



The Kreelan Empress holds Humanity's fate in her hands. Only one man can save them, a man who is willing to wage war across the galaxy...

IN HER NAME

MICHAEL R. HICKS

INVASION

The second body, Tesh-Dar saw, was that of a warrior, her chest armor riddled with the tiny holes made by the humans' flechette weapons.

Curious, nodding toward the dead warrior, Tesh-Dar asked, "What happened to her?"

The lead warrior, an elder as old as Tesh-Dar but far less accomplished, replied, "A young human killed her as he fled through the vegetation." She flicked a glance at the tiny human body, her cobalt blue face passionless. "Kumar-Etana was not fast enough, it would seem." She turned back to Tesh-Dar. "We stunned the animal, but it was not within your parameters, priestess."

Tesh-Dar nodded for the warriors to continue their duties, her mind idly pondering the likelihood of such a situation. She had noted the size of the human when they threw it onto the open grave, and it was far too small to have been trained as a warrior. Yet, it had killed Kumar-Etana, who had never been noted for sloth in combat, in what Tesh-Dar had implicitly understood to be a fair match.

Curious, Tesh-Dar allowed herself to be drawn to the mountain of dying humanity. Pitiful cries rose from the heaps of flesh as the effects of the stun wore off, for those humans who would not be leaving with her were not given the stasis drug.

Prodding one or two of the bodies with her sandal, she stepped to where her warriors had left the small human who had killed Kumar-Etana. It lay face-down, its frail form wrapped in clothing that was torn and battered. She hooked one powerful foot under the animal's left side and lifted, flipping the body over onto its back.

"The scar," she gasped as she saw the creature's face. Kneeling next to the human, she touched the scar over its left eye, wondering if it was possible for another human to have such a mark.

But, no, she decided, after studying the pup's face. The hair was darker perhaps than it had been that night, and the scar had lengthened as the skin stretched with growth. But on this creature she could clearly see the face of the pup she had nearly killed those few cycles ago. The one whose scar she shared.

Her mind probed into the human's spirit, examining the ethereal thing that lived within the shell of flesh as she might an insect pinned to a tree. It did not sing as did her spirit, but there was no denying that it was the same human.

"Much have you grown, little one," she said to the still form, fingering the human knife that still rested in her waist belt, a treasured curio she valued for the memories it brought to her. "And, perhaps, much may you yet learn..."

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations and events portrayed in this novel are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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MICHAEL R. HICKS

IN HER NAME

*For Jan.
Your love saved me.*

BOOK ONE

ONE

The blast caught Solon Gard, an exhausted captain of New Constantinople's beleaguered Territorial Army, completely by surprise. He had not known that the enemy had sited a heavy gun to the north of his decimated unit's last redoubt, a thick-walled house of a style made popular in recent years. Like most other houses in the planet's capitol city, this one was now little more than a gutted wreck.

But the Kreeelan gun's introductory salvo was also its last: a human heavy weapons team destroyed it with a lucky shot before the Territorial Army soldiers were silenced by a barrage of inhumanly accurate plasma rifle fire.

The battle had become a vicious stalemate.

A woman's voice suddenly cut through the fog in Solon's head as he fought his way out from under the smoking rubble left by the cannon hit. He found himself looking up at the helmeted face of his wife, Camilla. Her eyes were hidden behind the mirrored faceplate of the battered combat helmet she wore.

"Solon, are you hurt?"

"No," he groaned, shaking his head, "I'm all right."

She helped him up, her petite form struggling with her husband's greater bulk: two armored mannequins embracing in an awkward dance.

Solon glanced around. "Where's Armand?"

"Dead," she said in a brittle voice. She wiped the dust from her husband's helmet, wishing she could touch his hair, his face, instead of the cold, scarred metal. She gestured to the pile of debris that Solon had been buried in. The wall had exploded inward a few feet from where he and Armand had been. The muddy light of day, flickering blood-red from the smoke that hung over the city, revealed an armored glove that jutted from under a plastisteel girder. Armand. He had been a friend of their family for many years and was the godfather of their only son. Now... now he was simply gone, like so many others.

Solon reached down and gently touched the armored hand of his best friend. "Silly fool," he whispered hoarsely. "You should have gone to the shelter with the others, like I told you. You could never fight, even when we were children." Armand had never had any military training, but after his wife and daughter were killed in the abattoir their city had become, he had come looking for Solon, to fight and die by his side. And so he had.

"It's only the two of us," Camilla told him wearily, "and Enrique and Snowden." Behind her was a pile of bodies in a dark corner, looking like a monstrous spider in the long shadows that flickered over them. The survivors had not had the time or strength to array them properly. Their goal had simply been to get them out of the way. Honor to the dead came a distant second to

the desperation to stay among the living. "I think Jennings's squad across the street may be gone, too."

"Lord of All," Solon murmured, still trying to get his bearings and come to grips with the extent of their disaster. With only the four of them left, particularly if Jennings's squad had been wiped out, the Kreeleans had but to breath hard and the last human defensive line would be broken.

"It can always get worse," a different female voice told him drily.

Solon turned to see Snowden raise her hand unenthusiastically. Platinum hair was plastered to her skull in a greasy matte of sweat and blood, a legacy of the flying glass that had peeled away half her scalp during an earlier attack. She looked at him with eyes too exhausted for sleep, and did not make any move to get up from where she was sitting. Her left leg was broken above the knee, the protruding bone covered by a field dressing and hasty splint that Camilla had put together.

Enrique peered at them from the corner where he and Camilla had set up their only remaining heavy weapon, a pulse gun that took two to operate. Its snout poked through a convenient hole in the wall. From there, Enrique could see over most of their platoon's assigned sector of responsibility, or what was left of it. In the dreary orange light that made ghosts of the swirling smoke over the dying city, Enrique watched the dark figures of the enemy come closer, threading their way through the piles of shattered rubble that had once been New Constantinople's premier shopkeeper's district. He watched as their sandaled feet trod over the crumpled spires of the Izmir All-Faith Temple, the most beautiful building on the planet until a couple of weeks ago. Since the Kreeleans arrived, nearly twenty million people and thirty Navy ships had died, and nothing made by human hands had gone untouched.

But beyond the searching muzzle of Enrique's gun, the advancing Kreeleans passed many of their sisters who had died as the battle here had ebbed and flowed. Their burned and twisted bodies were stacked like cordwood at the approaches to the humans' crumbling defense perimeter, often enmeshed with the humans who had killed them. Enemies in life, they were bound together in death with bayonets and claws in passionate, if gruesome, embraces.

Still, they came. They always came.

Solon caught himself trying to rub his forehead through his battered helmet. *Lord, am I tired*, he thought. Their company was part of the battalion that had been among the last of the reserves to be activated for the city's final stand, and the Territorial Army commander had brought them into action three days before. Three days. It had been a lifetime.

"One-hundred and sixty-two people, dead," he whispered to himself, thinking of the soldiers he had lost in the last few days. But they had lasted longer than most. Nearly every company of the first defensive ring had been wiped out to the last man and woman in less than twenty-four hours. Solon and his company were part of the fourth and final ring around the last of the defense shelters in this sector of the city. If the Kreeleans got through...

“Hey, boss,” Enrique called quietly. “I hate to interrupt, but they’re getting a bit close over here. You want me to light ‘em up?”

“I’ll do the honors,” Camilla told Solon, patting him on the helmet. “You need to get yourself back together.”

“No arguments here,” he answered wearily, propping himself against the remains of the wall. “I’ll keep an eye on this side.”

Camilla quickly took her place next to the gunner. “I’m glad you didn’t wait much longer to let us know we had company, Enrique,” she chided after carefully peering out at the enemy. “They’re so close I can see their fangs.” She checked the charge on the pulse gun’s power pack. A fresh one would last for about thirty seconds of continuous firing, an appetite that made having both a gunner and a loader to service the hungry weapon a necessity.

“Yeah,” Enrique smiled, his lips curling around the remains of an unlit cigarette butt he held clenched between his dirt-covered lips. He had tossed his helmet away the first thing, preferring to wear only a black bandanna around his forehead. His grime stained hands tightened on the gun’s controls and his eyes sighted on the line of advancing Kreelans. “Looks like they think we’re all finished, since we haven’t shot back at ‘em for a while.” He snickered, then snugged his shoulder in tight to the shoulder stock of the gun. “Surprise...”

Solon was hunched down next to a blown-out window, looking for signs of the Kreelans trying to flank them, when he noticed the shattered portrait of a man and woman on the floor next to him. He picked up the crushed holo image of the young man and his bride and wondered who they might have been. Saying a silent prayer for their souls, he carefully set the picture out of his way. Somehow, the image seemed sacred, a tiny reminder of the precariousness of human existence, of good times past, and perhaps, hopes for the future. These two, who undoubtedly lay dead somewhere in this wasteland, would never know that their own lives were more fragile and finite than the plastic that still struggled to protect their images.

He turned as he heard the coughing roar of Enrique’s pulse gun as it tore into the alien skirmish line. He listened as the gunner moderated his bursts, conserving the weapon’s power while choosing his targets. Solon was glad Enrique had lived this long. He was as good a soldier as could be found in the Territorial Army. They had all been good soldiers, and would make the Kreelans pay dearly for taking the last four lives that Solon had left to offer as an interest payment toward humanity’s survival.

As he looked through the dust and smoke, the thermal imager in Solon’s visor gave him an enhanced view of the devastation around him, the computer turning the sunset into a scene of a scarlet Hell. He prayed that his seven-year-old son, Reza, remained safe in the nearby bunker. He had lost count of the number of times he had prayed for his boy, but it did not matter. He prayed again, and would go on praying, because it was the only thing he could do. Reza and the other children of their defense district had been taken to the local shelter, a deep underground bunker that could withstand all but a direct orbital

bombardment, or so they hoped. Solon only wished that he had been able to see his little boy again before he died. "I love you, son," he whispered to the burning night.

Behind him, Camilla hurriedly stripped off the expended power pack from the pulse gun and clipped on another. She had come to do it so well that Enrique barely missed a beat in his firing.

Solon saw movement in a nearby building that was occupied by one of the other platoons: a hand waving at him from a darkened doorway. He raised his own hand in a quick salute, not daring to risk his head or arm for a more dashing salutation.

He made one more careful sweep of the street with his enhanced vision. Although he had spent his life in service to the Confederation as a shipbuilder, not as a hardened Marine or sailor, Solon knew that he needed to be extra careful in everything he did now. His body was past its physical limit, and the need for sleep was dragging all of them toward mistakes that could lead them to their deaths. Vigilance was survival.

As he finished his visual check, he relaxed slightly. All was as he had seen it before. Nothing moved. Nothing changed but the direction of the smoke's drift, and the smell of burning wood and flesh that went with it. He felt more than heard the hits the other side of his little fortress was taking from Kreelan light guns, and was relieved to hear Enrique's pulse gun yammer back at them like an enraged dog.

He glanced back toward the building occupied by the other platoon just as a massive barrage of Kreelan weapons fire erupted on the far side. He watched in horror as the structure began to crumble under the onslaught. The human defenders, sensing the futility of holding on, came boiling out into the street, heading for Solon's position, only to be cut down in a brutal crossfire from further down the lane.

The firing tapered off, and Solon saw shadows rapidly flowing toward the other platoon's survivors: Kreelan warriors silently advancing, swords drawn. They killed with energy weapons when they had to, but preferred more personal means of combat.

"Oh my God," Solon whispered, knowing that his own final stand would soon be upon him: they were surrounded now, cut off. His throat constricted and his stomach threatened to heave up the handful of tasteless ration cake he had eaten earlier in the day. He flipped up the visor for a moment to look at the scene with his own eyes, then flipped it back down to penetrate the smoky darkness.

Suddenly, a lone figure darted across the street, plunging suicidally into the battle raging in the street. Under the figure's arm swung what could have been an oversized doll, but Solon knew that it was not. The little arms clung to the neck of the madly running soldier and the rag doll's little legs kicked at empty air. With a sinking sensation, Solon realized who it was.

“Rezal!” he shouted, his heart hammering with fear and joy, wondering how in the Lord’s name the boy had gotten here.

With a crack of thunder, the soldier’s luck ran out as a crimson lance struck him, spinning him around like a top. He collapsed into the rubble, shielding the boy’s body with his own.

Solon roared in the protective fury only a parent can know, his voice thundering above the clamoring of the guns. Camilla turned just in time to see him leap through the blasted wall into the carnage raging beyond.

“Solon!” she screamed, struggling up from her position next to the hammering pulse gun.

“No!” Enrique yelled at her, grabbing for her arm. He was too late to stop her as she bolted from the pit. “Dammit!” he hissed, struggling to change the empty and useless magazine himself. He pried the heavy canister off the gun’s breech section with blind, groping hands while his bloodshot eyes tracked the rapidly approaching shadows of the enemy.

Solon suddenly staggered back over the shattered wall. His breath came in long heaves as if he had just finished running a marathon, and his armor was pitted and smoking from half a dozen glancing hits. In his arms was a small bundle of rags. Camilla nearly fainted at the sight of Reza’s face, his skin black with soot and streaked with tears of fright.

“Mama,” the boy cried, reaching for her.

“Oh, baby,” she said softly, taking him in her arms and rocking him. “What are you doing here?” Camilla asked.

Solon collapsed next to her, wrapping his arms around his wife and child.

“What happened to the bunker?” Snowden shouted in between bursts from her rifle as she tried to kill the Kreelans who escaped Enrique’s non-stop firing.

“The same thing that’s going to happen to us if you guys don’t start shooting!” Enrique screamed hoarsely, finally slamming a new – and the last – magazine into his pulse gun. “The Blues are all over the place out here!”

Reluctantly letting go of his wife and son, Solon grabbed up his rifle and thrust its muzzle through a hole in the wall. Gritting his teeth in rage and a newfound determination to survive, to protect his wife and son, he opened fire on the wraiths that moved through the darkness.

Camilla, after a last hug, set Reza down next to Snowden. “Take care of him,” she begged before taking up her station next to Enrique.

Snowden nodded and held Reza tightly as the thunder of gunfire surrounded them.

The sky was black as pitch, black as death, as the priestess walked alone over the arena this world had become. Her sandaled feet touched the ground but left no sound, no footprint. She looked up toward where the stars should be, yearning for the great moon that shone over the Homeworld. But the only

sight to be had was the glowing red smears of the fires that were reflected by the wafting smoke and dust.

As she made her way across the field of carnage, she touched the bodies of the fallen children to honor them as they had honored their Empress. They had sacrificed their lives to show their love for Her. She grieved for them all, that they had died this day, never again to feel the flame that drove them to battle, the thrill of sword and claw, never again to serve the Empress through their flesh. Now they basked in the quiet sunset of the Afterlife, someday perhaps to join the ranks of the Ancient Ones, the warriors of the spirit.

She moved on toward her destination. It had once been a human dwelling, but now was a mound of ashen rubble. It squatted impetuously in the wasteland created by weapons the Kreela disdained to use. The humans had never realized that the destruction of their worlds was caused by their own predilection for such weaponry, to which the Kreela sometimes had to respond in kind. The warriors of the Empress sought battles of the mind, body, and spirit, of sword and claw, and not of brute destruction.

Watching the battles rage here for several cycles of the sun across the sky, she had become increasingly curious about these particular humans who fought so well, and at last had decided that perhaps they were worthy of her personal attention. She bade the young warriors to rest, to wait for her return, before setting out on her own journey of discovery.

She paused when she reached the back of the crumbled structure that hid the humans she sought. She listened for their heartbeats, smelled their pungent body odor, and felt for their strange alien spirit with her mind. After a moment she had an image of them, of where they sat and stood within.

Silent as the dead around her, she moved to a chosen point along the wall. Her breathing and heart stilled, she concealed everything about herself that made her presence real. Unless one of the humans looked directly at her, she would be utterly invisible.

Then she stepped through the wall, her flesh and armor melding with the essence of the barrier as she passed through without so much as a whisper.

“Is that all you remember, honey?” Camilla asked Reza softly, brushing his unruly hair back with her hand, which was temporarily freed from the armored skin she had been wearing for the past several days.

“Yes, Mama,” he replied. The fear had mostly left him, now that he was with them again, and that they thought he had done the right thing. “All I remember was lots of smoke. Then someone started to scream. People ran, hurting each other, because they were afraid. Someone, Madame Barnault, I think, led me out, but I lost her after we got outside. I remembered where Papa said you would be, so I came here to find you. I almost made it, except the Kreelans were everywhere. That’s when Kerry—”

“That’s enough, son,” Solon said gently, not wanting to force the boy to describe the death of the soldier, who had been another friend of their family. “It’s all right, now. You’re here and safe, and that’s all that counts.” He exchanged a quick glance with Camilla. *Safe* was hardly the word to use, he knew, even though the Kreelans had apparently given up for the day. Reza would now have to suffer whatever fate was in store for the rest of them. Solon could not justify risking someone else’s life for the boy’s benefit. One had already died for him.

“Reza,” Camilla told him, “I want you to stay with Snowden and help her find more ammunition for us.” She leaned close to his ear and whispered, “And I want you to watch out for her and protect her. She’s hurt and needs a big boy like you to care for her.”

Reza nodded vigorously, glancing in Snowden’s direction, the horrors of the past few hours fading. He had a mission now, some responsibility that helped to displace his fear. “I will, Mama,” he said quietly so that Snowden would not hear.

Later, as his father and mother rested under Enrique’s watchful eyes, Snowden kept an eye on Reza as he busied himself with hunting for the things she had told him to look for.

Peering through the darkness, his father having told him that they could not use a light for fear of bringing the Kreelans, Reza spied what Snowden had told him would be a great prize in the game they were playing. A bright metal clip protruded from under a stairway crawlspace, its surface reflecting the occasional flash of artillery fire that showed through the mangled roof. He saw that it was attached to a big, gray cylinder: a pulse gun magazine. Grinning with excitement, he scampered forward to retrieve it. He had heard Enrique say that they didn’t have any more of the magazines, and the big gun wouldn’t work.

He reached down to pick it up, but found that it was much heavier than he had imagined. He pulled and heaved, but the magazine would not move. He started sweeping the dirt away from around it, to try and dig it out. His hand brushed against something, something smooth and warm, totally different from the rubbery pocked coating of the magazine that was supposed to make it less slippery.

Curious, he reached out to feel what it was. He did not need a light to tell him that he was touching someone’s leg, and they had their foot resting on the magazine. Looking up into the darkness above him, he could see only a shadow.

“Who are you?” he asked quietly, curious as to how and why someone would have come into the house without letting his father know about it. “Are you one of Papa’s soldiers?”

Silence.

A flare burst far down the street, slowly settling toward the ground. In its flickering glow, Reza saw clearly the monstrous shape above him, saw the eyes that glared down from the dark-skinned face and the glistening ivory fangs that emerged from the mouth in a silent snarl.

Reza stumbled back, screaming at the nightmarish shape, all thoughts of the precious magazine vanished from his mind. He scrambled backward on all fours like a terrified crab, screaming. “Mama! Papa!”

“Reza, what is it?” Solon asked, picking the boy up from the debris-strewn floor as he burst from the hallway. “What’s wrong?”

“One of them’s in here! By the stairs! There, Papa!” Reza pointed, but the monster had disappeared. “It was right there!” he cried, stabbing at the air with his trembling finger.

Solon peered through the darkness, but could see nothing. “Reza, there’s no way anyone could be back there. That’s the one place where they can’t get in, because it’s a solid wall, no doors or windows, no holes.”

“Papa, one of them’s in here!” Reza wailed, his terrified eyes still fixed on where he knew the monster had been.

Solon hesitated. He knew how tired and confused Reza must be, how much they all were, and he knew he had to humor the boy.

“I’ll take a look,” Snowden volunteered. In the time since the last wave of Kreeleans had attacked, Camilla had finally had time to splint her leg properly and block the nerves. Walking on it would probably do permanent damage, but Snowden had figured that it was better to be alive and mostly functional than just plain dead. She snatched up her helmet and put it on. The shattered interior of the house, enhanced into precise detail by the visor, came into focus. “He’s probably just wired over what happened at the bunker,” she said. Camilla nodded, but Snowden could tell that she was nervous. “Don’t worry, Camilla,” Snowden reassured her, hefting her rifle. “I’ll take care of him.” Then, turning to the boy, she said, “Can you show me, Reza?”

Reza did not want to go anywhere near the stairs or the back rooms again. But everyone was looking at him, and he would not act like a baby in front of them. After all, he was seven years old now. “All right,” he said, his voice shaking.

Solon set him down, and then looked at Snowden. “Just be careful, okay?”

“No problem, boss,” she replied easily. Her outward confidence wasn’t foolish arrogance: even as exhausted as she was, she was still the best sharpshooter in the entire company. “C’mon, Reza.” Taking the boy’s hand, her other arm cradling the rifle, she led him down the dark hallway toward the back of the house.

Once into the hallway, she became increasingly edgy with every crunch of plaster under her boots, only one of which she could feel, the other having been deadened to stifle the pain. The hairs on the back of her neck were standing at stiff attention, but she could not figure out why. *There’s nothing here*, she told herself firmly.

She finally decided that it must be because Reza’s grip had tightened with every step. It was a gauge of the little boy’s fear. But her own senses registered nothing at all.

Reza moved forward, about half a step ahead of her, one hand clinging to hers, the other probing ahead of him through the murk. He knew he had seen the alien warrior. But as his fear grew, so did his self-doubt. *Maybe I was wrong*, he thought.

Behind them came a scraping sound like a knife against a sharpening stone. Snowden whirled around, pushing Reza to the ground behind her with one hand while the other brought the rifle to bear.

“Hell!” she hissed. A fiber optic connector that had been part of the house’s control system dangled from the ceiling, the cable scraping against the wall. She shook her head, blowing out her breath. *Don’t be so tense*, she told herself. *Take it easy*. “Reza,” she said, turning around, “I think we better head back to the others. There’s nothing—”

She stopped in mid-sentence as she saw a clawed fist emerge from the wall in front of her, the alien flesh and sinew momentarily merging with stone and steel in a pulsating mass of swirling colors. The hand closed around Snowden’s neck with a chilling *snick*. The alien warrior’s hand was so large that her talons overlapped Snowden’s spine. Gasping in horror, Snowden was forced backward as the Kreelan made her way through the wall and into the dark hallway.

Snowden’s mouth gaped open, but no words came. There was only a muted stuttering that was building toward an uncontrollable ululation of terror. She dropped her rifle, the tiny gap between her body and the alien making it as useless as a medieval pike in a dense thicket. Desperately, she groped for the pistol strapped to her lower thigh, her other hand vainly trying to break the Kreelan’s grip on her neck.

His mind reeling from the horror in front of him, Reza backpedaled away, his mouth open in a scream for help that he would never remember making. He watched helplessly as the warrior’s sword, free from the wall’s impossible embrace, pierced Snowden’s breastplate. It burst from her back with a thin metallic screech and a jet of blood. Snowden’s body twitched like a grotesque marionette, her legs dancing in the confusion of signals coursing through her severed spine, her arms battering weakly at the enemy’s face. The pistol had fallen to the floor, its safety still on.

Satisfied that the human was beaten, the Kreelan let go of Snowden’s neck. As the young woman’s body fell to the floor, the alien warrior pulled the sword free, the blade dragging at Snowden’s insides with its serrated upper edge. She was dead before her helmeted head hit the floor.

Reza bolted for the main room, his scream of terror reverberating from the walls and battered ceiling.

“Reza!” Solon cried as his son burst into the room to fall at his father’s feet. “Where’s Snowden?”

“Solon,” Camilla whispered, slowly rising to her feet as she saw the dark shape silently move from the hallway. A burst from down the street lit the thing’s face with a hellish glow, leaving no doubt as to its origin.

The Kreelan stopped just beyond the hallway. Watching. Waiting.

Enrique reacted first. Instinctively he brought up his rifle, aiming it at the alien's chest.

"Bitch!" he cried, his finger convulsing on the trigger.

Solon saw her arm move like a scythe in the eerie display of his helmet visor. The movement was accompanied by a strange whistling noise, like a storm wind howling against a windowpane.

Enrique suddenly grunted. Solon saw the gunner's eyes register disbelief, then nothing at all as they rolled up into his head. His body sagged backward and the gun discharged once into the ceiling before clattering to the floor at his side. Solon saw a huge wet horizontal gash in Enrique's chest armor that was wide enough to put both fists in, as if someone had split him open with an ax.

Camilla reached for her rifle, propped against the wall behind her.

"No," Solon said softly. "Don't move."

She stopped.

Reza lay face down on the floor, his body pointing like an arrow toward where his father now stood frozen. He blinked away the tears in his eyes, his entire body trembling with fear. He felt something sharp under his right hand, and without thinking he closed his fingers around it: a knife. He clung to it desperately, for he had no weapon of his own. A brief glance told him that it was his father's. He knew that his father always carried two, but must have somehow lost this one in the rubble during the fighting. Reza held it tightly to his chest.

"Why doesn't she attack?" Camilla whispered, terribly tempted to reach for her pistol or rifle. The sight of Enrique's gutted body stayed her hand. And then there was Snowden. Undoubtedly, she lay dead somewhere deeper in the house.

"I don't know, but..." Solon hesitated. He suddenly had an idea. "I'm going to try something."

Before Camilla could say a word, he drew the long-bladed knife he carried in his web gear. It was an inferior weapon to the Kreelan's sword, but it was all he had, and he didn't know where his regular combat knife had disappeared to. Then he slowly moved his free hand to the clasps that held his web gear to his armor. With two quick yanks, the webbing that held his grenades, pistol and extra weapon power packs clattered to the floor.

"So far, so good," he muttered. Sweat poured from his brow down the inside of his helmet. "Now you do it," he ordered his wife. "Draw your knife and drop the rest of your gear."

"What about Reza?" she asked, her eyes fixed on the alien as she repeated what Solon had done, her own equipment rattling to the floor around her feet a moment later. "Solon, we've got to get him out of here."

Crouching down slowly under the Kreelan's watchful, almost benevolent gaze, Solon reached down to where his son lay.

"Reza," he whispered, the external helmet speaker making his voice sound tinny, far away, "stand up, very slowly, and look at me."

Reza did as he was told, his body shaking with fright.

“Listen carefully, son,” he said, tearing his eyes away from the Kreelan to look at his son for what he knew would be the last time. He fought against the tears that welled up in his eyes. “You must do exactly what I tell you, without question, without being too afraid. You’re a young man, now, and your mother and I need you to help us.”

“Yes, Papa,” Reza whispered shakily as he stared into his father’s dirty helmet visor. But instead of his father’s face, Reza saw only the dull reflection of the apparition standing behind him, only a few paces away.

Holding his son by both quivering shoulders, Solon went on, “Not far from here, there used to be a really big schoolhouse, the university. Do you remember?”

Reza nodded. His father had taken him there many times to show him the great library there. It had always been one of his favorite places.

“Our people have built a big, strong fortress there,” Solon continued. “That’s where I need you to go. Tell them your mother and I need help, and they’ll send soldiers for us.” He pulled Reza to him. “We love you, son,” he whispered. Then he let him go. “Go on, son. Get out of here and don’t look back.”

“But Papa...” Reza started to object, crying now.

“Go on!” Camilla said softly, but with unmistakable firmness. Her own body shook in silent anguish that she could not even hold her son one last time. Fate had held that last card from her hand, an alien Queen of Spades standing between her and her child. “Go on,” she urged again, somehow sensing the Kreelan’s growing impatience, “before it’s too late.”

“I love you,” Reza whispered as he stumbled toward a hole in the wall, a doorway to the Hell that lay beyond.

“I love you, too, baby,” Camilla choked.

As her only son crawled through the hole to the street beyond, Camilla turned her attention back to the waiting Kreelan. “All right, you bitch,” she sneered, her upper lip curled like a wolf’s, exposing the teeth that had once illuminated a smile that had been a young man’s enchantment, the man who later became her husband. But there was no trace of that smile now. “It’s time for you to die.” The blade of her knife glinted in the fiery glow that lit the horizon of the burning city.

Together, husband and wife moved toward their enemy.

Reza stumbled and fell to the ground when the blast lit up the night behind him. The knoll of debris that had been his parents’ stronghold vanished in a fiery ball of flame and splinters, with smoke mushrooming up into the night sky like the glowing pillar of a funeral pyre.

“Mama!” he screamed. “Papa!”

But only the flames answered, crackling as they consumed the building’s remains with a boundless hunger.

Reza lay there, watching his world burn away to ashes. A final tear coursed its way down his face in a lonely journey, its wet track reflecting the brilliant flames. Alone now, fearful of the terrors that stalked the night, he curled up beneath a tangle of timbers and bricks, watching the flames dance to music only the fire itself could hear.

“Goodbye, Mama and Papa,” he whispered before succumbing to the wracking sobs that had been standing by like friends in mourning.

Not far away, another lone figure stood watching those same flames through alien eyes. The priestess's heart raced with the energy that surged through her body, her blood singing the chorus of battle that had been the heart and spirit of her people for countless generations.

The two humans had fought well, she granted, feeling a twinge of what might have been sorrow at their deaths. It was so rare that she found opponents worthy of her mettle. The humans would never know it, but they had come closer to killing her than any others had come in many cycles. Had she not heard the *click* made by the grenade, set off by the mortally stricken male while the female held her attention, she might have joined them in the fire that now devoured their frail bodies. Some of her hair, her precious raven hair, had been scorched by the blast as she leaped through the wall to safety.

What a pity, she thought, *that animals with such instincts did not possess souls*. Such creatures could certainly be taught how to make themselves more than moving targets for her to toy with, but her heart ached to give something more to her Empress.

Standing there, nauseated by the acrid stench of the burning plasticrete around her, she heaved a mournful sigh before turning back toward where the young ones lay resting. Her time here was terribly short, but a single moon cycle of the Homeworld, and she had yet much to see, much on which she would report to the Empress.

She had just started back when she heard a peculiar sound, an unsteady pulse under the current of the winds that carried the embers of the fire. It came at once from one direction, then from another as the fickle winds sought new paths over the dying city. She closed her eyes and reached out with her mind, her spirit flowing from her body to become one with the scorched earth and smoldering sky, using senses that went well beyond any her body could provide.

The child.

She hesitated, tempted simply to let it go, to die on its own while she returned to the young warriors who awaited her. But she found herself overcome with curiosity, for she had only seen their children in death. Never had she seen a live one. She debated for a moment what she should do, but in the end her curiosity demanded satisfaction. To blunt the pup's whimpering misery with death would be an indulgent, if unchallenging, act.

Reza blinked. Had he fallen asleep? He rubbed his eyes with grimy fists. His cheeks were caked with a mortar of tears and masonry dust. He glanced around, unable to see much in the dim glow that filtered into his hideout. Not really wanting to, but unable to help himself, he looked toward where his parents had died.

He sucked in his breath in surprise. A shadow blocked the entrance to his tiny hideaway. With arms and legs that felt weak as stalks of thin grass, he crawled forward a bit to see better.

“Mama?” he whispered cautiously, his young mind hoping that perhaps all had not been lost. “Papa?” he said a little louder, his voice barely rising above the wind that had begun to howl outside.

The figure stood immobile, but for one thing. Extending one arm, the fingers slowly, rhythmically curled back one by one in a gesture he had long been taught meant *come, come to me*.

His teeth chattering with fear and anticipation, he gripped his father’s knife, his fingers barely long enough to close around the handle. He crawled forward toward the gesturing apparition, still unsure if it was a man or woman, or perhaps something else. He was terrified, but he had to know.

Coming to the last barrier of fallen timbers that formed the doorway to his hideaway, Reza gathered his courage. He fixed his eyes on the shadow hand that continued to call him, mesmerizing him with the thought that help had arrived and that his parents might yet be saved. Placing his empty hand on the bottom-most timber, the other clutching the knife by his side, he poked his head out the hole.

The shape seemed to shimmer and change in the light. It moved with such speed that Reza’s eyes only registered a dark streak before an iron hand clamped around his neck and plucked him from the hole with a force that nearly snapped his spine. He cried out in pain and fear, never noticing the warm flood that coursed down his legs as his bladder emptied.

His cries and struggling ended when he found the cat-like eyes of the Kreelean warrior a mere hand’s breadth from his own. Her lips parted to reveal the ivory fangs that adorned the upper and lower jaws.

For a moment, the two simply stared at one other, Reza’s feet dangling nearly a meter from the ground as the Kreelean held him. Her grip, strong enough to pop his head like a grape with a gentle squeeze, was restrained to a force that barely allowed him to breathe. His pulse hammered in his ears as his heart fought to push blood through the constricted carotid arteries to his brain. Spots began to appear in his vision, as if he were looking at the Kreelean through a curtain of shimmering stars.

Then the alien closed her mouth, hiding away the terrible fangs. Her lips formed a proud, forceful line on her face, and Reza felt the hand around his tiny neck begin to contract with a strength that seemed to him as powerful as anything in the Universe.

As his lungs strained for their last breath through his constricted windpipe, a voice in his brain began to shout something. The words were repeated again and again, like a maniacal litany, the rhythm surging through his darkening brain. As his body's oxygen reserves dwindled and his vision dimmed, he finally understood.

The knife!

With a strength born of desperation, he thrust the knife straight at the Kreelan's face.

Suddenly she released him, and he fell to the ground. His feet crashed into the brick rubble over which he had been suspended, his legs crumpling like flimsy paper rods. Stunned, he fought to get air back into his lungs, his chest heaving rapidly. His vision returned at an agonizingly slow pace through the fireworks dancing on his retinas. He groped about, desperately trying to get away from the alien warrior.

His hand smacked into something, and he knew instantly what it was. He had felt it before. It was the Kreelan's leg. He looked up in time to see her kneel next to him, her mountainous form overshadowing the world in his frightened eyes. He tried to push himself away, to roll down into the flat part of the street where he might be able to run, but a massive clawed hand grasped him by the shoulder, the tips of her talons just pricking his skin.

His pounding fear giving way to resignation, he turned to face her. He did not want to watch as she killed him, but he had to see her. Whether out of curiosity or to face down the shame of being a coward, he did not know. Reluctantly, his eyes sought hers.

The knife, he saw, even in his tiny hand, had done its work. A vertical gash ran from a point halfway up the brow above the Kreelan's left eye down to the point of her graceful cheekbone. The blade had somehow missed the eye itself, although it was awash in the blood that oozed from the wound. The weapon had fallen from Reza's hand after doing its damage, and he held out little hope of recovering it. Besides, he thought as he waited for the final blow, what was the point?

He sat still as she reached toward him with her other hand. He flinched as one of the talons touched the skin of his forehead, just above his eye. But he did not look away, nor did he cry out. He had faced enough fear during this one night to last a lifetime, and when death came, he thought he might welcome it.

Slowly, she drew a thin line of blood that mimicked the wound he had given her. Her talon cut deep, right to the bone, as it glided down his face. Just missing his left eye, it lingered at last on his cheek.

He blinked, trying to clear the blood away as it dribbled over his eyebrow and into his eye. The flesh around the wound throbbed with the beating of his heart, but that was all. He was sure she was going to skin him alive, and he knew that her claws were as sharp as carving knives.

Instead, the Kreelan's hand drew back, and her other hand released his shoulder. She looked at him pensively, lightly tapping the talon smeared with his blood against her dark lips, her eyes narrowed slightly in thought.

His heart skipped a beat as she abruptly reached forward toward his hair. He felt a small pull on his scalp and instinctively reached to where he had felt the tug, expecting to feel the wet stickiness of more blood. But there was none. He looked up in surprise as the Kreelan held out a lock of his normally golden brown hair, now a filthy black from the dirt and smoke. With obvious care, she put it into a small pouch that was affixed to the black belt at her waist.

A prize, Reza thought, his mouth dropping open in wonder, a faint spark of hope sizzling in his breast. Was she about to let him live?

In answer to his unvoiced question, the huge warrior stood up. She made no sound, not even a tiny whisper, as her body uncoiled to its towering height. She glanced down to the ground at her feet and, leaning down, scooped up his father's knife. Turning the blade over in her hand, she made a low *humph* and put it in her belt. She looked at Reza one last time, acting as if the bleeding wound on her face was nothing, and bowed her head to him.

He blinked.

And she was gone.

Two

Five Years Later, On The Planet Hallmark

A plume of dust rising into the dry air warned of the approaching vehicle, a bulbous van that could hold over a dozen passengers. Like a fat beetle on some unfathomable insectoid quest, it crept across the arid land, threading its way through the pyramids of rocks strewn across the landscape that marked the labor and toil of tens of thousands of young hands. The vehicle's paint, reassuringly bright at a distance, faded to a chipped, diseased gray as it drew closer. The rattling cough and billowing blue smoke from its poorly maintained engine announced the unwelcome noontime visit to those who hadn't already been watching its approach.

The vehicle wheezed to a stop, its four oversized wheels sending skyward a last cloud of bitter dust. On the side of the van, in letters that had once been a bright cheery blue, was stenciled "House 48."

A side door slid open with a tired shriek of metal, and eight frightened children stepped out into the harsh sunlight. Aged from five to fourteen, the newcomers – war orphans all – looked with disbelieving eyes at the bleak and arid plain that was to be their home until the day they left the orphanage. These were the fields of the planet Hallmark, the home of nearly a hundred Confederation Emergency Orphanages, and here the children would begin their service to the state that now provided for them. Each of the orphanage complexes housed a thousand or more children who had lost their families. And each and every child would spend his or her youth pulling rocks from the soil to help make more room for grain to grow, grain that fed Confederation troops and helped the planet's corrupt administrators grow rich on illegal trading and price fixing.

The van suddenly groaned and shuddered as the driver's door was thrown open, and a tree stump of a leg probed downward until it found the firmness of the ground. As the man – at least his chromosome structure made him a man – put his full weight on the resilient earth, the vehicle's springs gave an audible sigh of relief. On the florid face, shaded by a gaudy aqua baseball cap, was a humorless smile exposing teeth that were as rotten as the soul within. His name was Francis Early Muldoon, and he was the overseer of House 48's field labor teams.

He wasted no time, barking harsh orders to the children and gesturing with his arms. Sausage-like fingers pointed out the various labor teams. In singles and twos they began to trudge toward their assigned groups, staying close together like longtime friends, though they were yet strangers to one another.

All had been assigned but a pretty teenage girl, the oldest of the group at fourteen years, who was left to stand alone. She watched, uncertain, as the giant thing that masqueraded as a man turned his attention to her, his smile transforming into a leer.

Some meters away, a group of tired, sweat- and dirt-stained children, having paused from their labor of wrenching the sharp-edged rocks from the unyielding soil, watched the newcomers with grim interest. Standing at the front was a lean, brown-haired boy in his early teens, holding the work-smoothed wooden handle of a pickax in his callused right hand. His jade green eyes had been following the van since it had appeared on the horizon, and now he felt his grip involuntarily tighten around the pick's handle as Muldoon turned his attention to the girl.

"Is he going to hurt her, Reza?" a young girl beside him asked in a hushed voice, her wide eyes fixed on the overseer and his latest object of interest.

"No," Reza growled as he watched Muldoon step closer to the new girl. Reza could not hear what was being said between the two, but he could well imagine. In exchange for food and protection from some of the older children who were as dangerous as rabid wolves, Muldoon usually got whatever piece of flesh – male and female alike – that his diseased cravings called for. Reza could remember many days when the van was parked near one of the little stone pyramids, rocking chaotically from the hideous sexual ballet playing within, and he well knew that participation was not strictly voluntary. But trying to tell the orphanage administration, whose bureaucratic heart had no room for the mindless prattling of youngsters with over-active imaginations, had led to more than one untimely death under "mysterious circumstances." The children had gotten the message: they were on their own against Muldoon.

But this girl, new to Muldoon's little operation, resolutely refused him. She met his groping advances with scratching nails and a hail of curses in a language Reza did not understand.

"You little bitch!" Reza heard Muldoon shout as she raked the nails of one hand across his face, drawing several streaks of blood. Reza's heart turned cold as the overseer struck the girl in the face with a meaty fist, knocking her to the ground. The man reached down for her, grabbed her blouse and pulled her toward him, ripping the vibrant yellow fabric that had struck Reza as being so pretty, so out of place here. Muldoon's hands grabbed for her budding breasts, now showing through the torn blouse. She tried to roll away, but he pinned her with his bulk, crushing her beneath him as his hands worked greedily at her clothing.

Reza had seen enough. He hefted his pickax and ran to where the girl lay writhing under Muldoon's gelatinous body. The other members of his work team followed him instantly, without question. Reza was their guardian, the only one who had cared about any of them, and their loyalty to him was absolute.

Muldoon was enjoying himself. He had wrapped his arms around the girl's chest, and now his hands were firmly clamped to her breasts as she struggled beneath him. Her face was pressed into the hard ground, the breath crushed from her by his one hundred and fifty kilos. He brutally squeezed her tender flesh, his fingertips pressing against her ribs just as his throbbing penis bulged against her buttocks. Only once before had he taken one of the children in the open, outside the van; he was normally very conscientious about that kind of thing. He firmly believed that sex was a private matter. But there were exceptions to every rule.

And this one was definitely an exception, he thought as his hands groped downward and began to work on unfastening her pants, his untrimmed fingernails cutting into her smooth skin.

The ground beside his face suddenly exploded, with dirt flying into his face. Crying out in surprise and pain, he struggled to free a hand to wipe at his stinging eyes. His vision cleared enough for him to see the gleaming metal sprouting from the earth not five centimeters from his sweating nose. As he watched, the metal spike levered itself out of the ground and rose above his head. He followed its trail until his eyes were drawn to the silhouetted form standing over him.

"Let her go, Muldoon," Reza ordered quietly. He held the pickax easily in his hands, hands that were stronger than those of most adults after the years of hard field work he had endured. Its splintered metal end was poised directly above Muldoon's head. "God knows, I should split your skull open just on principle, but the stench would probably be more than I could bear."

"Mind your own business, you little bastard," Muldoon hissed, his face twisting into the one that he saved for scaring the little children when they did something that really pissed him off. His hands bit even further into the girl's chest and belly, eliciting a groan of pain.

"This is your last warning, Muldoon," Reza said, raising the pickax to strike. He figured that he would almost certainly go to juvenile prison for killing this beast that almost looked like a man, but how much worse could prison be over this place? Besides, for all the suffering this bastard had caused, it would be worth it.

"You'd never get away with it, you little fuck," Muldoon warned. "You've got too many witnesses. You'd spend the rest of your worthless life in prison, if they didn't just fry your ass first."

Reza laughed. "Look around you, Muldoon. Do you think anybody here is going to be sorry if I ram this thing into your rat brain? And arranging an 'accident' would be pretty easy, you know. You don't drive so well sometimes. It would be a real shame if you hit one of the rock piles and flipped over or something. Maybe even the fuel tank would light off." Reza smiled a death's head smile. "Let her go," he said one last time, his voice hard as the stones they pulled from the ground.

“Kill him, Reza,” one child said fiercely. Muldoon had been the monster of his nightmares until Reza had taken him in. “Kill him. Please.”

Several others joined in until it was a chant. Reza knew that in a moment he wouldn't need the pickaxe to take care of Muldoon: the children would work themselves into such a frenzy that they would fall on him like hyenas and rip him to pieces with their bare hands. *And maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing*, he thought.

But Muldoon saw it, too. He was many things, but he was no fool. He had heard stories of children murdering their overseers, and he had no intention of letting it happen to him. It was one of the reasons he sought to keep them terrorized, so he could keep them under rigid control.

With a grunt of effort, Muldoon rolled himself off of the girl. Eyeing Reza with unconcealed contempt, he got to his feet. The girl lay motionless between them like a beautiful garden that had been trampled, corrupted.

For a moment, the only sound above the dry breeze that constantly swept this arid land was the wheezing of Muldoon's overtaxed lungs as they fought to support a body that was at least three times Reza's own weight.

Muldoon's eyes flitted from Reza to the girl, then to the others who stood watching him, silent now. Muldoon considered his options, and decided that he would have to yield. This time.

“Listen, boy,” he growled, his voice barely audible as he leaned toward Reza, “I'm going to get you one of these days. Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow. But I'll get you.” He nodded to the girl, curled now into a fetal position on the ground. “And then I'll get your little slut, here, too.” He hawked and spat on her, a gesture of defiance, of promise.

He turned away and headed back toward the van, conscious of the two dozen sets of eyes boring into his back. Once safe inside the vehicle, having slammed the driver's door shut, he leaned his head out the window. “You'd better have this section of the field cleared by sundown, boy, or your ass is gonna be in a sling with the headmaster!” As if noticing the other children for the first time, he bellowed, “What are you gawking at, you little shits? Get back to work!” Then he started up the van, gunned the engine, and drove off in a swirl of dust and choking exhaust.

“Go on, guys,” Reza urged the others. “Get back to work. We don't need him back again today.”

Heads down, the group began to break up as the children reluctantly made their way back to their work groups.

Reza was about to turn his attention to the girl Muldoon had been mauling when he suddenly found himself facing a child whose drawn face could have been mistaken for hundreds, thousands of others throughout the orphanage houses that dotted Hallmark.

“You should have killed him,” she said quietly. Then she was gone, trailing after her two teammates as they trudged back to their designated spot. Like

lifeless rag dolls, they collapsed onto their hands and knees and got back to work.

Reza turned his attention to the girl, who still lay on the ground, weeping. Three of the biggest boys from his own team stood around her like guards, waiting for his orders.

"It's all right," he told them. "You guys get back to work, but keep your eyes open. I'll take care of her." Kneeling next to the girl, Reza said softly, "How bad are you hurt?"

Almost unwillingly, she turned over, and Reza helped her to sit up. His face flushed with anger at the sight of the scratches and bruises that were already rising against her porcelain skin. She said nothing, but shook her head. Since hardly anything was left of her pretty blouse, Reza took off his shirt and offered it to her, careful not to touch her. She had already been touched enough for one day.

"Here," he said gently, "put this on."

She looked at him with her dark eyes, brown like a doe's, but with the spirit of a leopard's. There were tears there, but Reza saw no weakness.

"*Merci*," she said, wincing in pain as she reached for the shirt. He caught a quick glimpse of her exposed breasts and quickly averted his gaze, blushing with embarrassment at seeing that part of her body and anger at the mottled bruises he saw there. He turned his back to her as she stripped off the torn blouse and put on his shirt.

"Sorry it's so dirty," he said about the shirt, suddenly ashamed that he did not have something clean to offer her. "It probably doesn't smell too good, either."

"It is fine," she said, her voice quivering only slightly. "Thank you. You're very kind." He felt a light touch on his shoulder. "You may turn around, now."

He found himself looking at a girl whose skin was a flawless ivory that he knew from long experience would have a hard time under Hallmark's brutal sun. Her aristocratic face was framed by auburn hair that fell well below her shoulders, untrimmed bangs blowing across her eyes. Reza felt his throat tighten for no reason he could explain, other than that he thought she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

"I'm Reza," he said, fighting through the sudden rasp that had invaded his voice, "Reza Gard." He held out his hand to her.

Smiling tentatively, she took it, and Reza was relieved to note that her grip was strong. This one, he could tell from long experience, was tough. A survivor.

"I am Nicole," she said, her voice carrying a thick accent that Reza had never heard before, "Nicole Carré."

Wearing a blouse loaned from a sympathetic girl, Nicole sat next to Reza that evening at the mess table that Reza and his group had staked out as their own. Many of the boys and girls here, Nicole noted with disbelief, had formed

alliances to protect one individual or group from another, almost like a system of fiefdoms, replete with feudal lords. Those who did not belong to one of the gangs sat alone or in very small groups at the fringe tables, their eyes alert for intruders. Sadly, from what Nicole had seen today, she thought that the loners would not stand a chance without mutual protection. Truly, she thought, there was safety in numbers.

What she found even more surprising was that the groups were not necessarily led by the oldest or strongest. Reza clearly led the group she now found herself in, although there were at least four others here – not including herself – who were older or stronger.

“Everybody,” Reza said to the dozen or so sitting at their table, “I want to introduce Nicole Carré, the latest addition to House 48 and the one who put those neat scratches on Muldoon’s ugly face.” Reza had found out through the grapevine about the questioning Muldoon had been put through by the chief administrator about the scratches, scratches that would leave scars, Reza had noted with glee. But, as usual, Muldoon had explained it all away. Not all the administrators were bad and not all of them were idiots, Reza knew; it just seemed like the ones who were in positions to influence things were. It was just tragic fate that the children had to pay the price.

A little cheer went up from the group at the thought that someone had struck a real blow against Muldoon and lived to tell about it, and it was accompanied by a chorus of spoons banging on the metal table in celebration.

“Story time! Story time!” called out a young girl, maybe six, with lanky blond hair and a large purple birthmark across her chin. The others joined in, chanting “Story time! Story time!” while looking expectantly at Nicole.

“What is this?” she asked Reza, unsure of what was happening. She wanted to trust this boy and his friends, but her once bright and loving world had become dark and dangerous with the coming of the Kreeelans, and had not improved with her arrival on Hallmark.

“It’s just a little tradition we have,” he said easily, gesturing for the others to quiet down. “Whenever someone new comes, we like to have them tell us how they came to be here, what rotten luck landed them on Hallmark.” He noted her discomfort and shook his head. “It’s totally up to you. It’s just... it helps people sometimes to talk about it. But if you don’t want to, it’s okay.”

She looked at him a moment, unable to believe that a boy his age could have such bearing and strength. The children around him were tired and unhappy about their fate, yes, but they were hopeful, even proud, and obviously stuck together because they cared for one another. It was a sharp contrast to many of the other faces she saw about her: frightened, angry or hateful, dead. She had not realized before how lucky she had been to fall into this group.

“There is not much to it, really,” she said at last, embarrassed at the rapt attention the others were giving her and saddened at having to recount her recent past, “but I will tell it to you, if that is what you wish.”

She paused for a moment, her mind caught on the realization that she had never really related to anyone what had happened. No one had ever asked or seemed to care, outside of establishing the simple fact that her parents were dead. The adults saw Nicole as just one more burden to be tended by the state until she was old enough to take care of herself or serve in the government or the military. The looks and rote lines of compassion she had received from the endless bureaucratic chain had once been sincere, she thought. But after hearing the same stories and seeing the same young faces thousands of times over, the orphans had become a commodity of war, and the compassion the administrators might once have felt had long since given way to weariness.

Yet here, in this group of children, total strangers with only tragedy to bind them together, she found an audience for her grief, and it was almost too much to bear.

“I come from La Seyne,” she began, her eyes fixed on the table before her, “one of the provincial capitals of Ariane. It is a pretty place,” she said, briefly glancing up at the others and giving them a quick, shy smile, as if they would hold the claim of her homeworld’s beauty against her. But their attention was rapt, their minds already far away from Hallmark, imagining to themselves what such a place might be like, a place that to them was equivalent to the paradise of the gods. “The Kreeleans have never successfully attacked it, though they have tried several times.

“Papa is...” she bit her lip, “...*was* a master shipfitter, and he decided that we should have a vacation away from home this year, to get away from the yards for a while. He told Mama that we should go to Earth. He wanted us to see Paris, a place he always talked about – he had grown up there – but we had never seen it, Mama and I having been born on La Seyne. He never stopped talking about the wonderful tower, *La Tour Eiffel* that had been built before the days of artificial gravity and load lifters. He spoke of the lights at night, of the buildings that dated back to the times of great kings and queens. And so we boarded a starliner for Earth. There were three other ships in our little convoy, two merchantmen and a light cruiser.”

Reza saw her eyes mist over, her gaze somewhere far away. *God*, he thought, *how many times have I had to see this? And how many more times before I can leave this godforsaken place?* Under the table, he sought out one of her hands and took it in his. She held it tightly.

She nodded as her mind sifted through the images of times she wished she could forget. “We were only two days out from La Seyne when the convoy was attacked. I do not know how many enemy ships there were, or exactly what happened. I suppose it does not matter. Our ship, the *Il de France*, was badly hit soon after the alarms sounded, and Papa went aft to the engineering spaces to try and help them.” Her lower lip trembled as a tear streaked down her face. “We never saw him after that.”

She paused a moment, her eyes closed as she remembered her father’s parting hug to her and her mother before he ran down the companionway with

the frightened young petty officer. “The ship kept getting hit like it was being pounded with a great hammer. Either the bridge was destroyed, or perhaps the speaker system was damaged, because the order to abandon ship never came, even though we knew for sure that the hull had been breached in many places. Mama, who herself had never been on a ship before, did not seem scared at all, like she had been through it all many times in her head as she worked in the kitchen at home, making Papa’s supper. When the normal lights went out and the emergency lights came on, she said only, ‘We are leaving,’ and took me by the hand to where one of the lifeboats was still docked.” A sob caught her breath, but she forced herself to get on with it. “But the boat was already filled, except for one seat. But the aisle down the middle was clear. ‘Look, Mama,’ I told her, ‘there is plenty of room for us.’

“But I did not know that these boats had no artificial gravity, and that anyone not in a seat might be killed during the launch. I did not hear the warning the boat was giving in Standard. There was so much noise coming from our dying ship, and Mama spoke only French. She made me take the seat and she knelt in the aisle, praying, when the door closed. I... I blacked out after that. And when I woke up, she... she...”

Nicole collapsed in wracking sobs, the guilt and loss that had been eating away at her heart finally exposed. But a part – be it ever so tiny – of the burden had been lifted from her shoulders. She felt the comforting touch of caring hands as the others extended their sympathy, and Reza wrapped his arm around her shoulder, drawing her to him.

“It’s all right,” he said softly. “It wasn’t your fault—”

“But the warning,” she gasped angrily. “I knew Standard! I should have listened! I could have saved her!”

“And where would that have left your mom?” asked Tamil, an acne-scarred girl with hair cropped close to her skull. “Back on the ship to get spaced when the hull gave way?”

“I would have stayed with her!” Nicole shouted defiantly. “At least we all would have been together.”

Tamil shook her head. “She wouldn’t have let you, girl, and you know it.” While she was not very old when her own mother had died, Tamil remembered her mother well, and how she had saved her daughter’s life at the cost of her own. “She would have knocked you over the head and strapped you into that last seat to save you, if it came down to it. She loved you. She wouldn’t have let you die.”

That remark was met with nods and murmurs of agreement from the others.

Nicole suddenly understood that a consensus had been reached, and the look of sympathy in their eyes was joined by something akin to forgiveness. It was a tacit understanding that Fate was to blame. There was nothing she could have done to avert the tragedy that had taken her family away. More than that,

they had accepted her. She was one of them now, if she wanted to be. Thinking back to what Muldoon had done, she gave thanks to God for her good fortune.

"Listen," Reza told her, "the pain... never really goes away. But you learn to deal with it." His voice was nearly lost in the background banter and clatter of nearly a thousand spoons scraping the remnants of the evening meal from the trays of House 48, her new home. "You have to, if you want to get out of this lousy place in one piece. If you don't, people like Muldoon and some of the kids here will use you and throw you away like a toilet wipe. And you've got friends now to help."

"Besides," said a short, stocky red-haired girl two seats down from Reza, "you're a short timer. What are you, fourteen, or so?" Nicole nodded. "Jesus, Nicole, you've got less than a year here until you're fifteen and you can apply for one of the academies. You look like you're pretty sharp and in good shape. They'll probably take you. If you don't," she shrugged, "you'll just have to wait it out until you're seventeen."

"Fifteen," she lamented. "It is forever." The thought of spending the next six months here until her fifteenth birthday was appalling, but having to wait until she was seventeen was simply unbearable. Strangely, applying to one of the academies was a thought that had never occurred to her in her former life. La Seyne was very traditional, clinging to many of the ancient Western traditions brought by its early settlers. Most of the women born there spent their lives caring for their husbands and raising their children, any thoughts of becoming a "professional" being scorned as sacrilegiously self-serving. But, to get out of here in six months instead of two and a half years, she was more than willing to abandon tradition.

"It's a lot less than the half-dozen more years I've got to spend on this rock," Reza said darkly, his pre-pubescent voice carrying the resignation of the damned. His eyes blazed so fiercely that they burned her with shame for thinking that the paltry time she would have to spend here was unendurable. Reza had been here for some time before she had arrived, and would be here for long after she had gone.

"Please," she choked, suddenly flushing with empathy for him, for all of them, "forgive me. I did not mean it that way." She reached out and gently stroked his cheek with her hand. "Mon Dieu," she whispered, "how horrible."

Reza shrugged, his face dropping its melancholy veil. "It could be worse," he said. "At least it's not like for some of the really little kids who came here without even remembering or knowing their parents, like little Darrow over there." A tiny black boy a few seats down nodded heartily and gave her an enchanting smile. "At least we knew our parents and can remember them."

Nicole nodded thoughtfully as Reza turned his attention back to the others.

"Does anybody else have anything?" He looked around the table like a chairman of the board or councilman, his eyes intense pools of jade. "Okay, that's it, then, except to remind you that we're on alert for Muldoon and his slugs. Nobody goes anywhere alone, so stay with your blockmates. Jam your

doors when you go to sleep and don't open them again until your team leader – Thad, Henson, or Charles – comes to pick you up in the morning. Little kids, if you hear the fire alarm, don't leave your room unless you recognize one of our voices outside and we give you the right signal on the door. Muldoon pulled that trick last year and nailed a girl from Screamer's bunch. He's going to be gunning for us for a while this time, and there won't be another load of newbies for him to go after for another two weeks, so watch out and stick together."

With a murmur of acknowledgments, the children quickly got up from the table. Moving in formation with almost military precision, they dumped their trays in the waiting bins and followed their team leaders to the bunkhouse, leaving only Reza and Nicole behind.

"Should we not go with them?" she asked, wondering if the two of them would be safe, alone.

"No," he told her, gesturing for her to follow as he got up from the table and headed toward the tray bin. "We're not going back with them tonight. They'll be all right, but I think it's too dangerous for us to go back to the bunkhouse until tomorrow, at least."

"But," Nicole stammered, "where will we sleep?"

"Trust me," Reza told her. "I have a place Muldoon can't get into very easily."

He led her outside, following a path that led them through the various buildings that made up the House 48 complex. It comprised the bunkhouse itself, which was really a collection of dormitories; the school, which was only occupied during the winter, when even Muldoon could not bear to herd the children into the fields; the tiny medical clinic; and the administration building. The last, ironically, was also the largest, as it also housed House 48's shelter, visible from the outside by the universal red and black striped blast portal that was kept lit at all times. The exact same buildings could be found at any of the other Houses dotting Hallmark's surface. All of them were pre-fabricated, tough, cheap and easy to build and maintain. They were true modern architectural wonders, and all ugly as sin.

Up ahead, Nicole could make out a squat structure at the end of the path, the last of House 48's buildings that didn't seem to fit in with the others. Light showed through the slender windows, evenly distributed around the circumference of the octagonal building, reaching from about waist-high nearly to the roof over the second-story.

"My home away from home," Reza announced, gesturing toward the revolving door. It looked almost an airlock, and was intended to keep the dust of the fields out of the building.

"What is it?" Nicole asked as Reza ushered her through the door, the cylinder swishing closed behind them.

"It's the House 48 Library," he answered.

Nicole was about to laugh until she realized that Reza was completely serious. As they emerged through the door and into the light of the interior, she

saw the look of unabashed wonder on his face. Her smile slipped as she thought of how many times he must have come through that door, and yet his expression was as if this was the very first.

“Reza,” she asked, following after him into what must have been the lobby, “what is so important here?” She looked around at the meager collection of holo displays and the disk racks. “These devices are very nearly antique!”

Reza favored her with a quizzical look, as if her question had revealed a stratum of incredible, if easily forgivable, ignorance. “This,” he said disdainfully, pointing to the disk racks and study carrels arrayed around the lobby, “is junk: old periodicals, some of the new literature, and other stuff. I stopped bothering with that a long time ago.” He led her around the front desk as if he owned the place, which she suspected he might, in a way. Then he punched in an access code to a locked door. She noted that there appeared to be no one else here, a thought that was not entirely comforting. “This,” he explained quietly, “is why this place is important.”

Pushing open the door, they found themselves in a darkened room, but there was still enough light for Nicole to see angular shapes that radiated away into the darkness. Reza closed and locked the door behind them. Only then did he switch on a light.

“Oh,” Nicole gasped. In the gentle light that flooded the room, she saw row after row of books, real books, with pages and bindings. Some were made of the micro plastic that had found its way into favor over the years, but most were made of genuine paper, the exposed edges yellowed with age, their covers and bindings carefully protected with a glistening epoxy sealant.

“Besides being real antiques,” Reza told her, “and having some monetary value for anyone who can waste the transport mass charge to haul them around, they can be a real brain saver in this place.” He picked up a volume, seemingly at random – although he knew by heart the place of every book in the room – and held it up for her to see. *Hamlet*, the book’s binding said, followed by some strange symbols and then the author’s name: Shakespeare.

She took the book from him, careful not to drop it. It was terribly old, and one of the few such books she had ever seen. Every major publisher had long since done away with physical books. Electronic media were so much cheaper and more efficient.

But it was not the same, as her own father, a devoted book reader himself, had often told her. Watching the action on a holo screen left too little to the imagination, he had said once, holding one of his own precious volumes up as if it were on an imaginary pedestal. The screen fed the mind, but its calories were empty ones, bereft of the stuff on which thought depended. She had thought him quite comical at the time, her own young life having evolved around the holo images that invaded their home daily. But perhaps, as was most often the case, his words had more than just a kernel of truth in them.

“You asked why this place is so important to me,” Reza said, watching as she turned the pages, his ears thrilling to the sound. “I’ll tell you why. When you

come in from the fields, you eat, you sleep, and then you get up to go to the fields again. Over and over, for as long as you have until you can leave here.

“And every day that you let yourself do just that, just the stuff you have to do to get by, even when you’re so tired you can’t see straight, you die just a little bit. Not much, not so much that you notice that day, or even the next, but just a little. Your mind starts eroding, and you start forgetting about anything that you used to think was interesting or important, whether anyone else thought it was or not. Pretty soon, all the useless crap that we do here becomes more and more important to you, as if it really had some meaning.” He spat out the last few words, disgust evident on his face and in his voice. “After a while, you start finding yourself in conversations about how many kilos of rocks people dug up. There’s even an official contest. Did you know that? People talk about how many blisters so-and-so got, and who had sex with whom, what kind of stunt Muldoon pulled today, on and on and on. Remember the porridge you liked so much?” Nicole grimaced, the tasteless paste still coagulating in her stomach. “That’s what your brain starts turning into around here. Mush.

“And the worst part is that they start not to care about anything or anyone, even themselves. Why should they, when the most important thing they did today is clear a few more meters for some farming combine that doesn’t even give us a percentage of the grain they grow?”

Nicole’s mouth fell open at that.

“That’s right,” Reza told her, his eyes burning with anger. “All of our food is imported from Peraclion, because the grain there has a higher bulk than stuff grown here, for whatever reason, and so it’s more expensive to ship long distances. So all our stuff goes out-system, and Peraclion feeds us... after a few kickbacks get paid off to some of the admins here.

“So,” he shrugged, “here we all sit, droning our lives away until we’re old enough to either enlist directly or apply for an academy assignment. We’re slave labor for the farming combines that need the land cleared but are too cheap to send machines to do it.”

His expression turned grim. “But the worst part for most of the kids here is that, regardless of how bright they were when they came, they fail the entrance exams because they haven’t gotten the right schooling, or can’t even figure out what *abstract* means, let alone come up with an abstract thought.” His face twisted in an ironic smile. “No fighter jocks coming out of that group.”

Reza had no way of knowing at the time, but his last remark struck Nicole to the core. She loved the thought of flying, and had always secretly dreamed of piloting one of the tiny, darting fighter ships she saw in the movies. And in that instant, she knew what she wanted to do with her life, now that the old one was gone, washed away.

“And what of you, Reza?” she asked, her thoughts returning from her own hoped-for future. “Your mind has not turned to mush, I take it?”

“No,” he told her, his expression softening as he lovingly ran his fingers along the spine of a book, “not yet, anyway. Thanks to this place.”

“I still do not understand, *mon ami*.” She still could not see what Reza was driving at.

“When you come in here and pick up one of these,” he gestured at *Hamlet*, “or even watch one of the crappy holos out in the main room, you’re not just an orphaned kid marooned on a dustbowl planet anymore, with no more rights than any slave might have. It’s a way out of here. You’re a hero, or a villain, or anything else you could imagine, and a lot of things you probably can’t. Every time you turn a page you can go somewhere, even someplace that’s never been. But anywhere you go is somewhere far away from here. And the best part about it, the part that keeps me alive and sane, is that the words in the books leave a lot of blanks that your mind has to fill in. It makes your mind work without you forcing it to, and you get better and better at it without killing yourself like you have to sometimes in the fields.”

Nicole considered his words for a moment, her mind conjuring up images of some of the children she had seen around her since arriving at House 48. So many of them, it now seemed to her, had just been blank, without expression, without animation. Had they not been breathing, one might have thought them dead. And, perhaps, in a way they were.

“But Reza,” she asked, suddenly finding a hole in his escape theory, “how do you find the time? Or the energy?”

“I make it,” he said grimly. “I come here every night after dinner, no matter how tired I am, no matter if there’s mud from the rain or snow in the winter. And on the one day off we have after our six workdays, I spend all day here.” He shrugged. “What else am I going to do? I’d like to just spend that time sleeping like most of the others. I hate being tired all the time, but it’s too important. I’m not going to let myself turn into a vegetable in this place. When I’m fifteen,” he vowed, “I’m going to pass the academy entrance exams. I’m going to make it into OCS and be a Marine.”

“And then,” Nicole said, finishing the thought, “you will seek revenge.” He nodded, but turned his eyes away from her. He did not want her to see the hate that burned so fiercely there for the enemy that had stolen his parents, his life, from him to leave him marooned here.

“Reza?” a voice called from the desk area. “Are you in there?”

Nicole was surprised at the immediate change in Reza’s expression as a smile lit up his face like a beacon.

“Hi, Wiley!” he called, quickly unlocking the door and letting it swing open. “Hey, I’ve got someone I want you to meet.”

A face poked through the door, and for a moment Nicole was sure it was an enormous apple, left too long to dry, its sun-worn skin crinkled into innumerable peaks and valleys as it aged. The wrinkled face was topped by an unruly mop of gray hair that must have been cut with scissors by the man himself. Peering out from the apple-face was a pair of ice blue eyes that once might have been the object of interest and desire for many a woman, but now

were clouded with an expression that left some degree of doubt as to the owner's intelligence.

Those eyes swept from Reza to Nicole, and a mischievous smile crept across the man's face. "You got yourself a lady-friend," he exclaimed, his voice one of neutral innocence, rather than with the lecherous undertones that Reza would have expected from almost anyone else. "Showing her your collection, are you?"

"Yeah, Wiley," Reza nodded, turning to Nicole. "This is Nicole Carré, one of the newbies who came in this morning, and the newest member of our group. Nicole," he gestured toward the old man, "meet William Hickock, Colonel, Confederation Marine Corps, Retired. He's been my mentor and protector since I came to Hallmark," Reza explained. "And in case you were wondering, these are all his books. He brought them with him when he first came here."

Nicole's eyes widened. A collection like this must be worth a fortune.

The old man stuck out his hand, nodding his head toward Reza. "Nice to meet you!" he said with a disarming grin. "All my friends just call me Wiley."

Nicole could not help but smile as she took the man's hand, noting the restrained strength of his grip. "*Enchanté, monsieur,*" she said, bowing her head slightly.

As she looked back up at Wiley, she knew that something was not quite right, but she was not sure what it might be. There was something in his voice, or the way he carried himself, slouching slightly as if in acquiescence, that seemed out of character for a former Marine colonel.

Then she noticed the scar that crept away from the man's forehead and into his scalp like a lumpy, pink centipede, and she realized that his last battle – for that surely was where the scar was from – must have very nearly killed him. As it was, it left him less a man than he used to be, with some tiny part of his brain destroyed. She immediately pitied him, but she did not let it show on her face.

But Wiley, slightly brain damaged though he was, was nonetheless quite astute. "Yeah, missy," he told her, his voice wistful as he traced his finger along the scar as it wandered halfway across his skull, "I lost a few marbles, I guess. Lost this, too," he said, rapping on his right leg, the metal prosthesis echoing hollowly.

"But hey, that there's old news," he said, brightening suddenly as if someone had just turned an invisible toy wind-up crank on his back. "What are you all up to?"

"We're watching out for Muldoon again," Reza told him seriously, his voice reflecting as much concern as if a Kreelean attack had been underway. "He really took a fancy to Nicole."

Wiley's face changed for just a moment, so quickly that Nicole might have missed it had she not been looking right at him. A glow of anger flared in his eyes, the kind of chilled anger that came from living a life where death was always just a moment, a hand's breadth, away, a life that was far too short for

sorting out the complexities of human evil. She was sure that, had Muldoon been within arm's reach of the old man, he would have killed him in that blink of an eye.

Then it was gone.

"Well isn't that the damndest thing," Wiley whispered, shaking his head. "I just wish he'd leave you kids alone."

"That's the main reason we're here, Wiley," Reza said, looking sadly at Nicole. Reza had read – memorized, more like it – the biography of Colonel Hickock, and he knew that the tragedy of the man's intellectual demise was little short of monumental. "I was wondering if we might be able to stay with you for a couple days or so."

"Why, sure, Reza!" the old man exclaimed, delighted. "You know you're always welcome. I like company, you know." He gestured with his still-strong hands for them to come with him. "Come on, come on, let's get you settled in downstairs."

They followed him out the door, Reza locking it behind them. They went through the lobby and down some stairs into the building's basement, the bare plasticrete walls echoing their footsteps.

Opening a door that had MAINTENANCE stenciled on it in neat block letters, Wiley showed them into the room beyond. "It ain't much," he said, ushering them in, "but it's home."

Nicole found herself in what looked like an apartment, replete with a tiny kitchen, a separate bedroom, bathroom, and a fluffy, comfortable-looking sofa that took up nearly half of the living room. On the walls, themselves painted a light pastel blue, were holos of ships and people in uniform, even a few actual photographs, all presented in what Nicole guessed were expensive frames. While various other knickknacks could be found throughout the room, everything was neat and orderly, every visible surface clean of dust or the slightest trace of dirt. It was immaculate, but homey, without any of the fastidiousness that was nearly pathological with some people.

Looking at the sofa, she suddenly realized how tired she was. She had forgotten how long she had been awake, and was trying hard not to think of the ordeal she had faced earlier in the day with Muldoon.

"C'mon, honey," Wiley said gently, taking her by the arm. Even with his damaged brain, he could see when someone was exhausted. "Let's get you to bed."

Reza unfolded the sofa into a bed that nearly took up the whole room, quickly spreading out the sheets and blanket wrapped within. Nicole could see that it was an operation he had gone through many times before, and was glad for his quick handling of the matter.

She fell more than lay down on the old mattress, the clean, crisp smell of the sheets penetrating her brain, the downy blanket soft in her hands. Burying her face in the pillow, she closed her eyes.

Reza watched her fall away into sleep, and hoped that her dreams would not be troubled by the events of the day or the trials he was sure would yet come. He found that he liked this girl very much, and vowed to never let her come to harm, regardless of the cost.

THREE

Hallmark's hot summer gave way to fall without any noticeable change. The fall was still warm – hot, on many days – with rain that fell regularly and predictably across huge sections of the planet's three continents. It was an ideal location to grow grain, but offered little else of any strategic value.

And so it was no surprise that Hallmark had turned into a major grain producer, supplying nearly twenty percent of the quota for the sector, enough to feed forty combat regiments and all the ships and logistical support necessary to keep them in action. Much of the initial clearing had been done by machines. But the rock clearers were taken elsewhere after someone had come up with the idea of putting orphans there to build on the initial clearing efforts. Hallmark was safe from attack, they had said, since it had no military installations that might appeal to the Kreeleans, who seemed to be far more interested in contesting well-defended worlds.

On the other hand, Reza had often thought, that philosophy had left Hallmark utterly defenseless. But that's the way things had been for the last twenty or more years, and clearing the rocks from the land had become the traditional – and enforced – role of the orphans there.

"Busy hands are happy hands," Reza grunted as he heaved at a rock that must have weighed nearly fifty kilos, trying to pry it from the clutches of the hard earth beneath the loose topsoil. The rains had made the ground a bit less reluctant to give up its rocky treasures, but it was still backbreaking work that had to be done. For only after the rocks were removed and the tilling machines came through, adding nutrients as they did their normal work, would the field resemble something akin to arable land. Now there was only the indigenous steppe grass that blew in the wind, its razor-thin edges a constant hazard to exposed skin.

"What?" Nicole managed through her clenched teeth as she pushed against the rock's other side. She seemed to be doing little more than digging a hole in the ground with her feet as she pushed against the unyielding stone. But at last it started to give way.

"Nothing," Reza sighed as the rock finally came out like a pulled tooth, flopping over onto the ground with a solid thump. "Just philosophizing."

"About what?"

"*Je ne sais pas.*" He smiled at her reaction to his intentionally atrocious accent.

His talent with French had surprised even Nicole, who carried a trace of the linguistic chauvinism that had characterized her forebears. In the months the two had spent together, however, Nicole knew that he spoke it well enough to

almost be mistaken for a native. *Well*, she thought to herself with an inner smile, *almost*. She was terribly proud of him.

She grimaced theatrically, wiping her forehead clean of sweat with her bandanna in a sweeping gesture. “You need beaten, mon ami,” she chided, using a colloquialism she had picked up from Wiley. She sat down against the rock to take a break. “Your instructor has not been so deficient as to allow the language of kings to be so horribly mutilated.”

Reza favored her with an impish grin as he looked around at the nearby groups of laboring children, then at the sun. “I think it’s time to have lunch,” he announced, clapping his hands and rubbing them together as if a truly tasty meal awaited them. He stood up, cupping his hands to his mouth, and shouted, “BREAK!” to several figures off to their right. He repeated it to the left, and the other eleven members of his field team gratefully sat down for their noon meal break. It was the only one they were allowed during their twelve to sixteen hour workday.

Nicole got out the meatloaf sandwiches she made for them that morning. The meatloaf was a spread from a can, Reza had observed drily, and had probably not come from any sort of animal, so probably was not any sort of meat; nor had ever been part of any kind of loaf. But that was their feast for today. She set the sandwiches out on a white embroidered cloth she always brought with her for the occasion. It was something she had managed to make in her free time, virtually all of which she spent in the library with Reza and Wiley. Making their lunch had been her idea, and the extra work it took made her feel good, and it had since become a kind of tradition. It was a tiny thing that bound them a bit more closely together, staving off a little of the ugliness that filled their lives. Again reaching into her pack, she pulled out two battered metal cups and poured water for the two of them. Then she settled down to wait as Reza went about his noontime ritual.

She watched as he walked toward one pair of his team. He talked with them for a moment as they ate, making sure they were all right, then moved on to the next. He had always made it a point to take care of his people first, something he once told her he had learned from Wiley. On days when there were problems – and there were plenty of those, even on a job as mundane as this – he often did not get to rest or eat at all. The librarian, Mary Acherlein, whom Nicole had instantly liked, once told her that Reza had been a team leader for over a year before Nicole had arrived, despite his young age and Muldoon’s best efforts to the contrary. Of course, Muldoon did not try overly hard to get in Reza’s way: his team consistently outperformed the others in House 48’s field clearing totals, and that made Muldoon look good.

If that was possible, she thought sourly, thankful that the ponderous bulk of a man had left her alone, aside from an occasional visual appraisal that left her skin crawling with the memory of that loathsome first day when she had been trapped under his throbbing mass. She shuddered, pushing away the memory.

Watching as Reza started back toward her, most of his own eating time gone, she could not help but wonder if someday they might not become something more than friends. It was a pleasant thought, a dream that she kept quietly to herself. But for now, she treated him much like a brother who just happened to be very mature for a boy so young. He was still prone to mischief and the other emotional conundrums that plagued children his age, perhaps even more so now that he had someone to express them to, but there was no denying that he was already a young man, and she found herself very attracted to him. *Someday*, she thought.

“Well?” she prompted, handing him a sandwich.

He peered between the thick slabs of bread – one thing they had plenty of – and made a face. “Gross,” he said, a grin touching his lips. Nicole batted him in the shoulder. “Everybody’s okay. No more than the usual, except for Minkman. Said he had a broken finger on his left hand.”

“What did you do?”

Reza laughed. “I told him to use his right hand and not to worry about it.” Nicole frowned, sometimes not quite sure if he was joking or not. “Okay, okay. I splinted it for him, too. If he wants more than that before he can get to the infirmary tonight, he has to go to Muldoon, which he did not want to do. I can’t imagine why.”

“*Bon,*” she said. “Now, sit down and eat.”

“*Oui, madame,*” he said, this time with a perfect La Seyne accent. He plopped down across from her, somehow not getting dirt all over the picnic cloth. Taking a long swallow of water from his cup, he began to devour the first of three sandwiches and an anemic apple that served as dessert. The first day Nicole had offered to pack his lunch for him she had only made one sandwich, and Reza had been more anxious than usual to get back from the fields, this time to the dining hall instead of the library. He had never said a word about it, but she had felt awful when she saw how hungry he was that evening. She had not repeated that mistake since.

She stole a glance at him as he was looking off into the distance at something, the left side of his face turned toward her. Despite the scar that marred his skin, the keepsake left by the Kreeelan warrior who had killed his parents, he was a handsome boy. He wasn’t gorgeous or glamorous as some children promised to be upon their entry into puberty, but his face and his body radiated his inner strength and spirit. His skin was a golden color, not all of it from the tan from his years of work in the fields. Nor was it quite the olive color often associated with descendants of Terran Mediterranean races, nor was it European. He was all of those, yet none of them. The same was true of his hair. Almost chocolate brown, bleached somewhat by the sun, it was thick and lush, almost oriental in its texture. Haphazardly cut close to his skull when she had first met him, she had taken it upon herself to give him a proper haircut. Now it tapered evenly in the back to his neckline, with his ears and forehead

neatly exposed in what she jokingly referred to as House 48's *haute couture* hairstyle.

"You'll be leaving soon," he said quietly.

"What?" she asked, unsure if she had heard him correctly.

"Wiley got your acceptance papers this morning from Lakenheath Training Center," he told her, his eyes focused on the ground. "You maxed out on almost all those tests you took a few months ago. Made you look like kind of a hot shot, I guess. There'll be a ship coming to pick you up on your birthday next week." He smiled, still not looking at her. "You've reached 'free fifteen.'" He finally looked up. His eyes were a confused mixture of relief that she had been accepted and sorrow that she would be leaving him, probably forever. "I... I wanted to tell you as soon as I found out this morning, but..." He trailed off. "I couldn't," he finally whispered. "I didn't want to say it, that you're really going to be leaving. But I couldn't put it off any longer." He offered her a sad smile. "Congratulations, trainee fighter pilot Carré."

Nicole was speechless for a moment, her mouth working, but no words came out. The time had passed so quickly, her brain sputtered. It was too soon. It was impossible.

"Reza..." she managed. And then, like a dam bursting, she began to cry. She wrapped her arms around Reza and held him tight, overcome with joy that her future was not completely bleak, that she had something to look forward to. "Oh, Reza," she exclaimed, her French accent nearly obliterating the Standard words, "this is so wonderful! We can leave this rotten place! And in only a few days! We..."

"I can't leave, remember?" Reza reminded her softly, fighting to hold back tears of his own as he held her. He had lost so many friends to time and circumstance that he thought he would be hardened to this, ready for it when it came, when it was time for her to leave. But he wasn't. He could never be ready for the things he felt now, inside himself. He knew she had to go, knew that it was the only thing for her. But it hurt so much to think of what things were going to be like without her.

In that moment he knew the truth about his feelings. He loved her. He knew he was only a barely pubescent boy with emerging hormones, but he knew in his heart that it was true.

Her voice faded away as the realization forced itself upon her like Muldoon's groping hands.

"*Mon chère*," she whispered, the joyful tears suddenly becoming bitter and empty. "Oh, Reza, what will you do?"

He tried to smile, failed. "The same as I always do," he choked, shrugging. "I'll make do somehow. I'm just happy that you made it, Nicole," he told her. "As much as it's going to hurt to see you go, I'm so glad for you."

They held each other for a while longer, trying to forestall the bittersweet future that vowed to separate them, brother and sister in a family bound together not by blood, but by trust and love.

Finally, without saying another word, they rose unsteadily to their feet and got back to work.

Muldoon let the field glasses he had been holding to his eyes slap against his chest, the once bright finish of the instrument long since corroded by hours of being held in his sweaty palms.

He spent a goodly portion of his day watching Gard and his crew from an unobtrusive distance. He especially enjoyed watching the French girl. *Yes*, he thought, licking the sticky sweat from his lips, *especially her*. After the confrontation that very first day, Muldoon had been forced by Reza's tactics to leave them more or less alone. He had taken out his frustrations on his usual victims, although he had never thought of them as such. To Muldoon they were only young children who should have liked him, but did not for some inexplicable reason. But the lust in him for the little wench from La Seyne refused to die. If anything, it grew the more he tried to satisfy his urgings in other ways.

Muldoon had received word through his grapevine that Nicole would be leaving soon, and the diabolical device that served as his brain was churning through possibilities, looking for options, an opening.

Yeab, he thought to himself, feeling his crotch begin to throb, *I'd like to explore an opening, right between the little bitch's legs*. And he would not mind sticking it to her little boy benefactor, either, he thought as his teeth ground together in frustration. Just before he choked the life out of the little bastard.

He turned to get back in the van, his mind still churning, looking for a scenario that would work. He was not worried about the house administrators, or even the Navy ship coming to get the girl. It was the kids themselves, plus the joker that was the old man. Muldoon had always thought him a senile idiot, at least until he had tried to push the old Marine around, threatening him after Wiley had witnessed one of Muldoon's little indiscretions. The ground had never hit Muldoon that hard or fast. When he came to, the old man was sweeping the floor nearby as if nothing had happened. He was a wild card, and one thing Muldoon despised was unpredictability.

His mind began to bubble with frustration. He was usually so good at making plans quickly, and he kicked one broken-arched foot at the steppe grass, watching the dust trail away like smoke.

Like smoke.

And then it came to him. "Oh, that's just rich," he told himself, chuckling softly as he swung his bulk into the driver's seat. "Brother Muldoon," he said, "you certainly do have a way."

He started the engine and drove off, heading for the compound to make the arrangements for the French girl's coming of age.

Reza frowned. "That Muldoon," he muttered under his breath. "What an idiot."

It was the day before Nicole was to leave. The two of them, plus four others from Reza's team, had been assigned a ridiculously small quadrangle to clear. But it was not the area's size or shape that puzzled Reza, but the location: on all four sides there were quads of wheat that were almost ready to be harvested. Genetically modified over decades from original Earth stock, Hallmark's grain grew taller than Reza could reach with his arms extended over his head and produced four times as much grain per hectare. Normally that didn't matter to him. But now, standing inside this quad, it was impossible to see anything past the wall of gently waving stalks, and it made Reza nervous.

"What difference does it make, *mon ami*?" Nicole asked, reluctantly putting her gloves on. "Rocks are rocks, *non*?"

"Sure," he replied, "but you don't normally bother clearing little patches like this just before the harvest. It's easier to wait until the wheat's been taken out so you can get the rocks through to the road." He remembered how Muldoon had come to pick them up that morning in one of the huge combines, a first in Reza's time on-planet. Neither the large buses that were their normal transport when working far from the house, nor Muldoon's van could penetrate the wheat to get them to the barren quad where they now stood. They had to walk in from the road. And it wasn't his full team, just the six of them.

She touched his shoulder. "Perhaps we should get to work, Reza," she told him quietly, a tentative smile on her lips. "I think perhaps you have other things on your mind that make a little thing seem very big."

Reza looked at her. "Yeah, you're probably right," he sighed. Her leaving was indeed a big thing on his mind, and it did seem to make everything else – the bad things – worse. But a part of his mind still wondered why Muldoon had put them here. It was different, out of his normal routine, and that made Reza worry.

The morning passed without incident. Reza was working hard on digging out a particularly recalcitrant rock, simultaneously considering the feasibility of a lunch break, when he heard Nicole call to him from where she was digging a meter or so away.

"Reza," she asked, pointing to the north, "what is that?"

He looked up, and his heart tripped in his chest. There was smoke. Lots of it. And close.

"Oh, damn," he hissed, tossing down his pickaxe. His eyes swept the horizon around them, his stomach sinking like a lead weight over a deep ocean trench. Smoke billowed out of all the adjoining quads, as if nearly a combined hectare's worth of wheat had simply decided to ignite.

And he knew that was simply not possible.

“Goddammit!” he cursed. “Drop everything and get over here, now!” he ordered the others, his eyes judging the flames while the touch of the air against his skin helped him gauge the wind. He knew that wheat that was ready for harvest would not normally catch fire too easily, but once it really caught – especially if there was a wind to drive it – it would burn as well as kerosene.

The others joined him and Nicole at a full run. Their eyes were wide with fear. Every child who had worked in the fields for very long knew the danger of fire. Whipped along by the winds, it killed or maimed hundreds of orphans across the planet every year. Those who died were generally the lucky ones, for the house clinics were ill-prepared to deal with major burns, and off-planet medical transport for orphans was hardly considered a priority by the bureaucracies that controlled the planet’s operation. The fires, a constant hazard throughout the year, were started by everything from lighting strikes to spontaneous combustion; any of a dozen causes. Not least of which was arson.

Reza called up an image in his mind of the field they were in, a process made difficult because he had not worked this area for nearly two years. Since then, it had been bursting with wheat, and the orphans had nothing to do with that; that was the Hallmark Farm Combine’s business.

“There should be a road about a klick south of here,” he remembered, the image of the arrow-straight track coming to him from a map of the area he had studied with Wiley a long time back. He looked in the direction he thought the road should be, and was relieved to see that smoke had not yet begun to boil toward the sky.

“We’re going to have to move fast,” he said, “or the wind’ll help the fire kill us. Come on!”

He led them in the direction of the road at a restrained jog so the younger kids could keep up. Moving through the tall wheat was tricky as it was, the stalks grasping at clothes and skin, fouling their legs when it was stepped on. The others followed Reza without complaint or argument, with Nicole bringing up the rear. Reza pushed the pace as fast as he dared, his biggest fear hearing the crackling of a blazing fire but not being able to see where it was coming from. Should they lose their sense of direction, they could find themselves trapped in the middle of an inferno with no escape.

Nicole, last in the line of fleeing refugees, kept looking behind them. Her eyes reflected the licking tongues of the flames now just visible over the tops of the wheat stalks, coming closer under the driving influence of the wind.

The child in front of her – a new girl, Nicole did not know her name – stumbled and fell to her hands and knees. Nicole helped her struggle to her feet, urging her onward. “*Allez! Allez!*” she cried, pushing the girl forward.

“We’re almost there!” Reza called from the front. He had spent enough time in and around the fields to have learned how to navigate with a sort of dead reckoning, using the sun’s position and his pace count to keep him on track. “Only about fifty meters left!”

A few moments later, he breathed a sigh of relief as he saw the regular outline of the road through the last layers of wheat. He stood to one side and passed the others of his team on through first, giving Nicole a quick hug as she emerged from the trampled trail behind them.

The road would not necessarily protect them from the fire, Reza knew. But at least they could move in a direction opposite to the one that the fire was taking, keeping out of its way.

“Oh,” Nicole gasped, her chest heaving with adrenaline and the effort of running what had seemed like such a long way, “*Zut alors*. I did not think—”

“Reza!” someone shrieked. “Look ou—”

The voice was suddenly cut off with a sound Reza knew all too well: the *smack* of a powerful hand striking a child’s face.

Darting through the wheat to the road’s edge, Reza just had time to see the other children fleeing down the road past Muldoon’s van. The field master and three of his goons, his teenage hatchet men, stood in two-man cordons off to either side of where Reza stood, blocking the road. They had let the other children pass, even the one who had tried to warn Reza, because they were not of interest.

For that, at least, Reza was thankful. Without wasting another second, he disappeared back into the wheat, grabbing Nicole’s hand.

“Follow me!” he hissed, dragging her along behind him.

“What is it?” she gasped.

“Muldoon,” Reza replied, his breath a controlled heaving of his chest as he fought a new path through the wheat. He was desperate to avoid their pursuers, whose footsteps he could hear somewhere behind them, crashing through the stalks. “He brought some friends with him this time.”

Nicole quickened her pace.

Muldoon watched as the two older boys, whom the other kids called Scurvy and Dodger, chased Reza and Nicole through the field. Climbing atop a specially fortified portion of the van’s roof, Muldoon was high enough that he could see the bending and weaving of the stalks as his remote hunters closed on their quarry. The older boys were able to make better time through the wheat, especially with the trail the Gard kid left behind him. A smile of certainty crept across Muldoon’s face. Gard wasn’t going to get away this time, and neither was the girl. It had been easy to track their progress to the road. Now he would track them as his human hounds chased them down.

He glanced down at the other boy waiting below, whom he had dubbed Big John in honor of a certain very important part of the boy’s anatomy. Muldoon had given him his own special touch over ten years ago, and the boy had been unflinchingly loyal ever since.

Big John mutely smiled back.

Reza wove through the wheat in an intricate pattern that he had learned from other kids when playing in the fields. That was in the days before Wiley

had convinced him to spend that time in the library, earning himself a ticket off of Hallmark that few of the other kids would ever receive.

While it appeared to Muldoon that Scurvy and Dodger were gaining, Reza was keeping them at about the same distance, but at a cost. He and Nicole, already flushed from fleeing the fire – which still boomed and crackled around them – were getting tired. The weaving that confused their pursuers also meant that Reza and Nicole had to take at two or three steps to Scurvy and Dodger's one or two, the time being made up by the older boys hunting around for their path after missing one of Reza's sharp turns. Worse, Reza now had no idea where they were.

"Reza," Nicole gasped behind him, "we cannot run forever!"

"Don't stop!" he ordered grimly. His legs and lungs were burning as hot as the flames that consumed the wheat around them. Some of the smoke was now settling toward the ground, causing him to gag. "Keep going!"

Without warning they burst into an open quad. Reza, his legs accustomed to trampling through the wheat stalks, lost his footing and fell to the ground, skinning his palms and knees.

"Damn!" he cursed, grabbing Nicole's hands as she helped him up.

They were only thirty meters or so across the quad – less than a quarter of the way – when their pursuers appeared behind them.

"Give it up, maggot!" Scurvy cried. His acne scarred face was flushed with the exertion of running. "Game's over."

"Save it, Gard," Dodger chimed in. His lopsided eyes, one placed nearly two centimeters higher than the other, were bright with anticipation, and his brutishly large hands flexed at his sides. "You're good in the wheat, man, but you're dead meat in the open." He smiled, showing perfect vid-star teeth that were completely out of place in his lumpy face.

Reza slowed at the boy's words, then stopped.

"Reza!" Nicole cried, "What are you doing?"

"He's right," Reza told her as he caught his breath. "Those two bastards are quick. They'll catch us before we get to the wheat on the other side."

"Then what do we do?" Nicole whispered. Her eyes were fixed on the two approaching boys who now merely sauntered, apparently sure that she and Reza could not get away.

Reza smiled thinly, the fear in his eyes overshadowed by determination. "I'll have to use my secret weapon," he replied cryptically.

She watched as he reached into the little cloth bag that he always kept at his belt. Knowing what was in it – a few polished stones that she thought were pretty, some scraps of paper with names of books written on them, and a strip of leather that Reza sometimes did a parody of jumping rope with – did not make her feel any better. But her trust in him, especially now, was implicit.

Unhurriedly, he withdrew the leather strip and one of the stones, a spherical piece of quartz that he had meticulously ground and polished with the tools in Wiley's little handyman shop in the admin building's basement.

“Stand behind me,” he said quietly, and Nicole gladly moved herself a few paces back, putting Reza between herself and the two advancing boys, who were now about twenty meters away.

“What’s that supposed to be?” Scurvy demanded mockingly. “A wimp-sized whip?”

“Maybe he’s gonna hang himself,” Dodger said, laughing. “Too bad there’s no tree, or we could give him a hand.”

Reza paid them no attention as he placed the stone carefully in the center of the leather strap, which Nicole now saw formed a perfect pouch for the sparkling rock. He let it dangle to his side, his right wrist beginning to flex, judging the weight and response of the sling and its ammunition.

He looked up to see Scurvy and Dodger still approaching at a leisurely pace, confident in their victory. Reza’s mouth was compressed in a thin line of concentration, his eye calculating the distance and speed with the accuracy of a computerized laser range finder.

“Reza,” Nicole said quietly.

“Shhh,” he responded softly, his mind now focused on Scurvy. In precisely measured movements, he began to rock the sling. As it built up momentum, he brought it up into an orbit above his head, the sling now a brown blur as it whirled around like a propeller blade.

Reza had become an expert in the sling’s use under Wiley’s tutelage, and sometimes used it to focus himself when his mind seemed listless, or just to have fun. He and the old man would have contests, setting up old food cans at various distances and then trying to see who could knock the most down the fastest. Wiley won most of the time, but Reza never pushed too hard just to win. To him, it was the camaraderie that counted, the togetherness, not who bested whom. Wiley was, in fact if not in blood, his father, and had been since the first day Reza came to this world. It was Wiley who met him at the spaceport, Muldoon having fallen ill that day, and the old man had taken the boy under his wing as if Reza was his only begotten son. It was one of the few twists of fate that had gone in Reza’s favor, and he had given thanks for Wiley’s patronage every day since then.

But it was now, here in a vacant quad in the middle of a burning wheat field, that the games of the past were about to show their dividends.

Scurvy and Dodger had taken notice of the whirling leather, but they had no idea what it was or what it could do. Wiley had never shown his little toy to any of the other children, and Reza had carried on the tradition.

Until now.

“Maybe he thinks he’s just gonna take off,” Dodger joked.

Scurvy smiled as his hand reached into the rear left pocket of his jumper, extracting a knife that Reza easily recognized, even at this distance. Illegal on most worlds because of the harder-than-diamond metallurgy that made them the galaxy’s best edged weapons, the Kreeelan blade now in Scurvy’s hands was undoubtedly a gift bestowed on him by Muldoon. The boy’s arrogant smile

grew larger as he turned the knife in his hand, the blade winking with the reflected light of the sun.

With a last mental calculation, one end of the sling slipped from Reza's fingers, releasing the stone in a straight line tangent to the whirling circle over Reza's head. The buzzing of the sling sighed to a stop as it fell, empty, to Reza's side.

Scurvy had time to blink once before the stone, about the size of a large marble but much heavier, hit him precisely between the eyes. The impact staved in his forehead and drove a splinter of bone into his brain. His sightless eyes fluttered upward as his body collapsed to the ground, twitched once, and then lay still.

There was utter, complete silence in the quad. Even the crackling of the fire seemed muted.

"Son of a bitch," Dodger whispered, looking at his fallen companion. He looked at the little white rock that now lay on the ground near Scurvy's head, partly covered with his blood.

The humming of the sling began again as Reza readied his next salvo.

But Dodger was not as dull-witted as Reza had hoped. Fortunately forgetting the knife still clutched in Scurvy's dead hand, he burst into an all-out charge at Reza, his legs eating up the distance between them as Reza readied for another shot.

"Run, Nicole!" he cried.

"But, Reza—"

"Run, dammit!" he shouted as he loosed his second shot at less than ten meters range.

Nicole watched as Dodger earned his nickname, his torso performing an uncanny twist as Reza released the sling. Had Reza not aimed at the boy's center of mass rather than his head, the rock would have missed completely. As it was, it hit Dodger in the left shoulder with a hearty thump. It was enough to splinter the bone in his shoulder joint, making him stagger with pain, but it only slowed him down for a moment.

Nicole turned and fled.

Reza did not waste time trying to finesse another shot with the sling. He reached down and picked up the nearest rock and hurled it at Dodger, hitting him in the stomach and doing no damage other than making the boy even angrier. Then he turned to follow Nicole across the quad and into the wheat.

"You're dead, you little bastard!" Dodger shrieked as he held his injured shoulder, the bone splinter grinding painfully as he raced after his quarry.

Nicole was terrified. She had lost Reza, and now was lost herself. Running blindly through the wheat, her nose clotted with the smoke that swirled through the fields, she had no idea which way to go. She just ran.

Stopping for a moment to catch her breath, she wondered if she should call out to Reza. But no, she decided angrily, that would alert Dodger to her presence, and Reza might even be dead.

“I never should have left you,” she cursed herself, angrily wiping away the tears of guilt that sprang to her eyes. Memories of her mother, dead because Nicole had not thought to warn her of a lethal danger, rose unbidden. Perhaps, she thought miserably, she and Reza could have beaten Dodger. She knew she should have stayed with him...

“Merde!” she cried quietly, pulling at her hair in self-recrimination. She had to find a way out of this, she had to find Reza. Looking at the sun, now past its zenith, she tried to guess which way to go. Picking a direction, hoping it was the right way, she headed toward where she thought the road to the orphanage might be.

Such was her surprise when, after only a few tens of meters, she burst from the wheat onto the road that led to the orphanage. Falling to her knees, she sobbed in relief, at the same time wondering what had happened to Reza, knowing that she had to find help.

“Well, I’ll be,” she heard a familiar voice coo from nearby. “Look what we have here.”

She looked up just in time to see Muldoon’s obesity blot out the sun, his shadow falling across her face like a burial shroud.

Reza’s time was almost up. His legs were ready to give out, and he could hear Dodger’s labored breathing close behind him. No number of maze tricks was going to save him now.

“Got you, you little freak!” Dodger cried as he latched onto the collar of Reza’s shirt.

Reza tried to struggle out of it, but it was too late. He collapsed to the ground, quickly rolling onto his back to free his hands for his last great act of defiance.

Dodger straddled him, pinning him to the ground. Balling up his good fist, he said, “You’re gonna pay, you little fuck,” before he slammed it into Reza’s face.

Reza did his best to ward off the piston-blows that rained down with unerring precision, but no war was ever won through defense alone. Leaving his face completely open to attack, Reza shot his own fist upward while Dodger was cocking his arm for another blow, managing to land a glancing hit to the older boy’s injured shoulder.

Dodger let out a cry of agony, and Reza bucked his body upward and to the side like a wrestler fighting a pin, squirming from between Dodger’s legs. Reza plunged away into a curtain of smoke as Dodger tried to get back on his feet.

Through the slits left him by the swelling around his battered eyes, Reza suddenly became aware that he had led himself into a trap. Flames danced all

around him and his skin prickled with the heat. His nose, accustomed now to the acrid smell of smoke, could no longer screen it from his lungs, and he began to gag and cough.

“Where are you, you little son of a bitch?” he heard Dodger call from somewhere off to his left. “Come on out!”

He can't see me, Reza told himself. The smoke was a much better screen than was the wheat itself. *Now, if only I can get myself out of here*, he worried. Carefully avoiding the ravenous flames and Dodger's angry searching, Reza managed to work his way out of the fiery trap.

Behind him, lost in the smoke, he heard Dodger's voice calling, calling...

Nicole lay spread-eagled on her back inside the closed van. Muldoon's silent assistant had stuffed a rag in her mouth and bound her hands and feet to the cargo tie-downs with heavy tape. She quivered in fear, her eyes locked on the rolls of blubber emerging from Muldoon's uniform as he fought with the overstressed velcro down its front. The van was filled with the mingled scent of his body odor and the breath mints he always chewed before taking one of his pleasure rides. The smell alone made her want to gag.

The boy who had taped her to the floor had only smiled at her, no matter how much she had struggled. He had not hit her or threatened her, but treated her like she was amiss for not wanting to participate willingly, as if sure that she would chastise herself later for being so silly. He kneeled in the back of the vehicle, near her head, his eyes gleaming knowingly, as if she were about to learn a very important secret, a very special one.

“Ah,” Muldoon gasped as the uniform suddenly flew open down to his crotch, releasing his manhood from its fleshy confines. “I've been waiting for you for a long time, honey,” he said in quick gasps as he waddled forward on his knees, taking up station between her legs. His hands groped under her blouse, and he sighed as he squeezed her breasts. “They've grown since last time,” he said over the muffled screaming that made its way through the sock stuffed in her mouth. “Did you know that?”

His hands, shaking from the adrenaline rushing through his system, worked their way down, down over her belly, then grabbed roughly between her legs, his fingers probing through her panties.

Nicole closed her eyes and fought against the wave of nausea that would kill her with the gag in her mouth. But she knew that suffocating on her own vomit would be better than succumbing to what this man had in mind. She squirmed as his fingers grabbed the elastic waistband of the flimsy panties the orphanage issued, his dirty, untrimmed fingernails scraping her tender pubis as he began to pull them down, to tear them off.

“You'll like it,” he soothed. “I know I wi—”

The last word was cut off by the sudden grating of the van's cargo door as it slammed open, letting the bright glare of the sun shine into the darkened interior and momentarily blinding its occupants.

"What the hell?" Muldoon roared, whirling around like a rutting walrus facing off against a competitor, his erect penis pointing like an accusing finger toward the man who stood in the doorway.

It was Wiley. But in Muldoon's state of hormonal confusion, he did not notice the eyes that burned from under the knitted brow or the expression that had once belonged to a fierce warrior, a man who had killed – and, in a way, died – for God and country. He wasn't looking at Wiley. He was staring into the face of a colonel of the Confederation Marine Corps.

"Close that door and get out of here, you senile old fart!" Muldoon screamed, his face turning a beet red as he reached for the door. His hand faltered when he caught a glimpse of something metallic in the old Marine's hand.

Without saying a word, Colonel Hickock pumped two rounds from the pistol into Muldoon's skull. The tiny flechettes minced the big man's brain as they ricocheted within the bony structure, lacking enough velocity to make a clean exit out the back.

A third red eye gracing his forehead – the only evidence of injury and proof of the colonel's marksmanship – Muldoon somersaulted out of the van like an obscene high diver, his twitching body flopping to the dirt like a two hundred kilo bag of fertilizer.

"Come on out, son," Hickock said in a low growl that Nicole would not have recognized without seeing the man's lips move in time to the words.

Big John, his face sad now, crawled out of the van as he was told, neither his face nor his body reflecting any sign of defiance or resistance. And when the colonel turned away toward Nicole, sure that the boy was not a threat, Big John walked into the wheat field toward where the hungry fires burned. With his lover and benefactor dead, his own twisted and defiled soul had no more desire to live. Unseen and unheard, he cast himself into the flames.

"Wiley!"

The old man turned to see Reza huffing up the road from where he had emerged from the blazing fields, his face mottled with bruises and caked with blood.

"Where's Nicole?" he gasped, running up to the van, "Muldoon, he—" Then he caught sight of the mound of flesh lying motionless on the ground and the gun in Wiley's hand. "Oh, Jesus."

"Better help your girl, son," the old man said slowly, shaking his head as if something was in his ear. "And take this," he handed Reza the gun. "I won't be able to keep track of it much longer. The other kids," he went on groggily, "they came and told me what happened, and..."

The man who was Colonel Hickock never finished what he set out to say.

Taking the gun, Reza watched with soul-deep sorrow as the man's eyes suddenly transformed to reflect the good-natured innocence of Wiley the janitor. All traces of Colonel Hickock that had been there just a moment before disappeared like mist under a hot sun.

"Where's Nicole?" Wiley asked, cocking his head and looking around as if he had just come on the scene.

"Oh, God," Reza gasped, leaping into the van, terrified of what he might find. "Nicole!"

Relieved to find that she still had most of her clothes on, Reza carefully pried away the tape that covered her mouth, pulling the roll of gauze bandage out of her throat. Then he freed her hands and feet.

"Reza," she choked, hugging him so hard he heard one of his ribs crack. "Reza, I was afraid...I thought you had died."

He kissed her, and then held her even tighter, rocking her back and forth. He never wanted to let her go.

"You know what they say about bad pennies," he whispered, not willing to let on just how close he had come to losing it out there, how close he had come to losing her. "They just keep turning up."

"If Wiley had not shown up," she shuddered, "Muldoon would have—"

"Shh," Reza whispered in her ear. "Don't think about that." He looked down at Muldoon's bloated corpse. "It's over now. For good."

"Come on, kids," Wiley said quietly, his child-like eyes watching the smoke as the wind shifted back toward them, the dark curls billowing into the sky. Even in his senile state, he was no fool. There were no firefighters on Hallmark. The fires would be left to burn themselves out, and anyone caught in them would be dead or horribly maimed. "I think we'd better be getting back."

Reza helped Nicole out of the van, careful to keep her clear of Muldoon's stiffening body. She paused to give it a single look, just to make sure he was really and truly dead. Satisfied, she let Reza lead her away.

Arms around each other's waists, the three of them made their way back to Wiley's battered utility truck. They were a tiny family with no home, but with enough love to make life worth living on any world.

FOUR

Mon Chère Reza,

Things are going so fast here. I have been here only ten months, and already I have begun the real flight training, my head now filled with tactics and maneuvers that we will only now begin to apply. I made my first flight yesterday – with an instructor, of course – and might be able to solo in another twenty flight hours.

I cannot tell you how exciting it is to fly! To be so free, strapped to such a powerful machine (*oui*, even the tiny trainers they use here!) is like nothing I have ever imagined. I have spent many hours in the simulators, but they do not do justice to the real thing. My only regret is that you are not here to share in my happiness. I know you would love it.

As you suspected, I have many ‘suitors,’ as you call them, but I have not the time for them. To study and learn to fly and fight is all I allow myself to be interested in, for I am determined to be the best pilot in my class. Perhaps later I will consider such things, but we have gone through too much getting me here, *non?* I will not throw that away for anything, ever.

I must go now, my brother. The Officer of the Deck is shouting for lights out, and I am so very tired. The days sometimes are so long here that it reminds me of working the fields! I will write again as soon as I can, probably next week after a class exercise that is coming up.

Please, Reza, take care of yourself and give my love to Wiley. I have leave coming up for next month and hope to find a transport to Hallmark so I may visit. I will let you know. Please – write when you can. Sometimes it is all that keeps me going.

All my love,
Nicole

Reza read the letter several times, as he always did, before he folded the paper and put it in his breast pocket. Mary, the librarian, was hardly liberal when it came to printing out hard copies of personal mail (paper – even synthetic – was very expensive), but she made an exception for Reza. He did not even bother to read Nicole’s letters on the vid-screen when they first arrived, but printed them out straight away. Holding the paper in his hand when he read her

words made her seem a bit closer, more real. They had agreed to write this way, rather than send personal vids. Most of the other kids thought he was crazy and ridiculously old-fashioned, but somehow it made Nicole seem more real to him. His hand strayed to the small silver crucifix around his neck, his most prized possession that he never let out of his sight. It was her gift to him on the tear-filled day when she left for Lakenheath, nearly a year ago now.

He looked out the window to watch the kids file by on the way to their noonday meal, and he wondered if Nicole would even recognize this place when she came to visit on her first leave. *When she came home*, he told himself. For that is what he had finally decided Hallmark was: home.

Muldoon's death had sparked a highly-level Confederation investigation of the orphanage system and the Hallmark Farming Combine, and had resulted in nothing short of a miraculous change in the lives of the orphans. The field work, a back-breaking tradition for more than twenty years, was abolished as cruel child labor. The chief administrators of the orphanage system – not just at House 48, but all across the planet – were interviewed, cross-examined, and dismissed if they could not answer the commission's questions satisfactorily. Many of them now found themselves in prison at the sort of hard labor that the children had endured.

The farm combine itself received a tremendous fine for its part in the exploitation of the children, and more than a few of its senior managers also wound up in Confederation prisons.

All this was no surprise to Reza after he had first seen the makeup of the commission: thirty-five Navy and Marine Corps officers, with a handful of civilians from the General Counsel. Though he had been retired for quite some time, the name of Colonel William Hickock still carried a lot of weight. The Marine Corps took care of its own.

Now the orphans enjoyed three solid meals a day (although the food wasn't much better than it used to be, Reza lamented), went to school full time, and did not have to go to the fields anymore except to play baseball.

Reza had to shake his head at that, remembering how Wiley had taught them how to play the ancient Earth game in one of the open, dusty quads. The children, their minds focused on futile toil for so long, ate up what Wiley showed them. Soon there were baseball games going on all over the complex every day after school using bats, balls, and mitts that the older kids put together in the machine shops that were part of the physical plant and power generator station.

The game had spread like wildfire, and kids had been sent from almost every other house to see how it was played. There was even talk of forming a league with equipment donated by the Marine Corps. Reza was terrible when he came up to bat, but he could pitch better than anyone else in his house, and was looking forward to meeting the kids from other houses.

It would be a first for all of them.

Yes, Reza thought, *things certainly have changed*. He now spent time in the library not only because he wanted to, but because Mary had appointed him chief assistant librarian. He attended school, alternating half days and full days, depending on the courses that were being taught by the new instructors who had been brought in. He spent the rest of his time before dinner working the desk and helping the other kids who had begun to mob the little building, so much so that the administration was thinking about expanding it. Preparing school papers, reading tutorials, or just for fun, Reza had never seen so many kids here before. They had never had time under the old regime, and Reza often wondered why the combine had financed the library in the first place, it had been so little used.

Fate certainly could be fickle, he told himself wonderingly as he watched the animation on the faces of the other children, where before one could only see exhausted eyes and blank expressions.

“We’re human again,” he said quietly to himself, unconsciously patting Nicole’s letter in his pocket

Getting up from his desk in Mary’s office, Reza headed out to answer the bell at the front desk, thinking that his remaining time on Hallmark wasn’t going to be so bad after all.

Thirty million kilometers away, deep in the blackness beyond the orbit of Hallmark around its yellow star, a gravity well appeared at a point without a name or special significance, warping the void around it into a vortex of space and time. As the well deepened toward infinity, it created a fleeting, transient event horizon, and matter was instantaneously injected through the tiny rift in the fabric of the universe.

A solitary Kreeelan warship, an enormous battlecruiser that dwarfed any vessel ever built by Man, emerged from hyperspace. Her sublight drive activated, and she turned her raked prow onto a trajectory toward the nearby planet. Her sensors reached out before her like ethereal hounds sniffing out their quarry, searching for the planetary defense network orbiting the human world.

On what humans would have called the ship’s bridge, a warrior priestess sat in the throne-like chair from which she commanded the great vessel and its crew. She tapped her ebony talons in a gesture of anticipation that had been one of her trademarks for many cycles of the Empress Moon, the sharp rapier tips eroding even the resilient metal of the chair’s arm. She had left her mark in many ships of the Fleet in the hundred and more cycles of service she had rendered unto her Empress. But this ship, the *Tarikh-Da*, had always been her favorite. It was the greatest warship the Empire had ever built.

She had been greatly honored when the Empress had chosen her for this mission, for it was the first of its kind in the war against the humans. For all the cycles since the Empire had made contact with them, the ships of the Empress

had come to the enemy's planets to do battle. They came to destroy these lesser beings in feats of combat to honor their ruler and expunge the plague of yet another species not worthy of Her spirit.

But this was to be different. There would be killing, yes, but only the older ones. The pups, the young, these were to be spared. They were to be taken back to the Empire.

She glanced at the tactical display, noting with satisfaction that hers was the only ship within parsecs of this human enclave. *Not that it would have mattered*, she thought. The Empire's flagship could annihilate a fleet of lesser vessels, but had never been unleashed upon the humans; it would have offered the Children of the Empress no challenge, no honor.

"Their defenses have activated," the weapons officer reported. "Orbital batteries are reorienting toward our approach vector." A pause as she studied her instruments. "There are no planetary emplacements."

Which they already knew, the priestess thought to herself. She nodded toward her subordinate, pleased with her diligence. Prudence required that they be sure. Humans would never have made such good opponents had they been perfectly predictable.

"Very well," she replied. "You may deal with them at your leisure, Mar'ya-Nagil." She did not have to add that the ship's main batteries were to remain silent; the huge guns would not only destroy any satellite defenses, but the planet's surface below, as well. "Report to me when the defenses are destroyed."

"Yes, Tesh-Dar," the young warrior replied, proud that the priestess was again in command of her vessel, the ship on which she had spent most of her own life. She turned to her task as if the Empress herself had given the command.

Tesh-Dar, high priestess of the Desh-Ka, watched the golden planet grow larger in the huge three-dimensional display before her. One hand softly drummed on the command chair, while the other reflectively probed the scar that stretched down across her left eye.

Reza was putting books back on the shelves when the raid sirens began to wail. He looked up, wondering at the sound. Drill sirens erupted frequently enough, their goat-like bleating the butt of many jokes among adults and children alike.

But this was no drill. The low, mournful growl of the raid siren boomed from a rickety tower atop the main admin building, then rose to a screeching pitch that set the windows shuddering before dropping back again.

A chill slithered its way up Reza's spine and froze him in place for a moment. His gaze met with several others nearby, all of them welded to their seats or the floor where they stood as the siren began to climb toward a deafening crescendo once again.

Then pandemonium erupted. Children and adults broke free of their momentary paralysis and began to flee. They poured from the library stacks like forest animals driven before a blazing fire, tossing about whatever they were holding like plastic confetti.

“Reza!”

He heard his name called above the commotion as people pushed through the exits and into the street beyond. The children headed for the shelter while the adults ran for the Territorial Army armory to draw their weapons.

“Reza! Where are you?”

He looked stupidly at the armload of books he was still carrying, suddenly realizing that picking up *Canton’s Sonnets: A Jubilee Collection* probably was not terribly important at the moment, if for no other reason than the collection was filled with uniquely ghastly verse.

“Here, Mary!” he called, carefully putting the books down on a shelf before running to the banister that overlooked the first floor atrium.

“Reza, make sure there isn’t anyone left up there, will you?” she asked, her face flushed with excitement and anxiety. “Hurry, dear, we’ve got to get to the shelter!” The younger children were gathered around her like ducklings to their mother, their faces registering the fear of the adults who were now running headlong to their defense posts.

Reza called back, “Go ahead and get started. I’ll meet you there!”

Mary looked toward the door, then back at Reza, indecision checking her. Reza was mature for his age, but she was not sure if she should leave a boy not quite twelve years old to his own devices in an emergency.

“Go on, Mary,” he called quickly, deciding the matter for her. “I’ll be all right.”

Mary finally nodded and began herding the preschoolers and the dozen or so numbed teens out of the lobby and into the street, forming them into a line that she aimed at the huge shelter blast door a block away. A stream of bodies was already pouring into it.

“Be careful!” she cautioned him.

He waved, then turned to begin his task. Starting at the end of the second floor that was bounded by a wall and no adjoining rooms, he worked his way through the stacks, noting with amazement the number of books, disks, and other things that had wound up on the floor. It was as if an army of gremlins had declared war on his tiny domain, flinging to the floor everything they could get their tiny invisible hands on.

“God, what a mess,” he murmured to himself as he continued to weave up and down the aisles, his eyes darting all around him to make sure there wasn’t anyone hiding behind a cart or under a desk.

Having finished clearing the upstairs, he paused a moment to take a quick look at the sky through the windows. Everything looked normal to him: the same pale blue sky, a few scudding clouds, and the ever present fiery ball that was Hallmark’s sun.

He turned away just in time to avoid being blinded by a flash that erupted from sunward and threw his shadow deep into the library's atrium.

Reacting instinctively, he dove for the nearest cover he could find, a study carrel next to the teen non-fiction section, and waited for a blast wave to come rolling across the fields from whatever had caused the explosion. A dozen seconds later came but a single thunderclap, then several more explosions that sounded like huge fireworks.

"Orbital bombardment," he muttered, daring to open one eye to peek toward the window. But nothing was visible on this side of the building.

He got up and quickly continued his sweep of the library, finishing up in the basement.

"Wiley?" he called, opening the door to his surrogate father's apartment. "Wiley? Are you here?" Quickly checking all the rooms, Reza satisfied himself that the old Marine was not there.

"Probably in the shelter," he told himself as he headed back out into the hall and bounded up the stairs into the lobby. His own feelings about the shelter were clear: while they had undoubtedly saved many lives, he still had nightmares about the one he was in on New Constantinople that had been breached. It had been a death trap, and he did not think he would be able to willingly lock himself into such a giant sarcophagus again.

As he came around the last row of books and past the desk, he caught sight through one of the tall thin windows of a black cloud rising in the direction of the spaceport. He skidded to a stop. Leaning forward, his quickened breath fogged the glass as he looked outside.

That's what the flash and explosions were, he thought grimly. A single salvo from the attacking force had obliterated the spaceport and any interceptors it could have launched, had there been any. The two defenseless grain transports there had been reduced to molten heaps of slag. Their internal explosions had sent debris, including thousands of tons of wheat from their holds, into the air to fall onto the parched fields, which were now burning out of control.

He turned his attention to House 48 itself. The complex looked dead. Nothing outside moved except the Confederation flag, which fluttered in the light breeze with all the vigor of an unenthused geriatric. The street and walkways were deserted, people having hastened somewhere else before the inevitable landing began.

Perhaps the drills will pay off, Reza thought hopefully as he watched the sky. Maybe everyone managed to get to their posts and could protect this rock from whatever the Kreelans had to throw against them, at least until the Navy could bring in some real Marines to help.

But then white streaks appeared in the sky, trailing behind tiny pinpoints that bobbed erratically as they descended: the condensation trails of incoming assault boats. Reza hissed a curse at them, wishing them to fall from the sky like rocks and crush themselves against the unyielding soil of the fields, spattering their death-dealing passengers into lifeless jelly.

He stood there, counting them as they wound their way down, some arcing far away over the horizon toward the other houses and the few actual settlements Hallmark could boast. His hopes withered as he counted more and more, finally dying out completely as he reached fifty. And still more trails swarmed from the sky.

“Oh, God,” he moaned. Hallmark’s tiny Territorial Army – more than half of them untrained teenage orphans – could field a little over two thousand soldiers across the entire planet. But even if they had all reached their positions, and Reza doubted they had, it would not be enough. Not nearly enough.

The crackle of light weapon fire startled him. He looked to his right just in time to see a group of six camouflaged human figures diving for cover behind one of the thick stone fences in the House 48 complex.

A line of enemy warriors suddenly appeared out of the waving stalks of wheat at the end of town, coming in behind the humans crouched by the wall. Not being professional soldiers or killers from birth as were their opponents, the squad of defenders did not realize that they were being flanked. For the Kreeelans, they were nothing more than a target of opportunity.

“No!” Reza shouted, banging his fists on the glass in a futile attempt to warn the defenders as the Kreeelans filtered through an old gap in the wall that had never been repaired, their ebony armor glinting with Death’s promise. “Look behind you!” He watched helplessly as the encirclement began to close like a hangman’s noose, and he wished desperately for some way to warn them.

But it was too late. The Kreeelans swept down upon the unsuspecting amateur soldiers like vultures converging on a dying man, too weak and confused to defend himself from their frenzied slashing and tearing. Reza watched the gleam of the blades as they hacked and pierced their victims, the Kreeelans disdaining the use of energy weapons in any fight at close quarters.

He thought he saw a soldier reach out a bloody arm toward him, his face contorted in a plea for help, for mercy. In that instant, he was sure that the face was his father’s.

Reza closed his eyes as the blade fell.

Wiley was lying on his back under the old truck, tinkering with one of the servos that acted as a brake motor on the left rear wheel when he heard the thunder of the attack on the spaceport.

“What the devil?” he cried, banging his head hard on the old hauler’s frame as he tried to sit up. Gasping in pain, he flopped back down on the dolly, his hands clutching his temples as his head threatened to burst with pain. “Lord of the Universe,” he muttered, blinking his eyes.

But the eyes were no longer those of Wiley the janitor. They were hard and commanding, as the body and mind once had been. When the sound of the two grounded transports blowing apart reached his ears a moment later, he reacted

as if a different man had inherited the old body. Without hesitation, he pulled himself completely under the truck in case the ceiling of the garage collapsed.

When it was clear that he was in no immediate danger, he moved out from under the truck with a grace and speed extraordinary for a man his age, moving his artificial leg with the finesse of a dancer. After hitting the switch that opened the garage's rust-streaked articulated door, he jumped into the truck's cab and started backing out through the still-opening door into the blinding sunlight beyond.

He raced down the rough track that connected the garage complex with House 48's main buildings a few kilometers away, keeping his eyes on the sky. He ground his teeth when he saw the telltale streaks appear that heralded a landing with boats only, no decoys. He muttered a curse, knowing that the Kreeleans must have been completely confident of an easy victory to leave such targets open to anti-air defenses, had any existed.

But this was Hallmark, not Ballantyne, or Sevastopol', or Earth. The keen military mind that had temporarily retaken its proper place in the battered skull knew that Hallmark was about as easy a target as an invader could wish for. The Kreeleans always preferred more heavily defended planets, but it was no excuse for leaving a world like this one so lightly defended. With the orbital satellites gone, there was nothing standing between the invaders and the children but Hallmark's joke of a Territorial Army. They didn't stand a chance.

With a white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel, Colonel William Hickock raced toward House 48 as the first exchanges of ground fire began.

"Mary, the door has to be closed!" the man said, his voice flushed with fear as his finger hovered over the oversized red button. It was the emergency control for the massive vault's blast doors and glowed like a flickering coal.

"But Reza hasn't come back from the library!" she protested hotly, prepared to come to blows with the man if his finger moved any closer to the door controls.

"Look behind you, woman," the man demanded, pointing over Mary's shoulder with his other hand. "There's nearly a thousand people in here, the Blues are popping rounds off out there, and you want me to keep this damned thing open?"

"What's going on?" a steely voice suddenly demanded.

They turned back to the doorway to see Wiley striding across the hash-marked frame of the meter-thick blast door.

"Why isn't this door closed, Parsons?" he growled. Wiley leaned past the open-mouthed Parsons to hit the button himself. The enormous door immediately began to cycle closed.

"But Wiley," Mary blurted, suddenly realizing that the man before her wasn't the one who normally wore this body, "Reza's still out there!"

The old colonel's eyes narrowed. "Where?"

“In the library,” she said. “I asked him to make sure everyone else got out. He said he—”

Wiley did not wait for her to finish. In one smooth motion he snatched the flechette rifle from Parsons and disappeared back out the door as it closed.

“Hey!” Parsons shouted indignantly after him. “That’s mine!”

But he did not try to pursue the old man as the door thrummed into its lock, the huge bolts driving home to seal them in, and the enemy out.

They hoped.

Reza found himself frozen at the window, watching the enemy’s advance. The landing boats had set down in a rough circle around the house complex, and the warriors they had been carrying were now emerging from out of the wheat like black-clad wraiths, their armor bristling with weapons. He couldn’t hear any more firing, and figured that the last of the defenders had been mopped up. It had been a massacre.

That was why Reza had decided not to make a run for the shelter. There was no point. Assuming he was not cut down on the way there, he would certainly be trapped in a tomb that the Kreeleans could open without too much difficulty. The shelter’s vault should hold them off for a while, but not nearly long enough for human reinforcements to arrive.

Only one thing really puzzled him: why hadn’t the Kreeleans used their ships’ guns to blast the vault like they did the freighters at the spaceport? Why go to the trouble of making a landing at all?

He was startled by the sound of small arms fire from right outside the library, followed by someone crashing through the front door, knocking the smoothly turning cylinder off its bearings.

Dropping without a sound to the floor under the heavy desk he had dragged near the upstairs windows, he waited for the inevitable.

“Reza!” he heard a voice unexpectedly shout from below. “Are you here, boy?”

Reza thought the voice sounded vaguely familiar, but he could not quite place it. Not knowing that the Kreeleans had never been known to use such tricks to lure humans into a trap, like a timid snake he slowly slithered toward the banister to take a cautious look.

“Son?” the voice shouted again.

“Wiley?” Reza asked incredulously as he saw the old man crouching near the front door. “Is that you?”

“Lord of All, son!” he shouted. He gestured sharply for Reza to come to him. “Get your butt down here! We’ve got to get out of this place—”

A Kreelean warrior suddenly leaped through the damaged entryway, rolling with catlike agility to her feet.

In the blink of an eye, Wiley’s finger convulsed on the trigger of his flechette rifle, hitting the Kreelean’s torso armor with half a dozen rounds that

killed her instantly. The impact flung her body against the wall. Her mouth still open in a silent snarl, she slumped to the floor, her talons twitching at the tips of her armored fingers.

With a pirouette that Reza thought should have been impossible for a man with one stiff, artificial leg, Wiley turned and fired another volley into the warrior's partner, whose shoulder armor had caught on the lip of the canted entry cylinder door and prevented her from raising her own weapon. Her head vanished in a plume of bloody spray and gore.

"Come on, boy," the colonel beckoned, "while we still have time."

Reza wasted no time in bounding down the stairs to the lower level, hurling himself into the old man's waiting arms.

"What... what happened?" he asked, looking up at the bloody smear on Wiley's forehead where he had knocked his head against the frame of the old truck. "I almost didn't recognize your voice."

The colonel's face broke into an ironic grin. "Seems God chose to give me back my marbles for one last game," he said, holding Reza to him with one arm while the other held the flechette rifle pointed at the entranceway. "Listen," Wiley said, "I don't know how long I'll be any good to you, son. This thing," he tapped his temple, "can short out at any time, assuming the Blues don't get us first." He reached down to grab the strangely contoured rifle the first Kreelan warrior had been carrying. "Take this," he said, passing the flechette rifle to Reza, keeping the alien weapon for himself. "All you have to do is point and shoot. Just don't hold the trigger down too long or you'll be out of ammo before you know it."

"Wiley," Reza whispered as they crouched down near the Kreelan's body, "what are we going to do? There are Kreelans all over the place. I saw them from the upstairs windows. I suppose the people in the shelter will be safe for a while, but—"

"Baloney," the old man spat. "Those shelters are the damned most foolish things anybody ever dreamed up. All they do is trap people in one place and make it easy for the Blues. It'd be better to give every kid a rifle and bayonet and teach them how to use it as they grow." He looked pointedly at Reza. "But who's going to give a planet full of orphans their own weapons?"

He suddenly closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead with an age-spotted hand.

Reza saw that hand shaking as a tear rolled down the old colonel's face.

"I'm starting to lose it, boy," he muttered, his mouth drawn in a thin, determined line. "Wiley the Clown is knocking on the door—"

A muffled boom that set the windows rattling and dust sprinkling from the ceiling stole away the end of his sentence. The two of them stared at each other in the silence that followed, wondering what the noise had been.

"Maybe the Navy..." Reza began, but a gesture from Wiley cut him off.

“The squids aren’t going to hit a friendly site from orbit,” he whispered hoarsely. “They’d send in Marines. Every ship bigger than a corvette carries at least a company.”

Then they heard the spitting of Kreeelan light arms fire and someone screaming, but while the scream was only from a single terror, it had many, many voices.

“Oh, my God,” Wiley said, closing his eyes. “They breached the shelter.”

Reza thought of Mary worrying about him, whether he would be all right by himself until he could get to the safety of the shelter. And now all of them – a thousand or more children and adults – were being massacred. Reza started to shake.

“Boy,” Wiley said quickly, afraid that both he and Reza would lose their will and their wits if he waited but a moment longer, “it’s now or never. You’re going to have to make a run for it on your own.” Reza opened his mouth to protest, but Wiley hushed him with a finger across his lips. “I can’t go with you, son. I’m too old and too slow, and my brain’s going to turn to mush again here pretty soon. I can feel it.”

He took something out of his coat pocket, the one over his heart, the only one on his janitor uniform that had a button on it. It was an envelope, plain except for the Confederation Marine Corps seal at the closure.

“I wrote this the same night I wrote the one for Nicole,” Wiley told him. “I knew you wouldn’t need it for a few years, but when you have a noggin like mine, you do what you can when you can. Here,” he said, pushing it into the boy’s hands. “Read it.”

Reza opened it to find a single sheet of paper inside. But the paper was by no means ordinary. In addition to the embossed Marine Corps emblem that showed through the paper when held up to the light, it carried the symbols of two Confederation Medals of Honor, the Confederation’s highest award for valor in the face of the enemy. During the course of the war, only fifteen men and women had ever won two such honors; the Medal of Honor was almost always given posthumously. Colonel William Hickock had been one of those fifteen, and the only one who still lived. The words that were scrawled on the page were few and to the point:

To Whom It May Concern:

Being of sound mind and body as I write this, I submit that the young man bearing this document, Reza Sarandon Gard, be considered for acceptance into the military academy of his choice upon reaching the Confederation legal age of decision, that being fifteen years from his stated date of birth.

The Confederation Services will find no finer pupil for the military arts and the leadership on which the Confederation depends for its continued survival.

(Signed,
William T. Hickock
COL, CMC (Ret.)

“Wiley,” he began, “I don’t know what to say...”

“It’s the least I can do,” the old man said quietly. “If it’s what you want, that’ll give you a little muscle to get past some of the stuck-up boneheads screening people for the academies.” He looked around, as if he had suddenly forgotten something “But that’s for another time,” he said as he stuffed the envelope and its precious contents into a pocket in Reza’s shirt. “You’ve got to get out of here, son.” He looked hard at Reza, then pointed to the flechette rifle in the boy’s hands. “Think you can handle that thing?”

“Yes, sir,” Reza replied in a voice that sounded small and alone. “But—”

“No *but*s, boy,” Wiley said gently, but firmly, leaving no room for argument. “This is it. For real. I’ll try to create a diversion for you.” He nodded toward where the screams from the breached shelter still rose and fell like pennants in a gale. “Besides,” he went on quietly, his voice echoing memories from another life that Wiley the janitor had never known, “I want to die the man I used to be. Not as some senile broom pusher.” His eyes pierced Reza. “You understand that, don’t you?”

Reza nodded, biting back the tears he felt coming, remembering how he and his real father had parted a lifetime ago. *It’s happening all over again*, he thought wretchedly. “Yes, sir,” he choked.

“Do whatever you can to stay alive, son,” Wiley told him softly. “If anybody can make it out of this, you can.” He embraced Reza tightly.

“I love you,” Reza said, holding on to his adopted father for the last time.

“I love you, too, son,” Wiley said, stroking the boy’s hair, fighting back his own tears.

Reluctantly, Wiley let go. Then he rose in a crouch, holding his artificial leg behind him like a kangaroo’s tail for balance. “Good luck, Marine,” he said.

This was how he wanted it, Reza told himself. He only wished it could be some other way. “You too, colonel,” Reza said, snapping his arm up in a sharp salute.

The old man saluted him in return before making his way to the front door. After pulling the second Kreelan warrior’s body into the lobby and clearing the exit, he squeezed through to disappear into the street beyond.

Feeling as if were trapped in a holographic nightmare, Reza turned and made his way to the emergency escape at the rear of the library. Peering through the adjacent window, he saw that the area behind the library was clear, at least as far as he could see. The closest wheat fields were about two hundred meters away. Maybe a minute of hard running, he guessed. *Only a minute. Plenty of time to die.*

Holding the flechette rifle close to his side, he pushed open the door and headed outside, the door's emergency alarm blaring uselessly behind him.

Wiley crouched near the rock wall, not too far from the first group of soldiers that Reza had seen being wiped out by the attacking Kreeleans. He had exchanged the alien weapon for a pulse rifle and a spare magazine from one of the dead soldiers. The pulse rifle was a bit heavier than the flechette guns, but had more firepower in its crimson energy bolts than a flechette could ever hope to boast. Unfortunately, their higher cost made them a low volume commodity on all but the best-equipped worlds.

He snaked forward along the wall, trying to get a glimpse of what was happening at the shelter. The firing had stopped, as had most of the screaming.

"What are you bitches up to?" he wondered aloud as he peered through a hole in the wall toward the admin building.

Kreelean warriors were clustered about the entrance to the vault, standing in two lines that extended from the vault's entryway where the great door had been blasted from its hinges, to where a vehicle resembling a flatbed trailer hovered in the center of the street. The warriors were passing objects from one to another, moving them from the vault to the carrier.

Bodies, Wiley thought. They're taking the bodies away.

The lone wail that suddenly pierced the air made his blood run cold. He watched as a child, five or six years old, emerged from the vault and was passed along the chain of warriors like a bucket in a fire brigade to where the other bodies were being stacked on the carrier. There, a Kreelean in a white robe – a type of alien that Wiley had never seen or heard tell about – did something to the child, who suddenly was still.

His eyes surveyed the carrier closely, and he noticed two things: there were no adults, only children, and the children apparently were not dead, just sleeping. Drugged or stunned.

The old man's mind reeled. There had never been a confirmed report of prisoners being taken in the war against the Empire. Sometimes, for reasons never understood, the Kreeleans would leave survivors. But never had they taken prisoners.

Yet, here they were, making off with a few hundred children from this house alone. If they were doing the same at the other houses, they would be leaving with tens of thousands of children.

"I've got to get out a message, a warning," he whispered to himself.

But a presence behind him, a feeling that he was no longer alone, removed that concern from his mind forever.

He whirled in time to see a huge enemy warrior standing behind him, her form lost in the sun's glare, sword raised above her head. His old arm tried to bring the rifle around, his teeth bared in a snarl that matched the Kreelean's, but

he wasn't fast enough. The warrior plunged her sword through his unarmored chest, burying the weapon's tip in the ground beneath Wiley's back.

His hand convulsed on the trigger of his rifle as he saluted Death's coming, sending nearly a full magazine blasting into the rock wall around them. And as the blood stopped surging through his arteries and his body lay still, he made a remarkable observation through his still-open eyes as the warrior knelt down to collect a lock of his hair: the Kreelan carried a scar over her left eye that was identical to Reza's.

Pushing his way through the chafing wheat, Reza heard the hammering of a rifle and stopped in his tracks. He knew that it must be Wiley, and that the old Marine would never have fired off a full magazine like that unless he was in dire trouble.

He hesitated, wondering if he should go back, desperately wanting to. He knew that Marines did not leave their own behind, and Wiley was one of his own. He felt the envelope with Wiley's letter burning in his breast pocket, and his indecision made him feel unworthy of it.

But he knew it would be too late. If Wiley were in trouble, there would be no helping him. And that was the way the old Marine had wanted to die, Reza reflected somberly. He silently hoped that he had taken out a dozen of the aliens with him.

Damn them all to Hell, he cursed.

Completely alone now, he continued on through the wheat, not knowing where he was going, no longer caring.

He had been walking for nearly half an hour when he heard the aerospace vehicle's screaming engines. He threw himself into the dirt just as its dark shape passed directly overhead.

"I think I've had it," he murmured, clutching at the flechette rifle as he lay still. He could hear the ship somewhere nearby, no doubt dropping off a hunting party. *Maybe more than one,* he thought glumly as he heard the ship move off to his left and hover again.

Then the ship left, its engines a muted roar against the wind, and Reza decided it was time to move. He got into a crouch and quietly made his way forward. Pushing aside some wheat stalks, he found himself face-to-face with a Kreelan warrior.

Death was literally staring him in the face.

With a cry of surprise, the Kreelan suddenly flew backward through the wheat, her body carried by the volley of flechettes fired from Reza's rifle. The reflexive spasm by his right index finger on the weapon's trigger had been the narrow margin between his life and her death.

Shaking like a leaf from the adrenaline surge, he quickly forged onward through the wheat, his heart hammering in his ears as his mind relived the brief battle a thousand times in the blink of an eye. He looked about wildly for more warriors, but with visibility of less than a meter, it would be another chance encounter, with the odds stacked well against him. Fate would not favor him a second time.

Unexpectedly, he burst onto an open quad. While he desperately wanted to cross over the clear ground instead of struggling through the wheat, he knew that to be seen was to be killed.

But the sounds of pursuit that suddenly arose above the wind and the whispers of the stalks as they caressed one another made his decision. There was no going back the way he had come. He pounded across the field at a full run, glancing back over his shoulder for signs of the enemy. The sound of his footsteps and his labored breathing thundered in his ears, as if his senses became more sensitive the further he went across the quad.

“No!” Reza shouted as the Kreelan ship suddenly shot overhead to hover directly above him. He raised the rifle and fired, but the flechettes merely ricocheted harmlessly, not even scratching the vessel’s hull. He stumbled, dropping the rifle, then began again to run toward the safety of the wheat, which beckoned to him from the far side of the quad.

I might make it, he thought hopefully, as his legs pumped and his chest heaved. He bolted the last few meters to the waiting wall of golden wheat.

A Kreelan warrior, crouching unseen, suddenly rose up in front of him. The weapon she held looked incredibly huge. She squeezed the trigger.

For a moment Reza went blind and his ears rang from the buzz of a thousand angry wasps. But then he suddenly felt as if something soft and warm had embraced him, driving the air out of his lungs and the strength from his limbs. He crashed through the first few rows of wheat to land, unconscious, at the warrior’s feet.

“These animals have all met the standards you set forth, priestess,” the young warrior declared, her head lowered to honor her superior.

Tesh-Dar ran her eyes across the hundreds of human children arrayed like so much cordwood near the base of the shuttle, their bodies stunned and then drugged into a stasis sleep for the long journey ahead. Knowing – and caring – little about human physiological development, Tesh-Dar had set height as the main criterion for selection, as it was a convenient reference, easily measured. Any child taller than about one and a half meters was not acceptable. And therefore would die.

“Carry on, child,” she ordered, returning her subordinate’s salute and watching as they went about loading the human pups for transport to the great ship waiting in orbit. Across the planet, thousands of other human young were being collected for transport back home. Back to the Empire.

The sound of an approaching scout flyer drew her attention as it settled into a hover nearby. The clawed landing gear hummed from recesses in its belly and locked as it settled to the dusty patch of ground that served as their main landing zone.

Several warriors descended from the gangway before it had finished opening, bearing two bodies between them. The first, a small human, was deposited unceremoniously at the edge of the enormous pile of humans that would be left behind to die when Tesh-Dar's party took their leave of this world. Hundreds of them lay there, many long since crushed to death by the inert weight of those on top. Few, except for the adults who had been killed out of hand, bore any blast or penetration wounds. After being stunned and measured, they were simply discarded like trash.

The second body, Tesh-Dar saw, was that of a warrior, her chest armor riddled with the tiny holes made by the humans' flechette weapons.

Curious, nodding toward the dead warrior, Tesh-Dar asked, "What happened to her?"

The lead warrior, an elder as old as Tesh-Dar but far less accomplished, replied, "A young human killed her as he fled through the vegetation." She flicked a glance at the tiny human body, her cobalt blue face passionless. "Kumar-Etana was not fast enough, it would seem." She turned back to Tesh-Dar. "We stunned the animal, but it was not within your parameters, priestess."

Tesh-Dar nodded for the warriors to continue their duties, her mind idly pondering the likelihood of such a situation. She had noted the size of the human when they threw it onto the open grave, and it was far too small to have been trained as a warrior. Yet, it had killed Kumar-Etana, who had never been noted for sloth in combat, in what Tesh-Dar had implicitly understood to be a fair match.

Curious, Tesh-Dar allowed herself to be drawn to the mountain of dying humanity. Pitiful cries rose from the heaps of flesh as the effects of the stun wore off, for those humans who would not be leaving with her were not given the stasis drug.

Prodding one or two of the bodies with her sandal, she stepped to where her warriors had left the small human who had killed Kumar-Etana. It lay face-down, its frail form wrapped in clothing that was torn and battered. She hooked one powerful foot under the animal's left side and lifted, flipping the body over onto its back.

"The scar," she gasped as she saw the creature's face. Kneeling next to the human, she touched the scar over its left eye, wondering if it was possible for another human to have such a mark.

But, no, she decided, after studying the pup's face. The hair was darker perhaps than it had been that night, and the scar had lengthened as the skin stretched with growth. But on this creature she could clearly see the face of the pup she had nearly killed those few cycles ago. The one whose scar she shared.

Her mind probed into the human's spirit, examining the ethereal thing that lived within the shell of flesh as she might an insect pinned to a tree. It did not sing as did her spirit, but there was no denying that it was the same human.

"Much have you grown, little one," she said to the still form, fingering the human knife that still rested in her waist belt, a treasured curio she valued for the memories it brought to her. "And, perhaps, much may you yet learn."

Effortlessly, she picked Reza up in her arms and carried him to the healers who were preparing the other human children for transport. "This one shall go, as well," she ordered, setting him down next to a little African girl whose skin was as black as Tesh-Dar's armor. "Ensure that he survives."

"As you command, priestess," the healer replied as she continued her tasks. Tesh-Dar watched as the boy was drugged into stasis for his voyage to the Empire. As the healer worked, stripping everything from the pale body down to the skin before injecting the necessary potions, Tesh-Dar saw her remove a tiny object from around the boy's neck, tossing it toward the pile of human debris that would be left behind.

Effortlessly, the priestess snatched it from the air and held it up to the yellow light of the planet's sun. Its shape and manufacture intrigued her. It must have been of great importance, she thought, for the young animal to be wearing it around its neck.

"Curious," she murmured, glancing at the child, who was now being wrapped in amoebic tissue as if he were being rolled into the tight embrace of a pulsating, living rug. It would keep him alive for the long voyage ahead.

With a final nod to the healer, Tesh-Dar put the small cross of shiny metal into the pouch in which she collected her trophies before heading toward the shuttle's landing ramp to await the time of their departure.

The sun had not yet set when the Kreelans lifted from Hallmark with their human cargo. Once back aboard the battlecruiser *Tarikh-Da*, Tesh-Dar resumed her place on the bridge and began the final stage of their visit into human space.

The human survivors – those who were conscious – left behind on Hallmark rejoiced as the last of the Kreelan shuttles left for orbit. But their revelry was to be short-lived.

Seventy-seven black spheres, each about five meters across, were dispatched at precisely timed intervals from special bays arrayed along the *Tarikh-Da's* flanks. One after another, sometimes in pairs, they flitted away like melancholy balloons, seeking their orbital nodes with unerring accuracy to form a shell around Hallmark.

The last was launched from the battlecruiser only moments before the ship broke orbit for its jump point. As the *Tarikh-Da* sped away, a signal from the ship initiated the detonation sequence of the seventy-seven orbital weapons. In moments, Hallmark's atmosphere was transformed into a cloud of churning plasma, and the planet's surface temperature soared to that of molten lead.

Four hours later, when the lone Kreeelan warship jumped into hyperspace, Hallmark had been scoured clean of all signs of life.

Nicole's flight bag was so full that she had to sit on it to get it to close. She had found half a dozen books for Reza and some chocolates for Wiley, and somehow had stuffed them all into the bag, along with her clothes.

Having won the battle with the flight bag, she appraised herself in the mirror. Trim and dashing in her dress black Navy uniform, her epaulettes carried the single thin stripe of cadet ensign, and her boots shone like mirrors. Even though the trip itself would take nearly a week – a third of her leave – she wanted to look her best for them from the start. For her friends. For her family. She got along well with the other cadets (even the upperclassmen) and the instructors, but Reza and Wiley were her only family.

She had half an hour to catch the shuttle that would take her to the orbiting freighter and on to the first leg of her trip to Hallmark. Hefing her bag, she had just started down the hallway toward the elevators when a voice caught her from behind.

“Carré!”

She turned to find three of her friends rushing toward her. They all looked as if they had just lost a close relative.

“*Oui, mes amis?*” she asked as an unpleasant tingle ran up her spine.

“Nicole,” Seana, her roommate asked quietly, “have you heard?”

“Heard what?” Nicole asked, her throat constricting with foreboding. The three of them looked at one another in a manner Nicole had seen often enough. It was the unspoken vote as to who would break the bad news.

“What is it?” Nicole demanded.

Seana looked at her two companions and knew she was the one who had to do this. She was Nicole's roommate and the best friend Nicole had here. But this was a duty she did not want to perform. Nicole always talked about the orphan boy on Hallmark, referring to him as her brother (although Seana knew that Nicole was deeply in love with him), and doted on the old man – a Marine hero, she had said – who was her surrogate father. Sometimes all the talking about the boy annoyed Seana, who could not wait to get away from her own four brothers. But she could not deny the obvious love the girl felt for the boy and the old Marine, and she had come to find that listening to Nicole made her think more about how much she missed her own family.

And now this.

“Nicole,” Seana said, taking a step closer to her friend and gently putting a hand on her shoulder. “A report came in across the op's desk. A week ago, something happened... on Hallmark.” She paused, unsure as to how to continue, her mouth working as if she were chewing something unpalatable, indigestible.

“Dammit, Seana,” Nicole lashed out, her heart thundering with dread, “what is it?”

“The Kreeelans attacked Hallmark, Nicole,” Seana said softly, ready to break down in tears herself. Then she went on with the brutal truth, knowing that Nicole would not tolerate any of the candy coating so many others needed to take with their dose of tragedy. “They used something – some kind of new weapon, or so the rumor goes – that burned away the planet’s entire atmosphere. The surface...” She shook her head. “There was nothing left.” Her voice had fallen to a whisper as she watched the blood drain from Nicole’s face.

José finished it for her. “There were no survivors, and no record of what happened during the attack, except some debris from the orbital defense network. That’s the only reason they’re sure it was an attack instead of some bizarre natural disaster or something.”

“That’s enough, José,” Seana told him. “I think she gets the picture.”

Nicole did not hear her. The flight bag that she had been clutching so tightly in eager anticipation of her departure fell to the floor with an empty thud, the precious books and chocolates now dead weight without destination or purpose. The image of Hallmark boiled into her mind, the planet’s atmosphere burning away, incinerating the surface as it blew off into space. Tens of thousands of human bodies swirled in its wake.

“*Non*,” Nicole murmured, shaking her head slowly as first Reza’s, and then Wiley’s face swam out of the maelstrom, the flesh burning away until there was nothing left but a charred husk, the jaws locked open in an unending scream of agony. “*Mon Dieu, pourquoi?*” she whispered, her hands pressed tightly to her eyes to shut out the living nightmare. The only family left to her had been torn away like a tender sapling in a brutal whirlwind, spinning away into darkness. “Why? Oh, God, why?”

But God had no answer. He stood silently by as she collapsed into her friends’ waiting arms.

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