gel began to organise the vast amount of work that had to be done. Besides retrieving Jerrold, B Company had to clear space for the pre-fab huts to be sent down and sort out all the reports and paperwork, including reconstructing a unit diary for B Company. Most contentious of all they had to find and bring back, with due reverence, the bodies of their own dead, as well as those of the Destroyers they could find. The expedition had a small war graves unit but, like a lot of the expedition's other units, this was mysteriously occupied somewhere else. However, a state of the art lift-crystal transport left behind by Major Murtagh in the transport bay discovered by Hutchinson and Hartmann, which Flight Lieutenant Nilsen had promptly claimed as her own, could be put to use winching out the bodies they could readily access.

"Don't touch the bodies yourselves, if you can help it," Gel told the soldiers he had detailed for the job. They seemed relieved at this. "Use the mule androids to load them into the body bags we've been sent. Put a cam on the mules, supervise them from up in the transport then winch up the body bags."

"Yes, sergeant," said one, a stocky female. Her arm had been fractured in the initial ambush and she had been returned after treatment with her arm still in plaster to free up a hospital bed on the transport, on the understanding that she be given light duties. "But won't the bodies be smelling now?"

"Good point," said Gel. "I'm told the body bags will seal ..."

Captain Edge opened the bunk house door and strode in, followed by his staff. They all furled their umbrellas.

"Officer present," said Gel and B Company stood. "Good morning sir."

"It's raining again," said Edge. His woman companion smiled vaguely, and the man nodded.

"I had noticed, sir."

"Where is this ruin I keep hearing about?" said Edge. "I'm to take charge of it."

"There's a track leading North East from your hut sir, about two hundred metres along. We have one soldier there now."

"Can you get one of those vans I see out there along this track?"

"The fire support vehicles. Yes, sir."

"Then I'll need a driver and someone who knows the ruin, outside my office in two minutes."

"Yes, sir," said Gel. "This is Flight Lieutenant Nilsen, the only officer we have."

Edge nodded.

"Sir," said Nilsen.

"And this is squad leader Hutchinson, the next most senior rank."

"Sir," said Hutchinson. She got the same cursory nod.

"The turnout is better today," said Edge to Gel, "but still far below my standards and there was no morning parade."

Gel bit back an angry retort. B Company, who were all present for breakfast, murmured.

"We've only just come off very stressful operations, sir," he said mildly. "There is a great deal of work to be done and there is no parade ground."

“Double ranks on the track outside. This lack of military discipline must cease.”

“In the rain, sir?”

“Of course in the rain,” snapped Edge. “You’re soldiers not school children.”

B Company muttered again.

“We know what we are, sir,” said Gel.

“Tomorrow morning and every morning without fail with the flag to be raised, and there is to be an evening parade where the flag is taken down.”

“We don’t have a flag or a flagpole, sir,” said Gel. Such ceremonies had been routine on the base where he had been trained, but it had not occurred to Gel to have them in the middle of the jungle while they were still, technically, on operations.

“Then get them, man.”

“Um, yes sir.”

“I will be making reports on all of this.”

“Yes sir.”

Edge left as abruptly as he had come, trailing his staff. B Company collectively let out its breath, then murmured some more.

“So that’s the new base commander,” said Flight. “But who’s the girl?”

“No idea,” said Gel, “I wasn’t introduced.”

“The older dude’s carrying serious heat in that holster,” said Theo. “Top of the line ten shot.”

“Okay guys,” said Gel, anxious to head off any complaints about the new base commander, “let’s get on with it. We need to talk about how we’re going to clear that area for the huts. Parkinson you drive Captain Edge.”

Later, as B Company went about its duties, Hartmann cornered Gel and told him what Major Murtagh had said to him, and about the light flash feature on the Destroyer suit.

“He was surprised because I’m only a sergeant?” said Gel. “Well, that’s his problem. I’ll remember the suit flash thing, thanks.”

Alyssa then chose to pester him about his conversation with the Destroyer which had gone out on the unit net.

“What’s this I hear about you not telling a girl your real name and paying legal fees?” she said. “I thought you were holding out on something. You said you’d tell us the real story.”

“And I did,” said Gel. “All the highlights. But I didn’t say I’d tell you all of it, and I’m not going to. The only part I’d add is that the legal fees are for the girl’s mother.”

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Gillian Messenger was in her element, going toe to toe with a prosecutor on behalf of a woman who had stabbed an abusive partner, with a big plus that she was being paid for her time. It was an informal meeting without the accused present, but Gillian had brought plenty of steel and fire.

“There is little doubt that the incident was one of self defence,” she said.

“There’s a lot of doubt Gillian,” retorted her opponent, a woman serving out her last few years of her professional life with the prosecutor’s officer. She had little appetite for prosecuting Willow but would do her job. “The walls of that apartment are thin. Neighbours heard this Boomer person trying to persuade Mrs Barton to give up the knife.”

“I can counter that with the blood alcohol reading taken at the hospital, and those same neighbours will point to any number of times they have seen Willow with marks on her face. There’s even a hospital admission. Will the jury bother to retire to find her not guilty?”

“There’s plenty of evidence that Mrs Barton had a bad temper, gave as good as she got and could have walked away,” said the prosecutor. “Also, trials can be messy, embarrassing and very expensive. Tell you what, why don’t we drop the attempted murder charge, and your client pleads guilty to aggravated assault. She doesn’t have a record of any kind so the sentence is suspended, and we won’t oppose an application for the judge not to record a conviction.”

Gillian, who had been shaking her head up to that point, stopped shaking it.

“Will the judge do that for such an offence.”

“It’s at the limit of judicial discretion,” said the prosecutor, “you have to ask for it, and know the section of the code that allows it – I’ll write it down - but if we don’t oppose the motion then the judge will grant it. The conviction still counts for our clearance rates but Mrs Barton is free to get on with her life, sans Boomer, and doesn’t have to declare the conviction on any forms. Move now and we’ll get Justice Janice Pullman. She will be sympathetic to Mrs Barton’s case.”

“I know of Justice Pullman,” said Gillian. “You might have to talk her out of jailing Boomer.”

“Her honour might have to be persuaded that throwing the victim in jail is not a good look for the Lighthold justice system,” admitted the prosecutor, “particularly when we’re trying to convince the rest of the Empire that we’re not a hick back water, but she will do anything you ask to help Mrs Barton. Then the whole thing is over and done with, no one goes near a jail or even declare a conviction, and no one will care what anyone with the name Boomer, victim or not, thinks of all of this. I can’t believe his actual name is Boomer, incidentally.”

“A restraining order?” suggested Gillian.

“It’s up to you to make the application,” said the prosecutor. “I’ll be using my trusty work tablet to file the case records by that stage and won’t care. But you will impress on Mrs Barton not to stab any more lovers for the duration of the suspended sentence?”

“I’ll warn her,” said Gillian.

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With the rest of B Company allocated tasks for the day, Gel, Theo, Cliffe and Alyssa, still glaring at Gel for not being told everything, were left with the hardest task of all – finding Jerrold. They were discussing just where to look when Colonel Murchison called again.

“You have clearance to enter this Sylvan republic place,” he said. “I want a group to go there now, to make a point.”

“We were just going to look for Jerrold,” said Gel.

“Detail someone else to do that. I want a party to go to Sylvan and check it out. Make sure none of The Destroyers are still there. Contact a Professor Sylvan who runs the place and tell him why he’s heard shooting in the distance, and so on. Tell him there will be diplomats along shortly to discuss the status of his settlement and, no, you don’t know anything about that side of things.”

“I’m a simple soldier who doesn’t know shit – sounds right, sir.”

“We’re all simple soldiers, sergeant. And speaking of being diplomatic you are to go in with sidearms only, and no helmets. This Professor Sylvan is an idealist who doesn’t like armed soldiers wandering around his domain. He conceded sidearms only after being threatened with a takeover.”

“I’m fine with that if any Destroyers we meet are being kept to the same rules,” Gel said.

“He says there are no Destroyers.”

“The last time I heard that, sir, the company was almost wiped out,” Gel said. “But okay, sidearms only.”

They grabbed a ride with the body retrieval unit, who were only too happy to put off their grim task for a short time, in Nilsen’s new toy. Gel electing to be set down in a tiny clearing out of sight of the Sylvan settlement. Given the abject failure of previous intelligence estimates, Gel thought it might be better to walk out of the jungle from an unexpected direction and ask a few locals what was happening.

“Maybe there’ll be a bar?” said Theo as they walked through the jungle.

“If there is I can buy us a round,” said Gel.

“You have money here?” said Alyssa.

“A card they might accept. Used it in the ship’s canteen. If they accept it, we could do lunch. We have to hang around and be diplomatic in any case.”

“A day out. Sounds good,” said Alyssa. “We can talk some more about your personal life.”

“Maybe we can buy other services,” said Theo.

“That I’m not paying for,” said Gel.

Alyssa rolled her eyes. Cliffe, as usual, said nothing.

Sylvan, the capital and only town of the Sylvan Republic, proved to be Walter’s Find multiplied several fold. But it had a distinct downtown district on the single track leading into the settlement, which was about where Gel and his band happened to emerge from the jungle.

One boy, perhaps ten, walked across the track as they came in.

“Hey, kid!” said Gel.

The boy looked up startled, saw the uniforms and started backing away.

“Are there any Destroyers – other soldiers – around here?”

“I dunno nothing, mister,” the boy said and took off down one of the alleys.

The downtown district consisted of a short stretch of track with a bar on one side – a large hut with a sign saying ‘Bar’ above the door – and the town hall – a large hut with a sign saying ‘Town Hall’ above the door – on the other.

“More people in the bar,” said Theo.

Gel told Cliffe to wait just outside of town with the group’s equipment and for Alyssa to trail himself and Theo to signal Cliffe in case of trouble. He and Theo walked up to the bar side arms only - pistols taken from The Destroyers which did not fit properly in the salt’s holsters - and without combat helmets.

One of the republic’s citizens emerged from the bar door took one look at the pair, flung a look over his shoulder into the bar and fled down the street.

“Take your pistol off safety and undo the holster flap,” muttered Gel. “There’s something not right here.”

“Safety’s already off, sergeant,” said Theo.

A badly printed sign on the door said

### *Easy Spice Bar & Grill*

They opened the door and walked in. The room was a large one with a long bar on one side to their right, a bench with stools along the far side and a few round tables and chairs on their left. It was the settlement’s Saturday, as they later realised, and the place was crowded and buzzing. An old Irish tune called the Swallowtail Jig was playing on the music system.

The talk stopped, as if a switch had been flicked, the crowd turning in astonishment to stare at the two salts. Then they ran. Some went out the main door, brushing past the salts,

others out two back doors, and as the crowd thinned Gel and Theo saw three Destroyers in armour but without helmets standing at the bar, drinks in their hands.

The Destroyers, as surprised as the Salts at the encounter put their drinks down and moved away from the bar to form a line as the last civilians streamed away. They also had pistols in holsters and, Gel realised with a thrill of horror, the holster flaps were not done up. He and Theo had unexpectedly landed themselves in an old-fashioned stand up shoot out. Theo moved a few paces out to Gel's left. Both men's hands were down near their holsters. The hands of the destroyers were also near their holsters. No-one was moving. Gel could hear Alyssa screaming for Cliffe.

Swallowtail Jig was still playing.

"Well, this is retro," Gel forced himself to say. "We were told there were no Destroyers here."

"These guys are Destroyers," said the bar tender who had remained at his post, he was tall, thin, white-haired and narrow faced. His hands were out of sight. Gel suspected the man held a gun of some sort kept under the bar. "I didn't know that."

Finally, someone killed the music.

Silence.

"You're Professor Sylvan?" said Gel, without taking his eyes off his opponents.

"Yep."

"Professor?" said the middle Destroyer. He was tall, broad, mostly bald and with a hard, flat face – your basic brutal staff sergeant. The one on the left sported a moustache and goatee on a thin face, while the one on the right, in front of Gel had the smooth round face of a boy, a grin that never stopped and dead eyes. The snake that Gel had been staring at Gel when he woke a couple of night ago would have looked into that man's eyes, Gel decided, and moved on. "Since when does a professor end up tending bar here?"

"The professor is holding his academic qualifications below bar level, I think," said Gel.

"Yep," said the Professor and raised his hands to reveal a sawn off, double barrelled shotgun of the traditional break-open kind. The weapon lacked finesse and style but at the suicidally close range of a few paces, half a room's length, the blast would mess up any of the participants. Light sabres be damned.

"Three against two, not counting the academic," said the middle Destroyer, the leader. "Maybe you want to back away."

Cliffe chose that moment to smash the main window of the bar and put his rifle through. A red dot glowed dead centre on the middle destroyer.

"Keep it right there, Cliffe," said Gel.

"Sergeant," said Cliffe.

"Professor Sylvan keep out of this," said Gel. "It isn't your fight."

"You're in my bar," said the academic.

"You were saying about numbers," said Gel to the middle Destroyer.

"Your weapons won't penetrate our armour, sergeant."

"We're using your pistols," said Gel. All three Destroyers registered surprise at that and stared at the holsters of the two soldiers. "Cliffe there has a heavy calibre weapon that's really good at putting holes in your amour, as he's done a few times. You know how the deal goes. You put down your weapons slowly and you are prisoners. We don't have these rituals about killing prisoners at a place of slaughter or anything like that."

"Don't want to be stuck in no cell," said the Destroyer on the right. His dead eyes fixed on Gel. "Killing is what I do."

"Now wait," said the middle destroyer, conscious that no matter what happened, Cliffe was unlikely to miss with his rifle. He was too late.

“Suit, flash,” said Dead Eyes.

The moment the Destroyer said “flash” Gel realised he had forgotten to tell the others what Hartmann had told him about the suit flash trick. He had not been expecting any Destroyers.

“Eyes,” screamed Gel and he dived for the end of the bar, rolling, shutting his eyes and reaching for his pistol. He was aware of a flash and shots and the flat crack of Cliffe’s rifle. A shotgun blast tore through the air where he had been standing. The professor had shot at him! A bullet from Dead Eyes chopped off the near corner of the bar and whistled past Gel as he got to his feet, weapon in both hands. He dashed for the bar as his opponent’s second shot took another chunk out of the wood but missed him by a whisker on the far side. Gel saw the red dot from his pistol’s laser sights his opponent’s torso and the man’s dead eyes widen in alarm before firing twice, the shots flinging the Destroyer back almost to the wall. He looked around. The middle Destroyer was down, and so was Theo, Gel noted with horror. The Destroyer on the far side, Theo’s opponent, was now running for a door in the corner on the other side of the bar, clutching his arm.

Gel shot twice at that man as he ducked out of the door but missed, taking chunks out of both the door and the wall. Then he realised the professor was recovering his sight, had dropped his shotgun and was fumbling for something under the bar. Another man, a youth, was lying flat behind the bar arms over his head. Ignoring the youth, Gel shoulder charged the professor, his head connecting with the academic’s face and his right shoulder with the man’s chest. The professor yelped and was flung backwards on the ground.

“Fire on me, will you,” Gel said to the professor. “What other surprises have you got under here?” A quick search revealed an elderly pistol which Gel pocketed. He grabbed the sawn-off in his left hand, realising he had trouble moving his arm, pointed his pistol at the professor, snarled “gettup”, then kicked him none too gently in the ribs. They went over to where Theo lay, Alyssa working on him. Cliffe was already there, his eyes blinking.

“He’ll live,” Alyssa said, “but we need to get him up to the mother ship for surgery real soon.”

“Did I get that guy?” asked Theo, pale, blood flecking his lips. The wound was in his chest. Gel thought almost certainly Theo’s lung had been punctured. That was not good.

“You winged him,” said Gel. “He went out the back.”

“Other man alive,” said Cliffe.

The dead eyes on Gel’s opponent were closed but he was moving feebly. Then he stopped moving.

“Now dead?” asked Cliffe.

Dead Eyes had indeed passed on and, Gel suspected, he was no loss to the world.

“Grab his weapons,” said Gel to Cliffe. “And those on the guy you killed.” He turned to the professor. “There’s a landing field in this town?” The professor nodded, head down.

“Other end of town – a few minutes’ walk.”

“You behind the bar,” yelled Gel. “Get up.”

The youth emerged with his hands up.

“Don’t shoot, I was just helping with the bar.”

“Now you’re helping with the casualties,” said Gel. “Find a stretcher. There must be a clinic in this town. You and the professor can take this wounded man to this landing field. Professor, show our medic here how to contact our people and I may not have you arrested for trying to cut me in half with that toy of yours. It wasn’t even your fight but why shoot at me first and not the Destroyer?”

“You were in my bar,” he snapped. Then he added, in a more subdued voice, “and we don’t want the Empire in here.”

“No need for any more diplomatic niceties. Your little piece of paradise has just lost its independence. Cliffe, here are our good academic’s weapons.”

He handed the giant private Sylvan’s shotgun and pistol, to Cliffe’s evident surprise.

“What teaching?” he asked the professor.

“Good point,” said Gel. “Are you a genuine professor and what’s your specialty.”

“I didn’t always tend bar,” snapped Sylvan. “I lectured at Green University on the field of Conflict Resolution studies.”

“What?” said Gel, then laughed, as did the others. Release of tension. “This conflict got real resolved, professor.”

“You’re bleeding,” said Alyssa.

Gel looked. His left shirt sleeve and jacket was covered in blood and, now that he realised he’d been hit, his arm hurt like the devil.

“Our good professor here must have winged me with his shotgun.”

Alyssa cut the shirt open with scissors from her kit.

“Jacket took most of it,” she said, “but you got a few scrapes and one of the balls is just under the skin.”

“Give us a bandage now, and take the ball later,” said Gel. “Theo’s way worse than me, and I’ve got to go after the other guy.”

“You’re not going anywhere like this,” said Alyssa.

“Just watch me,” said Gel, although he was beginning to feel the shock of being hit – the buzzing, wooziness and urge to lie down, and he was aware that his right hand was shaking. He gripped his pistol more tightly, to make the trembling stop. “The other guy is in worse shape and remember the trouble over Jerrold roaming loose. Get him now and it saves us a heap of trouble in the future.”

“What is it with men,” Alyssa said, as she applied the bandage. “You’ve done enough already.”

“But we haven’t finished,” said Gel. “Cliffe, make sure our professor does his stuff and everyone gets to the landing field.”

“Sergeant.”

With his good hand holding his pistol. Gel walked to the back door where the Destroyer had left the bar, pushed it open cautiously to inspect what proved to be a back ally, then stepped out.

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“You realise now that you can’t charge him,” said Carmen.

Athena/Heather had just finished telling them how Gillian Messenger had worked it so that her mother had gotten off all but scot-free, despite some doubt about the circumstances of the stabbing. The deal had been handed to Messenger by the prosecution who wanted the matter to go away, but she did not know that. All she knew was that the lawyer Gel had paid for had come through. Her mother was out of trouble and free of Boomer.

“I don’t suppose I can,” said Athena, thoughtfully, “if he gets back to me. The message I got was real short.”

“He had to tell this lawyer to contact you as well, and he’d said earlier that he’d be busy for a few days,” said Helena. (Gel in fact had been trying to stay alive in Outpost-3’s jungles.) “This lawyer didn’t say anything about how she knew Gel?”

“Told me it was confidential,” said Athena.

“There are deep waters to this guy,” said Asian-dream Annie. “If he gets back to you, he’s worth keeping around.”

"I agree, deep waters," said Helena, thinking of the way Gel has spotted she was a Synth within seconds of meeting her. "As I said before if you do decide to keep him around, non-paying, then it has to be off-site. He pays for a room somewhere."

"Hmmm!" said Athena. Gel as a boyfriend rather than a client would be a complication in her life, albeit an interesting one. Athena's experience of boyfriends before she came to work in the establishment, had been a succession of good looking boys who were useless or losers or both. Whatever else Gel might be, Athena decided, he had proved very useful, and she doubted he was a loser.

"In the meantime, it's the right thing to send him a really nice thank you note," said Carmen.

"That's right, a nice thank you with a strong hint that he can call when he gets back," said Annie. "Then what happens is what happens."

"I guess I could do that," said Athena.

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Gel stepped out into a back alley between the bar and the back end of the next row of houses – no one seemed to bother with fences – then, realising he was an easy target, retreated a couple of paces around the end of the bar hut. No one shot at him. How was he supposed to know which way the Destroyer had gone? To his right, further into the town, or to the left towards the jungle? Then he noticed a drop of blood in the ally mud to his right. To the right then.

The next building along was made of the same material as the bar hut but larger and with another storey added, making it by far the largest building in Sylvan. The handle to the back door of that building had a faint, red smear. Gel had been trained in the basics of urban fighting. He used his left hand to pull the door open, wincing with pain from his arm, and poked his pistol through. Nothing. An empty, bare corridor, with doors on either side, ran the length of the building. A hotel? A boarding house? Gel stepped in and moved quietly along the corridor. He spotted a speck of blood on the plastic flooring halfway down. His arm was throbbing badly. This had to be ended quickly.

At the end of the corridor to the left was a set of stairs leading up and the right was what passed as a reception area with a white-haired, very nervous looking woman standing behind a desk topped by a serious security wire fence. A classy place. The woman took one look at Gel, bloodied and with a pistol in one hand, glanced at the stairs in alarm and vanished out a door at the back of her area without a word. No prizes for guessing where the Destroyer had gone.

Keeping his sidearm in front of him, Gel peered up the stairwell, then cautiously moved up. The corridor at the top was as bare and empty as the one below, but this time he could hear water running and voices. He crept along to the corridor's second door on the right. There were more flecks of blood on that door, and it seemed that the water was running just behind it. The voices were further down the corridor.

Gel tried the handle. Locked. He pushed against the door. It was flimsy and opened inwards. Only one thing to do. Gel raised his foot and smashed it hard with the flat of his boot. It swung in with a splintering crash and almost came off its hinges. Just to the left was a bathroom alcove where a Destroyer, with armour and shirt off, was applying a smart bandage – one that wrapped itself around the wound - to a nasty looking gash on one arm. He whirled. It was the same man who had been in the bar.

"It's over 'stroyer," said Gel.

"Fuck you Salt," the man said loudly. He made no move for his sidearm on the bathroom unit beside him or to raise his arms. Instead, he smiled slightly. Gel had a split



second in which to wonder why the Destroyer had called him ‘Salt’ so loudly and why the talking down the hall had stopped. Then, realising what it meant, he back pedalled out of the room, losing sight of his opponent and not stopping until his back hit the opposite wall. In his nervousness he lost balance and fell on the flat of his back, just as another Destroyer emerged further down the corridor, unarmoured but with his main weapon on full auto. Bullets punched holes just above Gel’s head, showering him with splinters. A woman started screaming. Gel could see the red dot of his laser sight on the Destroyer chest and fired twice. His opponent coughed and dropped his weapon in favour of clutching at a red stain that spread over his torso, just as the first Destroyer opted to poke his head into the corridor. The sergeant fired at the new target but missed as the Destroyer ducked away, chopping a section out of the bathroom recess door frame. He fired twice more his bullets going straight through the wall, at about where he thought his opponent would be in the room, while getting up. Then his sidearm clicked empty.

He had forgotten to reload before leaving the bar.

“Ha!” said the Destroyer in the room beyond,

“Shit! Shit!” whispered Gel, almost giving way to panic. Then he ran.

The wall of the corridor where he had been almost disintegrated in a hail of bullets as his opponent, a storm cannon operator as luck would have it, opened up. The noise was deafening.

Gel jammed his pistol under the arm pit of his bad arm and was fumbling for a magazine clip when he reached the body of the second Destroyer in the front of the still open doorway. That Destroyer came to life and grabbed one leg, making Gel fall heavily on his wounded arm. He shouted in agony. As he fell he glimpsed a woman sitting up in the room’s bed holding a gun in front her. She fired, the bullet whizzing through the doorway. What was this, Gel thought resentfully, open range day on Obsidians?

That shot made him angry. He twisted and thumped the Destroyer hard with the flat of his other boot as the Storm Cannon operator warmed to his work tearing huge holes in the flimsy walls on both sides of the corridor almost up to where Gel lay.

The Destroyer let go, just as Gel found the spare magazine in his combat pouch. He released the empty mag, jammed in the full one and worked the slide to cock it – basic gun technology had not changed for generations. Then, as the Destroyer grabbed his leg once more – what was up with this guy? – shot the man twice in the upper chest. The Destroyer went limp. Gel stood up. The storm cannon operator had stopped spraying the corridor. Then whoever was in the room fired again, perhaps aiming at the Destroyer on the ground. That made the storm cannon guy start up again. Gel dashed across the doorway risking, and getting, another shot which went wild. The remaining Destroyer was a far greater threat. He stopped just past the doorway and moved cautiously, crouching, and hugging the wall for a few more paces, leaving a smear of blood as he went. The Storm Cannon stopped firing.

Silence.

Gel could hear his own breathing and the sound of the rotating barrels on the Storm Canon – it had a gatling gun arrangement – winding down. Then Gel thought he could hear his opponent moving around. He edged forward so that he could just see through the closest of the huge holes the Storm Cannon had blown in the wall, saw flesh and realised that it was his opponent’s torso. He moved a pace forward, the dot from his weapon’s laser sights, showed on the flesh and he fired. The flesh vanished. He stepped forward again and this time could see his opponent staggering, a red stain on his chest, trying to bring around his storm cannon with his one good hand.

Gel fired again and the Destroyer fell and was still, blood spreading on the plastic flooring.

“Sergeant?”

It was Cliffe who had appeared at the end of the corridor.

“Heard firing.”

“There were two,” said Gel. “I just got the second. Okay now.”

Cliffe stared at amazement at the ruined corridor walls. He could even see through the far wall to the roof of the bar and yet more rain clouds moving in. As far as the Destroyer ammunition was concerned, the walls of the hotel might just as well have been made of paper.

“Okay?” he asked, puzzlement evident in his voice.

“Yes, go and keep an eye on Alyssa and Theo. I’ll be along in a moment.”

Cliffe left and Gel went to the open hotel room door. He peeked around the door jamb to see a young woman with long, dark hair sitting up in bed, naked but for the bed clothes she clutched around her with one hand. In the other she held a pistol which she pointed when she saw Gel. He shrank away and ducked.

“Madam, if you don’t drop that weapon I’ll fire through the walls,” Gel shouted. “The ammo on these guns goes straight through. Do it! And show me your hands.”

When Gel looked again, she had dropped the pistol on the bed beside her and spread her two hands while still keeping the bed clothes wrapped around her. He walked in and collected the weapon – a small calibre six shot.

“Why shoot at me?” he said. “I wasn’t trying to kill you?”

“You guys had guns. I was just trying to live, mister,” she said.

“You got any more weapons?” He put the small pistol in his pocket and looked in what was obviously the woman’s handbag on the side table, taking the weapon’s spare magazine.

“Just that,” she said. “You can always search me, but it’ll cost you.” She grabbed a card lying on the bedside table beside her and scanned it with a reader also on the table. “What?” she said, as Gel looked at her. “I’m just taking what I’m owed. That guy wasn’t natural.”

Gel checked the body in the doorway and realised that some of the blood from it was green and that parts of the body he could see through a ruined shirt were a darkish green. He was at least part synth. No wonder it had taken three bullets to put him down.

While he was checking the synth corpse the girl was eying him appraisingly. “You got time mister? Good rates.”

“Sorry, busy just now,” said Gel, thinking of Athena then of Theo. “Any more of these guys around? You really don’t want to lie at this point.”

“I saw four,” she said, “and I heard them say no-one else had come here

It was over. B Company had been avenged.

## CHAPTER TEN

Gel slung the weapons of the two Destroyers over his good shoulder then walked downstairs, feeling utterly weary. The receptionist had emerged from her hiding place to look at him, round eyed, from behind the security wire.

“Two of your guests have just checked out,” said Gel, then paused not knowing what else to say. “Which way is your landing field?”

“Who’s going to pay their bills,” said the crone pointing down the street. “What about the bullet holes in my hotel? I heard a lot of firing. Who’s going to pay for the damage?”

“Take it up with the new administration. Just be real glad we didn’t start throwing grenades up there.” Gel turned to go, then thought to add, “leave their rooms. Someone will be along.”

He walked in the direction indicated by the crone, watched warily by townsfolk from windows and alleyways. As two of the townsfolk had shot at him so far that day Gel, for his part, kept a wary eye on them. A few blocks of huts down the road was a cleared area and a hut with satellite dishes where he found Theo, now sedated, Alyssa with a comms head set on, Cliffe, the assistant bar tender, the Professor and another man who was seated holding a handkerchief to his head.

“Yes, sir,” Alyssa was saying as he entered. “He’s just come in. I’ll tell him.” She took off the comms head set and eyed the weapons, which Gel stacked on a table. “You found him, huh?”

“Him and yet another Destroyer in a sort of hotel next door. The last Destroyer was enjoying the paid attentions of a lady in the next room when I kicked the first’s door in. It got interesting there for a few moments.”

“No wall in corridor,” said Cliffe.

“Okaaay,” said Alyssa, eyeing Gel. The others also stared at Gel as if he had declared he was about to blow up. “You left any work for me?”

“No, no, those guys won’t be paying their bills. Owner is upset over that and the damage to her establishment. Running a hotel can be tough anywhere, it seems.” He produced the side arms of both men from another pouch and then the small gun. “And this little gun comes from the sex worker who also took a shot at me.”

“You didn’t hurt Mia did you?” said the Professor.

“She’s fine professor, although with the way the citizens around here have been using me for target practice, I was real tempted to shoot her and be done with it.”

“You know, Sergeant,” said Alyssa after a pause, “if anyone comes gunning for me, I really don’t want it to be you.”

Gel was surprised by this. “If it came to that, I’ll be the person running away. Anything but explain to you more about my personal life. What were you going to tell me?”

“General wants to see you in person with Professor Sylvan. They can send a transport straight away. It’ll be here in an hour. He wants you and the professor on it.”

“Well, okay, sure. How about Theo here?”

“I’ve put him out,” said Alyssa. “He’s stable but needs to be on that transport. Let me look at that arm.”

“And who is this gentleman,” said Gel gesturing at the man holding his head, while Alyssa got out her kit. He was a round faced, mostly bald man in his forties casually dressed in shirt, slacks and very muddy boots but with a military style belt to which both a truncheon and handcuffs were attached. He glared at the sergeant.

“Local cop,” said Cliffe. “Tried arrest us. Had gun.” The private showed Gel a pistol he had been holding of the same general type as the one under Sylvan’s bar but much newer.

“He hit me,” said the policeman, pointing at Cliffe accusingly.

“He does that,” said Gel. “Youch!”

“Hold still,” said Alyssa. “Baby!”

“Baby!” said Gel. “You have the good professor here take to you with a shotgun and you see how you like it.” He turned back to the cop. “Cliffe hit an officer once which is why he’s with us. Whatever happened to that officer, incidentally, Cliffe? Did he recover?”

“Hospital, out now. Mad at me.”

“Officers can be petty over these things, I’m told. But it’s still not a good idea to hit officers. Hitting cops who try to arrest you out here is a different matter.” He turned to the policeman. “We were fighting a war in your jurisdiction, I admit, but the crisis was over. You

should have stayed out of it. As it is, because the good professor here tried to take me apart with his shotgun, this place is under new management. If you want to keep your job you co-operate with the soldiers I'm sending."

"Urgh!" said the lawman.

Gel thought about this for another few seconds. "Come to think of it, what were you doing here trying to arrest my guys instead of at the bar and hotel where the Destroyers were?" He turned to Alyssa and Cliffe. "He was waiting here?"

They both nodded.

"In here, napping, when we came in," said Alyssa.

"You were going to try to arrest us and hand us over to the Destroyers," Gel said to the policeman, "or at least warn them – give them enough time to set an ambush. We just came earlier than you thought and from a different direction." He turned to the professor. "You've been with them all along."

"We can't have Lighthold in here," snapped Sylvan. "Most of our people are trying to escape Imperium rules or are on the run. You take control and most will leave."

"If they leave, then they leave, but maybe you can do a deal that involves exemption or amnesty for misdeeds."

The professor grunted.

Gel yelped again.

"Got the pellet out," said Alyssa holding it up triumphantly between a pair of tweezers. "I'll patch it up, but you better get it looked at by actual doctors when you get up to the transport."

"When the transport arrives," said Gel, "you and Cliffe find the other Destroyer rooms, any weapons I might have missed and personal effects, bag it all up then grab some lunch." Gel showed Sylvan his card. "This work here?" The professor looked then nodded. Gel handed it to Alyssa who snatched it, triumphantly.

"Remember I'm not mega-wealthy these days," Gel added hastily. "The lunch is for you and Cliffe and I will be looking at the total. Apart from that just stroll around looking casual. I'll send Senior Squad Leader Hutchinson with a couple of others for a light touch occupation plus Hartmann, now that I think about it, to trawl through the settlement's digital records to see what else has been happening. Sylvan's finest here," said Gel indicating the policeman, "will attend to the business of sticking the bodies in the local cool store, with the help of the assistant bar tender here. There is such a thing in this place right?"

"For the spices," said the cop, reluctantly.

"See to it and put the armour and weapons in your office for now."

"Ergh," said the cop.

"What do we do when Ella and the others arrive," said Alyssa.

"Take your orders from her. Maybe we'll switch our base to here but if worse comes to worse you can hike back to Walter's Find and keep Captain Edge company."

"Lucky us," she said.

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Major Murtagh did not scare easily. He was the one who usually did the scaring. But the person on the other side of the desk made him remember bad times from his childhood.

"You said you'd be able to hold out for months," said this person. He was like the individual Gel had dubbed Dr Evil, with a thin, tall human body and a built-up skull to accommodate the larger Gagrism brain. He had a hatchet-like face and eyes that glinted with the unholy yellow light of the intelligence behind it. The major thought they pierced his soul.

The mercenary also knew that the Gagrims were unfamiliar with the human concepts of pity or mercy, or the concept that mistakes could be made.

"The company that came initially should have been wiped out," said the major. "We hit all their transports with SAMs, then followed up with tac missiles. They were taken completely by surprise. Then we searched the sites. We know there were some survivors but thought that at the most there were three or four left."

"A contact has forwarded a report to the Lighthold government. A large part of one platoon got out thanks to the efforts of Gellibrand Obsidian, grandson of Bains Obsidian. He also found a few survivors of the other transports."

The Gagrims handed Murtagh a paper which included the report and infantry file picture of Gel.

"This is Sergeant Obsidian I heard about," said Major Murtagh. "If he's this founder's grandson, what was he doing as a junior leader on an infantry transport?"

"Never mind that now!" snapped the Gagrims. "The important point is that the humans led by this Obsidian have wiped out your unit."

"All gone," said Murtagh, taken aback. "None made it to Sylvan?"

"The few who did were killed there. And you lost both the Droid tank and the Hunter-Killer unit on the first day."

The major nodded. He could think of nothing to say.

"Just be thankful that there's a place for you on the transport out," the Gagrims said. "And we still have some use for your skills. We'll have to cut short our work on this site and leave thousands of our brethren to sleep in the crystal slabs both here and in the Walter's Find place, as you call it, for a while longer yet. We will return. In the meantime, keep out of my sight."

"Yes sir," said the major, subdued.

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When the transport arrived, Gel used the standard plastic ties from his kit to bind Professor Sylvan's hands to the arm rest on one of the seats.

"You said to that medic you were no longer mega-wealthy," said Sylvan as this was being done.

"My last name is Obsidian. My grandfather was Bains Obsidian, but I got disinherited. Now I'm poor like you."

"That was my bar and hotel you guys shot up. How about your family pays for the damages?"

"Who was the woman behind the security wire?"

"My mother – half owner," he said, reluctantly.

"It's nice that you keep it in the family, professor, but I've just sent three guys to your Spice cool rooms and, if I might remind you of current events, you tried to take me apart with that shotgun of yours. Instead of angling for compensation, you want to keep off my naughty list."

Gel settled into one of the seats and closed his eyes. The next thing he knew he was being shaken awake by one of the pilots up in the transport in orbit and a provost had arrived to take charge of Professor Sylvan.

"What are we to do with this guy, sergeant?" said the provost.

"Just keep him with us to meet the General," said Gel. "Then, as far as I know he's to be sent back. I tied him up because he's not a friend. Now you're here, he can be untied."

Then he was met by an aide to the General, a female lieutenant, who eyed him with concern, particularly the bloodied and tattered left sleeve with bandages showing through.

“There won’t be time to change sergeant,” she said. “You look as if you’ve just been in a battle.”

“I have just been in a battle, ma’am. Compared to the Destroyers I’ve met today, even the General will seem cute and cuddly.”

The staff officer smiled.

The general was also all smiles at the meeting in one of the conference rooms, as was Colonel Murchison and a woman diplomat, a Dr Watson, a formidable looking lady in her fifties who asked after the blood and bandages with some concern, and Dr Addanc who glared at everyone.

“Professor Sylvan, here,” Gel indicated the academic, “had an old-fashioned sawn-off under his bar which he tried to use on me. One pellet got into the arm and that’s been taken out.”

“What’s a sawn-off?” asked the diplomat.

By way of reply, the provost took the weapon out of the bag he had been carrying it in and laid it on the table, broken open to be loaded but without the cartridges.

“A Five-Way Special,” exclaimed Colonel Murchison. “I used to be a police officer on Lighthold. Must’ve been fast footwork on your part sergeant?”

Gel told them what happened.

The Colonel and the General exchanged looks.

“You were in a full-on, short-range Western style shoot-out in this Lucky Spice Bar and Grill place?” said the General. “You tracked the wounded Destroyer to the hotel-boarding house place next door and killed him along with another Destroyer? Quite an end to the campaign, young man.”

“Well, yes sir. I might point out the whole thing happened because it happened. We didn’t know the Destroyers would be in the bar; they didn’t know we’d come in. We went into the bar in the first place looking for Professor Sylvan as instructed. As it turned out he was tending bar in there, including serving drinks to the Destroyers. I also didn’t know there was another Destroyer in the hotel. I thought I was just rounding up one who was already wounded.”

“Really, professor,” said the general turning to Sylvan, “you tried to shoot one of my people after serving drinks to these guys. This doesn’t sound like neutrality that has to be respected under any universal convention does it Dr Watson?”

“No, it doesn’t,” said the woman diplomat.

“My people do not want the Empire or any part of it in their lives,” said Sylvan defiantly.

“I’ve already sent a half-squad to occupy the place,” said Gel. “Their orders are to look cheerful, raise a flag if they can get one and leave all enforcement matters up to the local cop that’s there.”

“That settles it,” said the General. “That entire section of planet is under our control. We can start that major base we were talking about and send Dr Addanc down to study this brain repository.”

“And we have to get Jerrold back,” said Dr Addanc.

“Oh, yes, and the irritating detail of Jerrold has to be attended to,” said the general.

“Yes, sir,” said Gel.

After he had finished with the senior officers, Gel went in search of the medical section to get his arm looked at, and to find Theo. Everyone he saw in the passageways had nice, neat uniforms, and looked at his tattered, muddy, blood-stained uniform, sometimes with surprise and wrinkled noses, and sometimes with awe.

He found Theo who had just emerged from the operation anaesthesia and was checking out the nurses.

“At least you’ve gotten a ticket out of the jungle,” said Gel, after he explained what he was doing there and what had happened.

“Two guys in the hotel, huh,” said Theo. “But I’m sore my guy got the drop on me. My rep in Five Ways will take a big hit. When that guy yelled ‘suit, flash’ or whatever, you shouted ‘eyes’ as if you knew what was happening.”

Gel told him about Hartmann’s encounter where Major Murtagh had pulled the same trick.

“You didn’t tell me?” said Theo. “You should have told me, man.”

“It slipped my mind, until that guy said the words,” said Gel. “How was I to know we’d be in a shoot out with Destroyers still in their suits?”

“Huh! You still should have told me. You owe me sergeant. A big favour, big time.”

“Okay,” said Gel. “Fair enough, I owe you.”

Gel’s acknowledgement of that debt would later have major repercussions in his personal life.

As he was leaving the hospital section he encountered a 40s-something, bustling dark-haired woman in uniform with a recording unit and a man, also in uniform, with a professional camera.

“You must be Sergeant Gellibrand Obsidian,” chirped this woman. “I’m with the media section and I’d love to interview you.”

“Don’t want to be interviewed.” Gel had never liked having his picture taken, disliked talking about himself to strangers and hated the subsequent media stories.

“Come now,” said this woman, “we’ve come direct from the general who said you’d been in a shootout. This sounds very interesting.”

“Less interesting if you’ve been in it,” said Gel.

“Then let’s talk about that.”

Gel advanced on the woman, making her back up against the bulkhead. “I said I didn’t want to be interviewed. Your friend here takes any pictures of me he’ll end up swallowing that thing.”

The photographer hastily lowered his camera.

“But the general said we could interview you,” said the reporter.

“General be damned. Talk to Theo. He just down there and was also in the fight.”

The journalist later complained to the colonel that Gel had refused to be interviewed.

“The man just dropped three dudes in a stand up gun fight,” said Colonel Murchison, “and being grazed by gunshot pellets didn’t improve his mood. If he doesn’t want to be interviewed then I’d leave him be.”

Gel, for his part, was suddenly aware that instead of being easy-going Gel he was now grumpy, hard case veteran Gel who growled at people. He was still easy-going Gel underneath, but the hard-case surface meant that he was less likely to be underestimated or taken advantage of. The bad result of this transition was that it came with fame.

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“You’re famous Jelly,” said a note from sister Genevieve. She attached a tolerably accurate account of B Company’s trials and fight back which had appeared in the news feeds. The account did not mention why The Destroyers had wanted to keep the infantry away from Walter’s Find, but that point was mostly overlooked in the resulting brouhaha. Lighthold had been settled long after the era of mass circulation printed newspapers on Earth and no independent journalist had been permitted on the expedition. But there was still free speech, a

number of social media channels willing to pick up on the military's press releases and plenty of commentators ready to add their thoughts.

The journalist took the colonel's advice and avoided talking to Gel again, but she spoke to Theo (the former hitman emphasised that he was single) and the professor. She added a small side story about her confrontation with Gel including what the sergeant considered nonsense about "looking into the eyes of a killer".

The media lapped up this story of a fightback, led by an erring rich kid, spiced with a knife fight and topped by a Western style shoot out. The fact that the infantry's standard weapons were not effective against Destroyer armour, and that the fighting had come down to knives at one point, kept the issue going at a political level. Questions were asked in the planet's Senate. The government promised an inquiry into the need for new infantry equipment.

In the meantime, partially to divert attention from these issues, the government was happy to sanction the award of an Infantry Cross – the mid-level bravery award - to both Theo and Gel, for the shoot out, the rescue of the surviving hostage from the Destroyers, before she could be executed, and the brawl in which Captain Gentry gave his life. Gentry got the highest award, the Grand Star. Gel was pleased to get the medal but disliked the fame that went with it, which included being occasionally pointed out in the barracks or on the streets. One person who was not impressed was Jenny, who withdrew her offer of hiring him as a probationary garden figurine.

"Jelly, a few of the senior girls told me you look hot," she said in a message. The news feed had used a file photograph. "I've even had one of my teacher's ask if you're single. Jelly you cannot date my English teacher and I can't have my figurines shooting at one another. I also can't have my brother in shoot outs or fighting with knives. I have only one brother and I don't want him lost anywhere, especially as mother has been embarrassed by the part of the story that said you were disinherited. She's been criticised on talk shows. Now she's more furious with you than she was before, which is interesting."

"Are any of the garden figurines armed with pistols or knives?" Gel wrote back. "If so, you may need someone to keep order. As for getting into shoot outs I couldn't help it, I was in one before I knew it. I didn't ask to be in a transport that got blown out of the sky and I didn't ask to be in a town where people decided to shoot at me."

"All excuses, Jelly," replied Jenny. "I don't have any use for a law and order figurine, but I do need a live brother to annoy. Don't get involved in knife fights or shootouts."

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After spending the night in a warm bunk on the ship in orbit, and before taking a transport back to the jungle, Gel dropped by the general's office.

"You wanted to see me sir?"

"Yes, yes, come in." The general waved him to a seat.

"Colonel Murchison tells me the officers of B company had a lot of trouble getting you to take a squad leader position."

"I didn't want it, sir," said Gel. "I didn't want to tell any other Salt what to do. I still don't much. I also didn't much want to be a sergeant."

"He said that to," said the general. "You protested at being made a sergeant – the very first time the colonel has encountered of the person getting such a promotion complaining about it, he told me. Yet your little campaign has put us on the map."

"Sir?"



“We’re still a relatively new force with no track record to speak of, and suddenly we have a real fight back against the odds to our name, complete with a hand to hand knife fight and a shoot out - all against a serious opponent. The Imperial Marines have started inviting us to seminars, and the Imperial system itself is now suggesting that we intervene in the Dimarch sector.”

“Dimarch, sir?” said Gel. “I haven’t been keeping up with events as I should have.”

“Place has fallen apart big time,” said the General. “Some fine cities have been ruined, although we’re still trying to figure out the situation and just how and where we should intervene. Such interventions have a mixed track record on Earth, as you may know, but whatever happens our government wants a further expansion of the Salts although it is itself a relatively new organisation.”

“Yes, sir.

“Tell me, sergeant, and this leads me to my next point, can you answer this question? When America sent troops to France during World War I, the divisions they sent were double the size of the divisions of the European armies. Do you know why?”

“Why, well, yes I believe so sir. Part of it was a difference in divisional organisation, but they also lacked officers. When American declared war its army was almost non-existent compared to those of the European nations and its main use in the previous decades had been to chase Mexican bandits. Suddenly the government wanted to send millions of men to France to fight a full-on modern war, with tanks, airplanes, poison gas and sound ranging of artillery, barbed wire and machine gun posts with interlocking fields of fire. They needed officers of all grades and getting them wasn’t easy. Senior officers in particular take a while to develop. Its sort-of surprising that they got a sizable fighting force to France at all, let alone that it was able to fight well in places like the Argonne.”

“Very good,” said the general, giving him a quizzical look, “I don’t think anyone on my staff could have answered that question for me, without looking it up. You know your military history.”

“When I first joined the Salts I stayed on base for months, and the base had a very good library.”

“Then you’ll understand when I say we’re expanding too. It’s not as nearly as big an expansion as the American armed forces had to undergo in two world wars but it’s one that still needs leaders, and I’m going to do my part to fix that shortage by sending you to officer training.”

“I haven’t applied to be an officer, sir.”

“I don’t care,” said the General sharply, leaning forward. “We have a three-month officer conversion course for those who are already graduates and you’ve going to be in the next intake. That’s an order.”

“Yes, sir,” said Gel. Later he decided that he didn’t mind. He would not seek promotion but if they thrust it on him then so be it. He would do his job as a soldier, as he now thought of himself.

“I’ll have someone send you the dates for the training course and orders for the transfer. I suspect you’re a natural at this soldiering game, sergeant, and I’m sure you won’t disappoint me.”

“Yes sir, thankyou, sir,” said Gel, wondering what Athena/Heather’s attitude would be when he returned to Lighthold.

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When Athena walked into the chat session, she found almost all her co-workers there, a rare event, and that they were all staring at her.

“What’s wrong,” she said, looking around in alarm. “Has anything happened?”

“Nothing wrong so much,” said escort Helena, “it’s just that, haven’t you seen the item about Gel on the news feeds?”

“No, what’s happened to him?” Her initial thought was that Gel had been killed.

Helena handed her a tablet with the item displayed. She read it and her mouth fell open. “Obsidian!” she said when her mouth closed again. “He’s from that mega-rich founding family.”

“Not just an Obsidian,” said Asian-dream Annie lounging in one of the easy chairs, “but almost The Obsidian. Just him and his sister in this trust. His mother can cut him off, but she can’t make it permanent, and she can’t take his share.”

“How do you know this?” asked Athena.

“I was curious. I looked it up,” said Annie. “Also, he still seems to have some money of his own if he can afford you plus your mum’s legal fees.”

There was a calculating look in Annie’s eyes that Athena did not like at all. Gel was her’s and she was not going to give him over to anyone else.

“It’s not just the money, look at what he’s done,” said Carmen. “Infantry Cross, promoted sergeant, led this fight back and had this shoot out. That’s impressive, and he looks hot even in that file pic.”

“It is impressive,” said Athena looking at the news item again.

“You should do more than just exchange messages with him now, if you want to see him,” said Helena. “You need to seriously encourage him.”

“Maybe,” said Athena.

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In a room in the basement of the same building the revelation that Athena’s favoured client was an Obsidian triggered an exchange that became almost heated.

“How did we not know that this guy was The Gellibrand Obsidian?” demanded the hooded man. He was tall, thin and narrow faced with a bony jaw. He wore a hoodie with the hood pulled down over his head almost to his eyes which seemed to glow yellow. The man and woman who ran the facility day to day, found their boss unnerving.

“We had no means of knowing,” said the woman. “He never said anything to her, and never gave her his real last name. Otherwise, she would have told the others. He also wasn’t widely known before this. He hates publicity, doesn’t like his picture taken, and has never been involved in his father’s business.”

“This shall be remembered,” said hoodie, “the question now is how do we turn this to our advantage?”

“Not easily,” said the woman, earning a glare from hoodie. “The problem is that he has no wife or girlfriend. In fact, he seems to have gone to Athena in lieu of finding a girlfriend. What we have doesn’t add up to serious leverage for us.”

“That’s right,” said the man. “It doesn’t matter that we were unaware who this guy was until now. There’s still no one to show pictures to. All we can really do is wait and see what happens. Maybe we can get leverage later, or in some other way.”

“Let these two see one another on the side,” said the woman, “and even meet here. We have time, we can wait.”

“We have already waited a long time,” muttered hoodie, almost to himself. “But we can wait some more.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The rain having stopped, for a time, and with the system's sun shining, the jungle of Outpost-3 seemed an almost pleasant place to be – that is, if it were not for the snakes, rats, worms and the need to find Jerrold. Gel was astride an e-bike captured from the Destroyers, waiting in a denser clump of jungle for the altered human to come into view. The sergeant heard the creature talking to himself well before he appeared.

"Gagrim are supreme," he could hear. "Make our bodies new, yes that's it. Human bodies just a phase. Human language needed for the moment. Once we'll have our base we'll redesign it all. Make ourselves over as humans say."

Jerrold appeared on the track, glancing over his shoulder, obviously hoping that he had eluded the humans he had just seen. He had changed greatly since Gel had last seen him. His hair had grown long and matted, he had a grossly unkempt beard, and his face and hands were filthy. An emaciated frame showed through tattered clothes.

"Do what we could not do the first time and ensure our bodies will survive," Jerrold continued to mutter to himself while walking. "That's it, remake it all. Make the bodies elegant and tough, then the Gagrim will be ready for the new age. Enslave humans. Let them know that touch of a whip. Make them pay for chasing the master race through jungles."

Gel turned on the e-bike, more of an e-scooter really with wide wheels and not much power – some of his Salts fresh from the racing tracks of Lighthold had expressed disgust at the "lack of oomph" as they put it – but the Destroyer vehicles had enough for jungle tracks on Outpost-3. Jerrold looked around suddenly, seeing the sergeant for the first time.

"Gagrim will rise," he said, then took off Gel after him. He tried to veer into the jungle only to find Hutchinson on another bike on a parallel track heading him off. He turned and ran across Gel's front to find Parkinson on another bike blocking his path. He realised then he was being herded, but he had no choice. He had to run and he did, moving so fast that they almost lost sight of him in the trees and undergrowth.

But he still ran straight into the pre-arranged spot where Alyssa and Cliffe had strung up a giant net borrowed from the Sylvan spice farms between two trees. Entangled in the net, Jerrold fell, although he was travelling so fast that he went head first into the hole they had also dug and covered with ferns to be sure of catching him, landing with a distinct thud. Anxious to make up for letting him go the first time Cliffe was on Jerrold in a second, but the fall had knocked the fight out of the altered human.

"We are the master race," raved Jerrold recovering as they bound him to a stretcher with tape. "Humans do not understand. You think you know about technology. No, the Gagrim are masters of technology. We will have ships and droids at the snap of our fingers..."

"This member of the master race stinks," said Alyssa.

"Eh," said Cliffe, which meant he agreed wholeheartedly.

"Flight, you with us?" said Gel through comms on his helmet.

"Of course, sergeant," she said. "Just above you now."

"Okay, guys, I'm going to ride along with our member of the master race. You wait for the others to come up, then everyone rides back on the bikes to Sylvan and finish setting up the barracks, and good work."

"Yes, sergeant," they chorused.

On hearing about Captain Edge's insistence on morning and evening parades Colonel Murchison had ordered B Company remnants to move to Sylvan where they had

requisitioned two empty buildings on the edge of town. Captain Edge had been given a section of the Guards Regiment, finally freed from whatever else they had been doing on Outpost-3, to lord over.

Jerrold in his stretcher was winched up to the transport – the one found when Major Murtagh had fled - hovering just above the jungle canopy, followed by Gel.

“Where to, sergeant,” asked Flight, from her pilot’s chair. She had not been given a co-pilot.

“Back to the ruin with the brains,” said Gel. “We’ll drop Jerrold off there.”

“Back to my brethren?” said Jerrold, eyes lighting up.

“Sure,” said Gel, sitting on the edge of his stretcher which had been clipped into a frame built for that purpose. As Alyssa had noted, Jerrold stank. The sergeant would have preferred not to have anything to do with the new-model Jerrold, but he was curious. “You are going there to help others understand the Gagrims. The other Gagrims are our prisoners.”

The light in Jerrold’s eyes died.

“You mentioned before about a base,” said Gel.

“What of it?” said Jerrold, suddenly wary.

“Why do you need a base? Where is it?”

“This is information that you do not need to know,” said Jerrold. “When the Gagrims rise again human you will know just what we can do.”

“You don’t look like you are rising at the moment? How do you expect to get to this base?”

“You will find out in good time, human,” said Jerrold.

Gel was silent for a few seconds, watching the jungle canopy as it moved past the transport’s windows.

“The Gagrims must have been a great race,” he said eventually.

“We were supreme, we were dominant,” spat Jerrold, the yellow gleam coming back in his eyes.

“Not so dominant from where I’m sitting,” said Gel. “After being stored on a slab for thousands of years you’re in a borrowed body which is bound to a stretcher and on your way to a prison. So much for being the master race.”

“We will build our strength,” said Jerrold, struggling against his bonds. “If not me, then others and they will come for me, and then you will be in the stretcher.”

“Maybe,” said Gel, “but it doesn’t seem so likely just at the moment, and there’s nowhere in this part of the galactic arm to build a base that Lighthold would not be instantly aware of.”

The creature smiled slyly. “Not if the base is well hidden. Oh yes, hidden from prying eyes. Inconvenient to hide, it is true, but it’s possible to build bases, create masters and the means to control slaves. Humans are too stupid and slow to beat the Gagrims. Humans will be slaves.”

“Humans may surprise you yet,” said Gel. “How could the Gagrims know enough about humans to be sure they will win?”

“Gagrims are vastly superior,” snapped the creature. “We already have dark forces working inside your society – dark forces, yes. You will try to stop us, but you will not be able to.”

“Dark forces,” scoffed Gel, anxious for more details. “You’re just bluffing.”

Jerrold suddenly realising he might have said too much, clammed up.

Flight brought them to a halt gently above the ruin then descended and landed inside the hanger area from which Major Murtagh had fled, pursued by Hutchinson and Hartmann. They were met by the mysterious pistol-toting civilian who accompanied Captain Edge and a few members of the guard’s detachment.

“Sylvester,” said this individual, shaking Gel’s hand. “These gentlemen will take your guy through to the research part.” The guardsmen picked up the stretcher and marched off without a word. Gel wondered how they would get it up the winding stairs. “Sorry we didn’t get a chance to talk before. Quite a campaign you guys had, and a shoot out.”

“Thanks,” said Gel. “A lot of it just happened, and the other side made mistakes.”

“It’s good if the other side makes mistakes. I was a staff sergeant in the Imperial Marines in a past life...”

“You were?”

“Sure, a while ago,” said Sylvester, “and the other guy’s mistakes are even better if you can take advantage of them, as we used to say.”

“Is that a wise old Imperial Marine saying.”

The older man shrugged. “It should be.”

“I have to ask, what are you doing here?” asked Gel. “You’re an armed civilian in a military unit.”

“Personal bodyguard and sometime valet for Captain Edge.”

“Really?” said Gel, doing a double take. “And this is allowed? He’s worried about being kidnapped or whatever out here.”

Sylvester shrugged again. “His family’s got money and some sort of pull..”

“He’s one of those Edges is he?” said Gel. “I know some of the Edges, sort of, but I’d never heard of him before.”

“A son by a first marriage who was lured from earth by promise of an officer’s commission. He likes the prestige but feels he needs protection.”

“All I can say is lucky you,” said Gel. “I hope you’re being paid enough.”

“It’s a living,” said Sylvester shrugging. “It’s seeing me through to retirement.”

“Come ‘n Gel let’s go,” said Flight from the loading ramp, “dinner time soon.”

“Be there,” he called, then turned back to the former marine. “I am also curious, who’s the girl?”

“Her official designation is assistant, but she’s his girlfriend.”

“What? And this is allowed on campaign? Since when are the Edges allowed to flout the rules to that extent?”

“As far as the duty roster is concerned, she is his assistant and nothing else.”

“Hmph,” said Gel, “well gotta go. We’ll meet again soon, I’m sure of it.”

“Look forward to it,” said Sylvester.

Gel left thinking that Sylvester seemed worth the trouble, but that Captain Edge was even more of an idiot than he first thought. He would see both again under very different circumstances.

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Gel later wrote a report of his conversation with Jerrold as it seemed significant and, not knowing what else to do with the report, forwarded it to Colonel Murchison who sent it on to the AI’s intelligence section. A junior official at the intelligence section glanced at it, thought the statements too vague to be of much use and filed it. However, he also sent a copy to Imperial Intelligence where it eventually ended up with the people who mattered.

“I don’t like this reference to dark forces,” said one official. He was enormously fat and looked and dressed like an accountant at a small company. He had no title, was never addressed by anything other than the first name he had chosen for work purposes, Dereck, and his office was non-descript, dusty, run-down oblong of space in an obscure corner of the

building, with nothing on the door to indicate who worked inside. The only decoration of note was a print from the *Lord of the Rings* universe depicting the Eye of Sauron on top of the tower of Barad-Dur – the all-seeing Eye. For the fat accountant was the head of Imperial Intelligence, the Eye, with direct access to the Imperial System and one of that system's most trusted advisors. Anyone who underestimated Dereck's intelligence, ruthlessness or power because he looked like a fat, no-account official waiting for retirement, might learn that they had made an enormous mistake – that is, if Dereck could be bothered dealing with them.

"What can we do about it then," said the other official. He was well-dressed, well-groomed and thin. As far as the world was concerned he was head of The Eye but he was, in fact, Dereck's deputy. He handled details and politicians while Dereck looked at the big picture. The well-groomed official often travelled from his prestigious top storey corner office through a secret back way to meet with his boss.

"Alert our agents out in Lighthold," said Dereck. "Send them the report. Have one of our agents contact this Sergeant Obsidian, discreetly, and see if there is anything to add to it. Also have them work up a profile on him, but quietly. He may well turn out to be friend, and a friend worth having."

"Do we tell Dr Addanc any of this?" asked the deputy.

"As always, only what he needs to know," said Dereck. "It gives the Lightholders some illusion of control, if they think they know who The Eye's main agent is in their part of the galaxy."

"As always," said his deputy, making a note.

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On Outpost-3 only details remained.

"Okay people, listen up," said Gel in B Company's makeshift barracks in Sylvan City one morning. In lieu of formal parades which he could not be bothered with, he made announcements while they were all sitting at breakfast, as if he was presiding over a wedding reception or a 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. "In-memoriam media sites are now open for our many fallen comrades of B Company. It would be good if you could post something on each person you know but that's obviously a request not an order. There will also be a service when we return to Lighthold. I might remind you all that the day we were ambushed was the single biggest loss the Assault Infantry has ever sustained, as well as the biggest one-day loss experienced by any human force for decades. But one comfort for the loss of so many comrades is that we then killed or captured all but one of the force that ambushed us."

"Yes!" said B Company and pounded the table.

"However, as there are so few of the company left it is unlikely they will keep us together, but I must say I'm proud of every one of you. 'Come'n give it up for yourselves."

More "yesses" and table pounding.

"There are also a few announcements. For those who don't know, I have been ordered to officer training."

"Quite right, too," called Flight. The others murmured approval. They knew that they had lived and come out on top because of Gel.

"Our beloved Senior Squad Leader Hutchinson becomes our beloved Brevet Sergeant Hutchinson."

"Yes," said the audience and pounded the table some more.

"Then there are the awards," said Gel. "As you know Theo and I scored Infantry Crosses because we were dumb enough to walk straight into a confrontation with three Destroyers in a bar."

"And kill two in the place next door," said Alyssa.

“Well, that was also pretty dumb. Then there are the combat awards, basically like elephant stamps in primary school for a job well done. Alyssa gets the Medic star for being foolish enough to go somewhere near the action.”

They all cheered.

“What can I say,” said Alyssa. “They started shooting, I was there.”

“Flight gets the Flight Arm Combat Medal, because she had to kick dirt, as the pilots say, and got mixed up in an infantry battle, which I understand is just not the done thing in the flight arm.”

“I’m socially ruined,” admitted Flight, “but camping out with you guys wasn’t bad fun.”

They laughed.

“Then there are the infantry combat stars. Cliffe has the most confirmed kills with that rifle of his including one in the Easy Spice Bar and Grill and another Destroyer out in the jungle who wished me harm for which I am most grateful, so he gets one.”

“Thanks, sergeant,” said Cliffe.

“That’s the longest speech he’s ever made in public,” said Gel. “And I’d just like to say here that the rumours you have heard about Cliffe and his rifle are not true. They’re just good friends.”

B Company laughed again.

“Then there is the final award which gives me particular pleasure. When I sent Hartmann into the ruin,” Hartmann looked up in surprise at the mention of his name, “I told him to go through that door as if the devil himself was on the other side. Well he did, and he managed to wound Major Murtagh, now the only member of the Destroyer unit which ambushed us we have not killed or captured.”

“Yes,” said B Company and pounded the table.

“Then he got blown up on the stairs but picked himself up and charged down them.”

“Charged?” said Hartmann.

“Those unaware of the realities of a combat situation may claim that he stumbled down them and fell flat at the bottom, but it was all part of a clever tactical move.”

“That’s right,” said Hutchinson. “Clever tactics.”

“I suppose..” said Hartmann.

“Crucially he still had his weapon. Then Murtagh pulled that suit flash thing and when you got up you saw a grenade coming towards you which you batted away, very cleverly. It was not simply a stumble where the grenade connected with the butt of your rifle but a deliberate batt. However, the grenade went off and you got blown up a second time.”

“I got blown up a lot that day,” agreed Hartmann.

“Then you and the then beloved Senior Squad Leader Hutchinson pursued Murtagh through the ruin to that hatch and in hacking the hatch, you triggered a booby trap – fortunately from a distance but it meant that you got blown up a third time.”

“That one really hurt,” said Hartmann.

“For wounding Murtagh but especially for getting up again after being blown up the third time you get a medal. Private Benjamin Hartmann, come on down. Give it up guys.”

B Company cheered so loudly that their ears hurt.

Hartmann seemed stunned.

“Thanks, sergeant,” he said eventually.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

The maitre d' raised one eyebrow over Gel's military uniform.

"Do you have a reservation, sir?" he asked.

"My name is Obsidian. I'm expected."

The man froze for just a second, his jaw almost dropped. Then he recovered.

"Of course, this way sir."

He led Gel up to the restaurant's observation deck with its sweeping views of Green Bay. Pleasure craft could be seen criss-crossing its bright waters. In the distance transporters rose from Lighthold's star port. Others descended from orbit. A menu had already been placed on the table and his host had ordered wine which sat in an ice bucket.

"Hello mother," said Gel. It was the first time he had seen his mother in well over a year.

"You're in uniform on a Saturday?" said Mrs Obsidian.

"I'm in a short officer's course which is intensive. I had some lectures this morning," said Gel placing his peaked cap on the table.

"Alison said you looked well in your uniform," she said. "I suppose you do."

"Thank you, mother, perhaps she could persuade Dwight to wear uniform?"

"Who is Dwight?"

Gel had mentioned the man specifically to gauge his mother's reaction. She seemed genuinely not to know the name.

"Dwight is the man Alison was having an affair with."

Mrs Obsidian did a double take. "Alison was having an affair?"

"I caught her with this other man, a Dwight Sullivan, on that Swing charity ball night in one of the rooms out the back – a storage place. Why do you think I left so suddenly? Part of it was about ducking your bizarre political schemes and interference in my personal life, but also because I finally worked out she was your choice and your ally not mine.

"We got along well," said Mrs Obsidian. "She was to be my daughter in law. What's wrong with that?"

"You were on the board of the charity that organised the fund raiser where I met her," said Gel, undeterred. "You primed her and threw her into my path, and poor male fool that I was I fell for her charms. All along she and you just thought of me as a prop or maybe puppet in some broader political game."

Mrs Obsidian shrugged. "I just thought you two would get along."

"Nonsense, mother," said Gel. "You engineered the whole thing with politics in mind. Alison never cared for me, really. The marriage would have been an empty one. We were engaged and she was stepping out on me with Dwight."

Mrs Obsidian did not reply. Gel thought it was the first time she had seen his mother at a loss for words.

"In all this chatting about how I looked in uniform, and offering to put me back in the trust if I'd return to the family fold – the offer relayed to me - she didn't think to mention her dalliance with Dwight?"

Mrs Obsidian took a deep breath and seemed to shake herself. "No, she never said anything, about an affair. You're sure of this I suppose?"

"Of course, I'm sure mother!" blazed Gel. "Do I need to draw a diagram about what was happening. She admitted it later, saying she had been trying to break it off, and I'll give her at least this much credit I think that's what she was trying to do. Dwight was doing most of the work when I barged in. Then Leo grabbed me from behind."



“Who is Leo?”

“A nasty Nordic type and confederate of Dwight’s who happened to be behind me when I barged in, and while I was being shot at it in the jungles of Outpost-3 it finally occurred to me to wonder just how Leo happened to be there at that critical time. The answer was, of course, that he had been following me. Dwight engineered the encounter with Alison knowing that I’d be watching, and he was sure I was watching because Leo was watching me from a distance. Dwight was careful not to look in my direction but I saw him check his phone at one point in the ballroom. A text from Leo no doubt. The whole thing was about luring me away from the ballroom – with the secondary aim of getting back into Alison’s pants.”

They sorted out the orders and, after the waiter had gone, Mrs Obsidian said: “Quite a story, but why did this Dwight person want to lure you away from the ball?”

“That is a good question mother. Why not simply jump on Alison some other evening? The answer is that they wanted to frame me for the murder of Arvind Olsen.”

That really startled Mrs Obsidian. “They found poor Arvind at his desk and I thought that his heart must have given out, but then the police started asking me questions about it.”

“I also thought it was natural causes,” said Gel, “because that’s what I read in the news feeds, but then the police turned up at the Assault Infantry barracks and accused me of murdering the man.”

“Why would you murder him? Did you murder him?”

“No, mother, I did not kill him – thanks for the vote of confidence in your son. Let me finish the story. My guess is that he was found at his desk but unless there had been any obvious marks of violence or blood then they have naturally assumed he went the same way as dad – some sort of heart attack or stroke at his desk.”

“Okay..” said Mrs Obsidian.

“But a later routine examination – they usually do some sort of check if the death’s not at a hospital - identified issues, maybe bruises on the back of the head that suggested a fall. The police didn’t make any public statement, but they looked at the security camera files and the material on Arvind’s desk. Lo and behold they found images of me entering the building at about the time of his death, plus a log for a security card in my name showing that I had entered the building.”

“You’ve never worked in that building,” said Mrs Obsidian. “You haven’t even been in it since you were a child.”

“That’s what I told them. But they also found a printout of that silly declaration about throwing me out of the trust you’ve been threatening me with for years – the one you had Uncle Jerome deliver with insults – with Arvind’s name on it.”

“Arvind’s name?” said Mrs Obsidian. “Why would he have the declaration and why would his name be on it? He has nothing to do with the trust.”

“I told them that too. I also told them there was no reason for Arvind to put his name on the declaration. So why was it on the declaration? The answer is that it was put there by someone who didn’t know much about the trust structure. The security footage of me also has problems. It shows me waving to someone and I have my left elbow out slightly like this.” Gel showed his mother.

“As if someone had an arm around it,” said his mother, after a moment.

“Exactly mother. In fact, it was Alison, and I was entering Founder Hall, not the Obsidian building. I said hello to someone as I was coming in, I seem to recall. Dwight’s digital consultancy had done work for both buildings and he’d probably built back doors for both. He grabbed the security cam file for Founder Hall for that day, the only time I’ve worn the white jacket I was seen in and cut it into the file for the Obsidian Building. The problem

is that it takes time to properly doctor even a minute or so of video, and he probably didn't have the right software. And there are lots of other signs of the frame being a rush job.

"After Dwight doctored the security cam files he had to look for a motive, so he hunted around in the files of the Obsidian Group - probably searched on my name - and found that declaration. He then added in Arvind Olsen's name, misspelling Arvind in his haste, printed it out and left it on the desk. All that remained then was to get me out of the way for the period I'm supposed to be in the building."

"Is that why he lured you to that back room with Alison?" asked Mrs Obsidian.

"Yep, although keeping me out of the way for a time would not have been enough. My guess is that I wouldn't have lived the night."

"What?"

"What I think happened is this - Leo killed Arvind, probably accidentally. Leo may have just meant to knock the man out. I remember father saying something about the man having a habit of wandering about the building at all hours."

Mrs Obsidian nodded. "He told me it kept employees on their toes. Sometimes he would do it after hours just to see what was on desks. There were privacy complaints about it."

"This time he must have gone somewhere in the building and seen something that made it worth it for a complete stranger to thump him over the head."

Gel noted that his mother suddenly went very still.

"You don't know that dear," she said, her voice uncharacteristically quiet.

"I don't know anything for certain, mother," retorted Gel, "except that Arvind turned up dead at his desk, having been moved after he died. Maybe it was a mistake on Leo's part, but once he had done it Dwight decided to cover his friend's tracks. He went to a lot of trouble to fake surveillance files and find a motive. But he realised I'd have a ready alibi, so he set up the elaborate lure with Alison, and to give him his due it almost worked. Fortunately for me he had to move fast as they can tell when someone has died with reasonable accuracy. He had to make it as close to the time of Arvind's actual death as possible. The result was a sloppy frame job.

"If you recall, he had a back door in the Founder Hall security system. Smuggling me out after kidnapping me wouldn't have been hard, then later they probably would have pumped me full of that Crank available on the street and left me in some drug hole. Everyone would have assumed that I had been a rich kid with a secret drug habit, filled with remorse over the murder of Arvind. Alison would have known and would have lost her billion-dollar ticket, but by then she'd have been too far in to easily go to the police. This sounds elaborate but Dwight was making it up as he went, and he wanted to go back to banging Alison."

"But you didn't turn up dead, dear."

"Dwight and Leo thought they were dealing with some soft, easy-going rich kid. Like you and Alison they underestimated me. Grandpa had me do unarmed combat for years. I fractured Leo's shin bone."

"Fractured it, darling?" said Mrs Obsidian, startled.

"Yep, and Leo cut my leg with a knife as I was leaving."

"Knife?"

"Yes, mother. Knife as in a piece of metal with a handle that you can stick into people when you want to kill them. I got four stitches in a clinic, as it happens about the time that Dwight had set for me to be in the Obsidian building. I had my alibi, despite all his efforts. But having set it all up he left the faked evidence in place, probably thinking that the police might think they had enough to put me on trial. There were other reasons for the frame which I'll get to in a moment."

"Did you tell the police all this?" asked Mrs Obsidian.

“They worked out a lot of it when I pointed out the problems with the security cam feed, but there’s nothing really connecting Dwight or Leo to the murder, and no motive, which brings me to the next point, mother. What secret did Arvind stumble across while roaming the corridors of Obsidian Corp?”

“Why are you asking me, dear?” she said, as their food arrived.

“You’re chairman of the board there and you didn’t immediately ask me what Arvind had seen. I also know you’ve been using Uncle Jerome in some sort of advisory capacity at Obsidian Holdings.”

“Your uncle has proved useful,” said Mrs Obsidian.

“My uncle is a cheap thug, mother, who dad wouldn’t allow in the business, I now suspect for very good reasons.”

“Don’t talk about your uncle like that, dear,” said Mrs Obsidian, sharply. “Your father and my brother never got along.”

“When he came to serve that declaration,” continued Gel, “your darling brother accused me of Arvind’s murder, and got quite angry with me over it. In the process he let it slip that he knew Leo.”

“He.. he does?”

“Then it occurred to me that the police have never publicly declared they are treating Arvind’s death as a homicide, but they must have some reason to speak to Uncle Jerome about it. More importantly, why would he care, one way or another, about the man’s death. I understand that he reports to you not Arvind.”

Mrs Obsidian nodded.

“However, if he knew Leo, and I guess Dwight as well, then he would have asked them about it. Very likely he knew they were in the building about that time. Leo and Dwight then gave him their version of events, along with the video footage and so on. The frame was about fooling Uncle Jerome, as well as the police.”

Mrs Obsidian munched on a little of her salad and smiled slightly. “A lot of conjecture, dear.”

Then Gel knew that his mother was involved in whatever was going on at Obsidian Holdings, perhaps something that involved him becoming a puppet leader and stooge in a larger political game.

“I’m not about to turn in my own mother,” said Gel, “but maybe you should talk to Uncle Jerome about his henchmen and about who really killed Arvind. I take it from all of this you had no idea of who killed him until now?”

“No, I didn’t,” she said. “I will speak to my brother about all this, but I won’t be accused or investigated.”

“You were accusing me of murder before, mother. Now you have some idea what I’m capable of, tell Uncle Jerome it’s time to quit whatever’s going on, and get out while the going’s good.”

Mrs Obsidian froze then responded with a fixed smile. Gel thought the temperature of the room had dropped. “Your message is noted, dear.” Then she relaxed a little. “Instead of threatening me and your uncle why don’t you re-think the offer of a political career. This Infantry Cross thing looks so well on career summaries.”

“I survived several serious attempts to kill me to get that ‘Infantry Cross thing’ as you describe it,” said Gel, “and I certainly didn’t do it because it might look well in a political pamphlet.”

“This family needs you in politics,” she said.

“You’re not listening to me, mother,” said Gel. “I’ve have been reading a lot of military history of late, including about the career of one William Tecumseh Sherman, a general in the American civil war way back on earth. Although he disliked politics and

politicians he was once asked to stand for the American presidency. He told them ‘if nominated I will not run, if elected I will not serve’. I like that answer, mother. I’m keeping it.”

“I see,” said Mrs Obsidian.

When lunch was over and Gel walked out, he thought what a wonderful, warm, sunny day it was.

## AUTHOR’S NOTE

What did Arvind Olsen see at Obsidian Holdings that got him killed? What is to happen with the Gagrim and what is the dark secret behind Athena’s building? To find out, as well as read more about the adventures of Gel, Alyssa, Heather/Athena, Theo, Cliffe, Hartmann and the other salts, yes, even including Captain Edge, check out the next book in the series Obsidian’s War: The Winter City. But for those who want to jump ahead on the time line I have written an epilogue about the gunfight.

## EPILOGUE

Gel was involved in other, more desperate matters in his time with the Assault Infantry, but nothing quite caught the public imagination like the shootout at the Easy Spice Bar and Grill which was reported over the entire Imperium.

Instead of Theo’s reputation in Five Ways taking a hit, as he had feared, gangs which he had fought against took to boasting that he had been their opponent. While Gel did his best to duck the subsequent fame, Theo revelled in it and the resulting female attention.

Although the basic facts of the fight were known right from the start - there was even a video of the main shootout from a security cam the professor had set up above the bar – the facts were never enough for the writers, producers and actors who flocked to the story. They may not have set foot outside safe, comfortable earth, but they were all too ready to turn the incident into a key part of an imaginary space frontier mythos of heroic men, and women, fighting evil developers.

Gel did not recognise any of the events or characters in the first film about the event which was a flop, in part because his character – he thought it must be his character – kept preaching about the fight to preserve the wilderness. Right! As if he cared a jot about the snake filled swamps on Tripwire-3.

He detested the second film, a smash hit, as it depicted him as a careless, screw-up playboy who somehow managed to shoot straight for that day. Theo became a vicious, insubordinate killer, Cliffe was transformed into a mild-mannered stores clerk who had to be given a rifle and together they shot up the whole town rather than just two buildings, with a body count well into double figures. After being seriously wounded Theo’s character gave Gel’s character a speech about how they had to defend the jungle to preserve it for future generations, which amused Theo.

“The only use I found for that shit hole piece of dirt was to bury bodies,” he said afterwards.

Despite all this activity, Gel’s character still found time to conduct a romance with a very glamorous medic who was initially disapproving of him.

Gel was married by that time and his wife, whom he had not met by the time of the shootout, laughed with Alyssa over this, saying she would have preferred the sex scene with the male star. Gel muttered. Eventually she persuaded Gel to be interviewed by an historian and to write a foreword for the subsequent book, to which he gave grudging approval – *Shootout: events at the Easy Spice Bar and Grill and Spice Hotel* – the first time he had made any statement about the event apart from the official report.

The families of the two Destroyers he had killed in the hotel tried to sue him, claiming that both had been victims. Gel refused to make even the nominal payment required to make the law suit go away, pointing out that the first supposed victim had refused two offers of surrender and then wrecked the hotel firing at him on full auto, while the part-synth Destroyer had fired at him first, also with his weapon on full auto. Eventually the legal actions died of their own accord.

Some years later, his daughter complained that boys were wary of dating her because of Gel's gunslinging reputation.

"Good," said Gel, thinking he had finally found a use for his notoriety. "Tell them I still have the weapon I used on that day" (he did) "and that I keep it in good working order."

But for Gel the most astonishing part of the aftermath was when business took him and his wife back to Outpost-3 after the second film had been released, and he thought to visit Sylvan, now a suburb of a large town called Tatcha, in honour of the slain commander of B Company. He expected the place to be built over but instead found the bar and grill and hotel exactly as he had left it, bullet holes blood stains and all, with the professor selling souvenirs and running tours from a booth set at one end of the bar building.

"Well professor," Gel said, confronting the academic, "do you still want my family to pay for fixing up the bar and hotel?"

Sylvan, who had changed little with the years, did a double take on recognising Gel, then smiled. His welcome grew distinctly warmer when he realised that Gel had no interest in claiming a share of the royalties.

"Proved surprisingly useful to own the site of the shootout," he said. "One has to make a living. Care for a drink in the bar?"

"Last time I was in there you used me as shotgun target practice," Gel said.

"You still sore about that?"

"It's the sort of thing that sticks in a man's mind, professor. Did they ever give you your toy back?"

"I never got it back," said the professor. "I have to make do with a replica that makes a noise during the re-enactments."

"Re-enactments?" spluttered Gel remembering the way his hands had shaken after the shootout in the bar, his moment of near panic when his gun clicked empty and was at a loss for words.

"Do you remember me?" said the woman at the booking counter and Gel realised she was the sex worker who had shot at him. She was now the professor's wife, his mother having passed away a few years back, respected local businesswoman and mother of two small boys. The youngest of these, a pre-schooler, had both his small hands on the edge of the ticket counter to pull himself up so that he could get a better look at the legend come to life that was Gel.

"I hope you're not going to shoot at me this time," said Gel. "Everyone wanted to shoot at me that day."

"That was the only time I ever shot at anybody and I'm glad I didn't hit anything," she said smiling.

"I'm glad too," said Gel.

Amused by these developments, Gel's wife accepted a complementary replica of the sidearm both sides had used during the encounter as a toy for their son, as well as Tee-shirts for all of the actual players in the drama of that day to be handed on when they returned home.

These read: "No Easy Time at the Easy Spice Bar and Grill".

"No figurines, professor?" asked Gel.

"We looked at that," replied the professor, unabashed, "but we didn't have the volume to justify them. Merchandising is a tough business."

"I guess it must be," said Gel.

THE END

M S Lawson, Mark Steven Lawson, is a retired Australian journalist.

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