

SHARDS

BOOK 02

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Shards: Book Two

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Chapter One

Monday, April 21st, 2679

"Private Wyeth, it's time to wake up. HEY! Get up!"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm up," I moaned and turned over. Susie mumbled something in her sleep I didn't catch.

"Oh, no, you don't, Abby! Wake up! It's 0330, and Sergeant Thawell is expecting you at 0430. Rise and shine!"

You're not supposed to shoot the messenger, but at 3:30 AM, Miss Manners was fast asleep and wouldn't hear the gunshot.

"Computer, deactivate internal voice mechanism."

He chuckled. "Not that easy, kid. You did that once, and once is all you get. The only way to get me quiet is to get out of bed and trudge out that door."

"Mike? Shut up."

I must have drifted off again, because suddenly I heard Thawell's gravelly voice chewing rocks right next to my left ear.

"Where ARE you, Wyeth? We're waiting! It's 0445 and I'm sending Hernandez up to your quarters now with the override codes. You better be decent!"

He no sooner finished speaking than there was a pounding on the door and I heard it open. I leapt out of bed, grabbing a pillow to cover my front. I did wear clothes to bed, sort of. They were cloth, and they hung on me after a fashion. But strong argument could be made about their purpose, or lack of.

"You just stay out there, Drew! I'll be ready in-"

"HA! Gotcha!" Mike laughed triumphantly. "Now get moving! It's 0335. Oh, by the way: Good Morning, Abigail!" He laughed again and shut off.

"Abby? Are you up?" Susie was propped up on her elbows in the half light, looking toward me. Because of my skills in the puterverse and our close friendship, Susie and I had been roommates for two years now.

"Yeah, I'm up. Sorry about the noise."

"You stayed up too late again, didn't you?" She yawned. "You've *got* to cut down your time in the puterverse when you pull early duty. Sooner or later, Mike will run out of ideas, and you'll oversleep. Again."

I harumphed and pulled out clean clothes. Snatching up my sidearm and holster, I headed down to the showers, thinking back to the first-and only-time I'd been late to duty. Thawell gave me such a splendid five-minute cussing out on the uselessness of a soldier who reported late that I couldn't help but admire him. The man had a true gift. He never once repeated himself. I should have taken notes, he was that good. After I finished an additional ten-hour shift cleaning the hanger, I had to look up at least a half-dozen of his words. Three weren't even listed. One was illegal.

I made it to the hov carrier with plenty of time. I'd met up with Sarah, Kate and Lena in the showers as usual, so we were in a group when we showed up at the armory to get issue. Dusty passed out short-range laser rifles to each of them and a nullifier and quiver of holoknives to Sarah. Since this was a combination rescue and quick strike raid, Sarah had left her heavier armor stowed away, and had on only four layers of micro armor. I didn't get any extra ordinance. My skills lay elsewhere on this trip.

Thawell was waiting for us at the hover carrier and nodded as we entered. We went in and settled in for departure. They took seats along the starboard side; mine was the one at the terminal, port side, just

behind the cockpit.

The hover was capable of holding twelve personnel and three crew. It was the size and roughly the shape of a small bus, though of course it used an inverted gravity ion drive. It was completely enclosed and sagged slightly in the front, where it was plated. Entrance was through a ramp in the rear. With us on board, there were still four more to go, not counting Thawell. It was normally pretty crowded, but since this was a raid using light equipment, there was extra room in case we could pull out some ripes. While we waited, I fired up the terminal and began reviewing the mission. Following protocol, I kept the field tight, forcing me to keep my head still as I viewed.

By the time I had finished, the last of the team was on board and buckled in. Thawell locked up and the hov moved off. The craft moaned and creaked as it passed through the pressure shield. The terminal flicked off for several moments as all access was cut off, then resumed normal operation once we cleared the negating field. The hov leveled out as it reached the top of the shielded ramp and moved out onto the desert floor. Through the front portal we could see the darkness of the arid wilderness. There were no lights of any kind, not even navigational. We were kind of stuck up about our privacy. I looked up through the top portal and saw the pitch black of the desert night sky, dotted with thousands of stars. The total elimination of pollution made for spectacularly clear air. The vehicle started ambling off to the north. Too much speed would leave a heat trail. It would be at least five minutes until we cleared the minefield and could begin phased travel. As I said, we were pretty touchy about our privacy.

"All right, listen up." Thawell's grating voice called for all our attention. I looked at tonight's squad. Besides my three friends and me, there was one other woman, six men and Thawell. Pretty even split. I knew them all quite well, and could probably give the mission briefing as well as Thawell. Of course, if I tried, Thawell would dump me off while we were phasing and let me swim home through solid rock.

"Wyeth." I pulled up a solid hologram in the middle of the group. Thawell continued. "Okay, here's the target. It's a riping facility located inside a legitimate parts factory. Ninety percent of the personnel and equipment manufacture solar shielding for the ball chasers. They are NOT the target and must be treated as innocents. No weapons except when necessary, and only disabling charges can be used. Marks!" A big man in the back with a swarthy face and slow smile looked up. Cradled in his right arm was a heavy caliber slug gun. "You use that cannon tonight anywhere outside of a real fire fight, and I'll issue you a popgun like Wyeth's. Permanently." Marks smiled his slow smile and looked over at me. I smiled back. Aaron was my wing man on nearly every mission-Sarah was my other wingman-and a better one I couldn't ask for. Unless it was for someone whose eyes, smile, and voice didn't set my heart to thumping. Thawell continued.

"As I said, ninety percent of the area is legit. It's the other ten percent we want to take out. That section is located here." I magnified the display and let it flow in the direction most of us would be taking to break in. Their gazes followed it carefully, as though their lives depended on it, which they did. Our target was buried deep inside the complex, an intentional ploy to use innocents as shields. NATech Supreme didn't miss much. Including cover-up, I thought. It had taken me nearly two weeks to pin this

facility down, and even then it was because I got lucky. That made this pretty hot property.

"We're looking for a total clean-out. It's unlikely we'll find any rescuable ripers, but if we do, it's SOP. The rest will need to be sacrificed. May God have mercy on their souls." A few crossed themselves. "The location is cross-planet, higher latitude. Total allowed mission time is twenty-two minutes." Several surprised looks at the longer than normal time. Thawell jerked a thumb at me. "Our resident girl genius has a couple of new tricks, so we get an extra six minutes. Use 'em right."

"Sergeant?" the pilot called back softly. The hov's drive was completely silent, and even a vehicle equipped with a MacDonald phaser could travel almost without sound.

"Yeah, Gibbons?"

"We'll be slipping in three minutes. Phasing travel time is twenty-seven minutes."

Thawell looked back around at us. "Okay. We'll use tri-team plan beta. Wyeth, you're non-activate tonight, so Hacker, your tri-team is number one. Marks, you and Grominski gotta ghost. No ripe pickups for you." I was normally the anchor member of Company A's top tri-team, making me second in command during the actual mission, but would stay behind tonight. It wasn't wise to let a sharded Cue view unrescued ripers in riping facilities since it could cause a pretty wicked episode. It had been nearly eight months since my last shard, but that wasn't long enough for me. Never again wouldn't be long enough for me.

Thawell seated himself and buckled up. I had maybe two minutes left of full interface, so I did a final check of the night's mission logic, running just under one million scenarios in ninety seconds. Simulation result gave us a ninety-seven point nine percent chance of success with no casualties. Not bad, but it could be better. Maybe if I tried adjusting the...

"Shut 'er down, Wyeth," Thawell barked.

I shifted over to flat display, set voice interface to most sensitive, then settled back to await the phase. The atmosphere grew warm and dry and brittle as the unit charged. I looked through the front portal. The pilot, guided by unseen markers, reached over to a box. He lifted the box to reveal a switch, which he rotated, then left his hand on. He waited a moment longer. Ahead, the desert flowed smoothly by.

"Phasing ... five ... four ... three ... two ... one." He pressed the switch.

Everything became very hazy and translucent. I looked up at the top portal, not really wishing to see the insides of the pilot and co-pilot. The night sky shimmered through the metal, an unnaturally breathtaking sight. Then the pilot depressed the controls and we dipped into the desert sand, my stomach only slightly behind the rest of me.

Like a submarine diving into the sea, we sank into the earth. But where in a submarine you are only surrounded by the elements, during phasing, you become part of the elements. Perfected about a century ago, phasing shifted the molecular makeup of the phased object and allowed it to pass through solid matter. The idea was not new-it had been the stuff of science fiction stories even in my old life. But now it was science fact. What had not been anticipated was the difficulty in navigation. Nor was the visible effect ever seen clearly, pun intended.

When phasing, everything became ephemeral and took on a translucent effect. The result was that you could see everything in a limited visual range at all levels. When I was first oriented on the effects, I became very self-conscious that the guys sitting behind me could see all of me. No worry, because it turns out they could see all of me: each layer of clothing I had on, my skin, internal organs, flesh, bones, even through to the clothing on the other side of my body. Not exactly the stuff of fantasies. Disquieting seemed hardly a strong enough word. I had looked only once, and it was more than enough. I now passed the time with my terminal display, which was hard enough to focus on, with its multi-holophasic guts visible as well.

Breathing or movement was difficult: imagine being caught in a large sandstorm. But the advantages far outweighed the discomfort. Properly shielded, a phasing vehicle could travel at high speeds completely undetected. There were only three known dangers. First was phase unit failure, with pretty abrupt and final consequences. Second was the inner core of the earth, which while not fatal in and of itself-heat had no effect on a phased object-did cause problems as the massive density slowed passage down to a crawl. It might take years to penetrate. And with the glow of the superheated iron core, it could be blinding for both man and sensors, making navigation impossible.

The third, and most possible danger, was phased mines, such as we used. It had been disastrously proven that two objects can reside in the "same" place at the same time, but three could not. When two objects, one actively phased and one not, came into contact with each other, nothing occurred. But if two actively phased objects meet in a third stable object-unless the phasing frequencies were within one ten-millionth of a hertz-there would be an incredible explosion. So to prevent unauthorized entry, some facilities were now using phase mines. These small, phased objects were located in a half-sphere pattern close enough to prevent intrusion but far enough out to not damage the facility they were guarding if they were set off. And because a military force would obviously lose all surprise appearing outside the field, a phase-mined facility was safe from secret infiltration. Fortunately, phased mine fields were difficult, dangerous and expensive to maintain, so there were relatively few of them. We had one only because of successful raiding.

The target we were advancing on was not mined, but it had a huge advantage defensively: innocent workers. For as much as we had NATech Supreme's measure, they had ours. We had never wantonly used force against anybody except armed NATech soldiers. We directed our energies against machinery, facilities, and data; never flesh and blood, and NATech knew it. So they buried their ripping factories and bio-physical manufacturing facilities and other targets deep inside cities and legitimate work areas. Ruthless but effective. What made it worse was that most of NATech military forces had no qualms about opening fire in these populated areas. As a consequence, our mission time was severely limited to

minimize conflict. We constantly needed to come up with new ways to complete our missions. I had a couple of ideas for this one. I focused my attention to the fuzzy display, continually blurred by rock.

"Okay, Mike, let's play for a while." Having the speed of a sleepy tree sloth, I relied on voice interface. This was only a small problem: voice interface wasn't the preferred method of access-direct mental connection was-but it would work. Mike was my virtual partner in the puterverse. I had created him way back when I was John Wyeth, but only as a high-speed assistant with very rudimentary and artificial judgment. He didn't even have a form then. He was quite different now, much more real.

"Hiya, Abby! Playtime, huh? Are we finally hitting the Denver ripe facility?"

"Uh-huh. Are the weather patterns over the northern Rockies still following?"

"Course they are! It's what you asked for, isn't it?"

"Don't get uppity, with me, Mike! I think Dusty's still looking for a new puter for his armory. You want to finish out existence as Agnes?"

"Perish the thought! One screwed up girl around here is enough!" For some reason, Mike was fascinated by my circumstances, and when he wasn't asking me questions about the experience, he was making comments about it. Before I could say anything, he chuckled. "Just kidding! This is what we've got so far: I downed the Anchorage and Idatana nets six hours and forty-one minutes ago. They thought they repaired the damage and brought them up three hours and six minutes ago. That was the signal to bring them back down again, taking the Seattle net with them. Now they don't know what to do. We're on perfect schedule, with some wicked storms spread out across the northwestern section of North America . The pot's on to boil, Abby! Shall I take out the Denver weather net?"

"Yes, please. How long until we can generate lightning over the target, and what are the three most likely scenarios?"

"The lightning is easy: three minutes for the weather net breakdown, five minutes until storm conditions, then five more until lightning can be triggered, using the suddenly malfunctioning shield regenerator as a lightning rod. So, thirteen minutes. Shall I bring the regenerator down, now?"

"Um ... no. Let's give them time to evacuate, but not enough time to effect a repair crew. I don't want to fry anyone. Bring it down in fifteen minutes."

"You got it. Now as for the three most possible scenarios, the first two are pretty much unchanged. One has us succeeding with target elimination and rescuing a few Ripes. The other has mission success but no rescue. Between the two, they have ninety-five percent probability of being most likely. The third one is the tough one, Abby. I've looked it over, and I think the major battle scenario is not possible. The more likely scenario, with a three point six percent probability is a major intervention, with mission

success but possible loss of life."

"What casualties?"

"I'd guess three to four on our side. Their side? Unknown but substantially higher, with seventy-eight percent being military personnel, twenty percent ripe, and less than two percent innocent."

"Very well. Notify Sergeant Thawell of our latest projections." He wandered off to let Thawell know. The sergeant could call off the mission for any reason, but probably wouldn't for this. From a cold, military point of view, this was very acceptable risk. If I told myself that enough, I might even believe it.

"He said it's a go, Abby!" Mike reported cheerfully. He still hadn't quite gotten over the excitement of missions. Which made sense, because I hadn't either, despite my concerns about loss of life.

"All right. We should be breaking through in about twenty minutes. Have the commandant phone in from his lunar vacation home and ask for an important conference with ... with ... what's his name?"

"Captain Garber."

"Right. With Captain Garber and the two lieutenants. Put the call through in, say, twenty-five minutes. That'll give us time to disembark. Make him really ticked off."

"Check! He'll be chewing nails! Anything else?"

"Not right now. I'll talk to you in twenty."

"Twenty it is! And may I say," he dropped his voice down to a smooth, silky octave, "you look ravishing tonight, my dear. I just love what you've done with your spleen." He shut off quickly, laughing his brash laugh.

I giggled and would have shaken my head, if I could. I had purposely made Mike my age to help me keep perspective. He could be pretty gross sometimes. But he could be a darling, too.

* * * *

Half an hour later, I wasn't thinking how sweet Mike was, I was thinking how slick he was. We'd broken through in an abandoned part of the warehousing district. Slightly populated is normal for a Sunday night, but a false radiation leak about two miles upwind had caused full evacuation. Mike talked the security puters into liking us, so we were undisturbed. Parked alongside an old building in the pouring rain, we couldn't have been seen from 100 meters.

The squad was already ten minutes gone, leaving just the hover crew and myself. I paced the deck back and forth, waiting impatiently for word, but knowing there couldn't possibly be any for at least another ten minutes, and that would be word of the mission's cancellation. I sat down and hugged my knees, staring out the lowered back ramp into the rain and lightning. I wished I was with them.

Suddenly, the sky lit up, and there was a flash on the horizon. Mike whooped excitedly. I could almost picture him jumping up and down, pumping his fist.

"Wow! That was great! Direct hit!" He started laughing. "Yes! Oh, yes!"

"What? Mike, what? Give me an image!" A blurred image showed up in the middle of the deck. The crew turned to look. There were huge flames spouting out of a ruined stack. The bottom half glowed a dull red.

"Is that the shield regenerator?"

"It sure is, sister! Man, can we call 'em or what? We picked up a two-point-six-gigawatt bolt perfect! No reported injuries, fire crews responding but not yet arrived. Perfect, Abby!"

The pilot, Gibbons, slapped me on the back, grinning widely, and I had to admit to a certain sense of accomplishment.

"Well, so far, so good. How's the conference going, Mike?"

"Not bad. I've got 'em blaming each other for stuff that didn't even happen. The captain's already busted one of the lieutenants to sergeant. And I've shunted all emergency calls and alarms to that hot subroutine we wrote. They still don't know the generator's been hit. The way it's ... uh-oh!"

"What? What!"

"I just lost contact, Abby! I think they're on to us!"

"Okay. Wait a minute." I thought furiously. They probably knew they'd been duped, and would immediately suspect the riping area as the target. There wasn't any other explanation, unless ... unless ... I had it.

"Mike! Slip into their financial records and scrounge up some dirt, especially on one of those three. We'll make 'em think that's what we were after."

"Abby! I can get it, but I'm not going to be able to get a patch into any kind-"

"I know!" I slipped into my seat. "I'll be right there. Just get me something to work with. And let them trace this call. Corporal!" This to Gibbons. "I think this place might be getting scanned or searched pretty quick. They caught on a little faster than I expected. I've got a couple more decoys, but I don't know how well they'll work."

"Very well, Abigail. What makes you think they'll search here?"

"Because I may have to make us one of those decoys if they find out the generator is hit. Stay clear of this terminal." My puterverse access was such that anyone coming into the field risked severe injury, possibly death. "Access," I said. All terminals gave me immediate puterverse entrance on request.

The hover disappeared, and a vast plane spread out before me. A boy with a metallic green shimmer and hazy features ran up to me. It was Mike. His hard breathing told me he finally had to work hard. He probably enjoyed the challenge.

"Abby!" he gasped, bent over and whooping for air. "I got it! Looks like both the lieutenants have been shaking down the employees for credits." He stopped to catch his breath.

"That's nothing new. They all do that. I'm surprised the Captain isn't doing it, too."

"He is. But he's also swiping credit from his two lieutenants, a definite no-no, even for NATech. He's using an alias and has the file locked. Here's the key." He held out his bare hand. A flash of rainbow light and a smell of lilac, and the key appeared. I touched it, and its shimmering colors washed over me, painting me with its palette and scenting me with lilac. We headed off toward the facility's main system entrance.

There were two ominous looking sentries at the entrance. They were huge, helmeted behemoths, staring out of solid face plates. They were as unmoving as Vermont granite, but could respond with crushing attacks on the slightest provocation. Unseen, but far more deadly were several worms buried under the surface. I couldn't avoid them completely, not in the short time I had, but I could mislead them. Getting in should have been tricky, but I had prepared for this and laid out my paths a week earlier. Just as we were about to pass through the main entrance, I created a hole in the ground and stepped in. I floated gently to the floor, five meters down. Mike followed. It was tempting to press on under the entrance, but the worms would be on me at once. As soon as they penetrated my lilac-scented armor, I'd be exposed and locked out for good. Worse, the worms would latch on to my presence and follow me when I tried to leave. It would take precious minutes to detach or destroy the best worms.

To give them something to do, I called up a panel from the side of the hole Mike and I were in. I captured a holo display of the immediate area, then twisted it along both axes. I then warped the time frame, sending it into a one-minute loop with random trapdoors to reroute the unsuspecting worms. Next, I shunted communications to several trinary code subroutines I had written. Finally, I whipped up three doppelgangers of Captain Garber and placed them at various entry points in my warped reality.

Knowing what was coming, Mike grabbed my free hand. It tingled with electricity and pulsed warmly. I closed my eyes and activated my model.

Although I couldn't see it, I knew what happened. I temporarily warped the reality of this corner of the puterverse. The worms very quickly got busy, tracking the equally busy doppelgangers and sending their warning off to my subroutines which came up with appropriate instructions that led them to the trap doors. The warp would probably last two or three minutes.

We cut through the sewer computer system and accessed the main server via the maintenance routines. After that, it was easy to cut through one firewall and enter the secured channel into the private accounts. Knowing I was running out of time that the three of them would be together, I slipped a hand into a nearby terminal. Mike took a position about two meters up the line and poked his hand in as well. I located the search paths I was certain they'd be using to trace the call. I located the trace, then rerouted it to the Captain's private quarters making it look like he'd intended to false trace it to the commandant's. It made no sense; they already knew the call was faked, and with a moment's thought, they'd figure out there was no way the call could come from either place. But I was betting that emotions would be pretty high in that little room, and they'd be reaching for their guns before accessing their brains.

"Worm coming through, Abby! Five seconds!"

I felt a shiver that meant the worm was nearly on me, so I withdrew quickly and sealed it up. Mike's high sign meant I'd made it. He waited a moment to cover up any tracks I'd left-as a creature of the puterverse, Mike was immune to worms-then also withdrew. We headed back to the surface. I thanked him and exited.

The plain collapsed in on itself, and the interior of the hover reappeared. Gibbons was looking at me intently from his pilot's chair, his gun strapped on.

"How'd it go, Abby?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I'm not sure, Corporal. I got away with it, and placed the trap before they traced the call. But if they don't kill each other, they will trace it here. I had to give them the real trace for me to find them. If they took the bait, we're fine. If not, well, it's better we take them on out here..."

"...than our people take on everyone over there. Good thinking. Jamison!" The co-pilot looked up from his scanner. "Let Mosser do that. You and Abby keep an outside patrol. One hundred meters, separate routes, three-minute check-ins. Go!"

I was already pulling on my light armor and headset. The interior of the hov sucked in the night's darkness as Corporal Gibbons cut all lighting. I stepped out first into the soaking blackness and went to my left, away from the building. Jamison was right behind me. He was new to the team, but seemed competent enough. Instead of heading between the hover and the building, he walked over to me.

"Are you going to be all right, uh, Abigail?"

"Huh?" I looked around at him. "What do you mean? Of course I'll be okay."

"It's just that we might run into some muscle, and I thought, well." His voice trailed off uncertainly. "Well, I just want to let you know, you know, that..."

"How sweet! Thanks, Charles, isn't it?" He nodded. "Thanks, Charles, but I think I can handle things that go bump in the night. You take forward, I'll take aft. Shout if you come on anything." I smiled in the darkness and rain. "And Charles? Read the mission personnel dossiers next time, okay?" I smiled at him again and moved off.

I was soaking within seconds. My light armor would deflect most projectile and some energy fire And it was flexible enough that I could use my smaller, more pliable =body to its full advantage in hand-to-hand combat. But the armor covered only my torso and did nothing to hold off the rain The gel even seemed to soak it up..

I took a careful reconnoiter around the dark warehouse. Behind me, the hover sat in complete darkness. I worked my first circuit, meeting Jamison halfway. We continued on, checking in on occasion, and met again at the hover. Ten minutes had passed. Another ten and the squad would be back. If anything had gone wrong, Mike would let Gibbons know, who would in turn tell us. We stepped out about twenty meters and repeated. I'd gone about a quarter of the circuit when my headset crackled.

"Five. Light. Point one twenty ninety."

I turned and moved back toward the hover. Gibbons' message was short and cryptic to avoid interception. He told us there were five soldiers, lightly armored, one hundred and twenty meters off the starboard side of the hover. I pulled my gun, but didn't charge it. I wanted to wait until just before I fired. Many patrols had energy detection equipment, normally heat sensors and night goggles. The rain took care of the first and Mike could falsify the second, but when playing this game, there's no point in taking unnecessary chances.

"One position ten point one." I was letting the others know I'd be in position, ten meters from the attackers, in one-tenth of a minute.

"Two position ten point two." That was Jamison.

"Three position ten point one. Four position fifteen point one. Five position twenty heavy point two. Six position twenty heavy point oh." Mike used four different voices, sending out signals just in case they were listening in.

I snapped on my charger and stared into the rain. At first I couldn't see them, but eventually, I made out four separate shapes. That made the fifth one a lurker. Standard NATech recon party. I lifted the gun and aimed at the one in the lead. He was a big enough target at ten meters. I started to gently squeeze off a shot when Jamison spoke up on my left.

"That's far enough, gentlemen! Drop the weapons."

The fool! Instead of dropping their weapons, they used them. Fighting down the temptation to cuss him out, I snapped off my shot and moved toward him, keeping low. The largest of the group fell heavily. I saw a quick beam from where Jamison was, and hoped he moved. Another one went down, but the other two were closing in on Jamison. I ran to him. I heard the boom of a slug gun.

I made about half the distance when I slammed into the fifth guy, the lurker. He was slightly built, but still larger and heavier than me. His arm clouted my gun hand, and the gun clattered off. He'd been trying to shatter my elbow, but hadn't accounted for my small size, so he hit more gun than me. It numbed my left hand momentarily, but was probably worse for him.

I had maybe five seconds before those other two caught up with Jamison. Lurker swung a vicious hand at my neck, to break it. But this motion was the complement of the first, so he had not adjusted for my short height and quicker speed. As a result his attack, already high, was easily dodged. He still raked it across the top of my head, ripping off my headset. I had no time for finesse, so I jammed my open palm into his nose, sending the slivers of bone into, well there's no point in getting graphic. He dropped, making a sick, gurgling sound. I passed by him, knowing that he was dying. I'd been lucky. I was so intent in getting to Jamison that I had forgotten about the fifth man. Had I been a full-grown woman, that oversight would have cost me my life. Of course, had I been a full-grown woman, I wouldn't have forgotten in the first place.

I ran to where Jamison had fired from, but there was no one there. I stopped and turned in a circle, listening. I brushed my soaking hair back from my ears-my ponytail had come undone when I lost my headset-to better hear. At first, there was nothing but the slam of rain on ancient concrete and the lonely grumble of far off thunder.

A lighting bolt raked the night, and the pieces of the sky thundered their protest. In the flash, I saw the frozen struggle of man-to-man combat. They were in front of me, about ten meters distant. Away from the hover. Jamison might be new, but he had his priorities right. I just hoped he would live long enough to receive the compliment.

Jamison was in a bad way when I came upon the little group. He was on his knees, being held by the throat. His main attacker had his arm raised for the killing blow. The second one was scrambling for a plasma rifle that had fallen. Jamison's attacker was the immediate danger. I pulled my boot knife and engaged.

I slammed my foot against the side of his left knee and knocked his left hand from Jamison's throat just as his right arm came slashing down. He screamed as the knee buckled and tore. I stepped between the two, and he screamed again as his descending right arm impaled itself on my extended blade. Leaving the knife transfixed in his gushing forearm, I stepped around him, using him as a shield from his friend's attack, and shouted at Jamison to get down. The wounded man had his gun holstered, and I couldn't tell what type it was. I took a big chance and drew it, hoping it was a slug gun. I wouldn't have time to wait for a charge. The second man was aiming his now charged rifle.

For the second time in as many minutes, I was a lucky girl. Projectile based, and standard NAtch issue. Holding it in my left hand, I brought the heavy gun up along his back as he slumped, snapped off the safety, and fired.

The slug was a little high, but not too high. The man with the rifle, just a blurry outline in the bucketing rain, jerked back as if tugged hard by a rope, dropping the gun. He probably dropped it involuntarily, but that still made it his smartest move yet. I was about to fire a second-and final-time, but didn't need to when the rifle fell free. Keeping an eye on both men, I knelt beside Jamison, who was lying on his back.

"Are you all right, Charles? Are you wounded anywhere?" I ran my free hand over him, looking for injury. He stared up at me, oblivious of the attention.

"You ... you just killed those two. You took them out like they were recruits."

"Maybe they are recruits. Anyway, they're not dead." I raised my voice so they could hear. "Unless they want to push their luck." The nearest one wasn't going to; he was too busy clutching his left knee with his left hand and holding his heavily bleeding right forearm against his body. The other one was lying very still.

Charles had some cuts and bruises but was otherwise unharmed. Leaving him to tend to his former attacker, I checked on the rifleman. He was alive, but wouldn't be much longer. I knelt beside him, and he looked up at me.

"Wasn't too smart, waiting for the rifle to charge, was it?" He coughed blood.

"No, it wasn't." I took his hand and he smiled.

"Taken out by a little girl! I suppose it's just as well I don't make it. The guys would never let me live it down." He looked at me. "A little girl. How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"So young. So young."

"Is there someone you'd like me to contact? NATEch won't."

"I know they won't. You'd ... you'd do that?" He shook his head with wonder when I nodded. "That's classy. Yeah, tell my sister, Colleen, that I wished we'd emigrated now." He choked out where I could contact her and was silent. I thought he was gone, but he opened his eyes slightly and smiled.

"I'd always thought I'd die in a buddy's arms, saying something really impressive and memorable. I think this is better. I only wish..." And then he died.

We took the wounded man back to the other two. Both were down but breathing. The lurker was out in the rain, somewhere, but he wasn't coming back. I went toward him to locate my gun, which had been knocked clear. It took me about five minutes, but I found both my gun and headset. The first was fine, the second shattered. I holstered the gun, tossed the headset, and headed back to Charles. He was listening to his headset, then frowned. He pulled it off and shook it, fiddling with the limited controls.

"Did you lose the signal?"

"Yeah, I see it picked up a crack during the fight. Water must have leaked in. Doesn't matter. I got most of the message." He continued messing with the headset.

"So?" I said expectantly.

"Sorry. That was Corporal Gibbons. He said they'll be back in five minutes, and we should report back immediately. That's when it cut out." He looked down. "What about these three?" He paused. "And wasn't there a fifth one?"

"Uhhh ... yeah, there was. I don't think he'll be bothering us." His eyes widened a bit, so I hurried on. "As for these guys, two of them will be out another hour or so. And this one..." I let my voice trail off. The wounded man looked at me.

"Hey, I'm no coward, but I'm not an idiot either. I'll fight you for a paycheck, but getting killed makes it hard to spend 'em."

"At least your living expenses would go down. Come on. We'll get you fixed up at the hov, then put you out for an hour or so." He nodded, then grimaced from the pain. We tossed their weapons off into the darkness and picked up the wounded man.

We headed back to the hov. Charles took most of the man's weight, with me helping as best I could. We walked in the darkness and growing thunderstorm. Maybe I overdid it just a bit, bringing down the Anchorage, Seattle and Idatana weather nets. Mother Nature was loose and flexing her muscle.

We hadn't gone too far-this guy was big-when we heard the high whine of approaching skimmers above the pounding rain. I hoped everyone was safe. I wondered if there were any ripes. I hoped so. I wasn't worried about sharding. Not in this kind of environment when seeing ripes. It was the combination of seeing a lot of them in a hostile environment, or seeing a ripe that was very similar to a previous ripe of your own that could cause a sharding episode, and even then it was rare.

By the time we reached the hov, the first four of them were pulling up. Two of them were riding double. So there had been some ripes they were able to get out. I could tell they were both women, maybe twenty or twenty-five years old. They were both staring around, as though in a daze. They each wore uniforms, but from their bagginess it was easy to see the uniforms didn't belong to them.

I heaved up under the man's arm, holding him around his waist. We staggered on. No one had seen us yet. We were just stepping into the light.

"Uh, people?" I called out. They all turned and looked. "Kudos all around and everything, but could we get a little help here?" Two of them came over and took the man. I straightened and walked up to the ramp. I heard a scuffle behind me and turned.

Both of the girls were clinging to the men that had carried them. One had partially slipped out of her borrowed uniform and showed a lot of shoulder. They were pleasure ripes: creatures whose minds had been ripped to obey the whims of whomever owned them. Obviously embarrassed, the men were trying to peel them off.

"Please! Look, this isn't right, uh, miss." Gregg Wagner sounded both flustered and flattered by all the attention. I laughed.

"Well, Gregg! Quite the ladies man, aren't you?" The girl looked at me.

"Abigail!" Gibbons voice was sharp. I jumped at his tone and turned around. He was staring. "What are you doing here? Didn't you hear my message?"

"Sorry, Corporal, no. I lost my headset, then Jamison, here," I jerked a thumb at him and turned back to smile at him, "broke his like a rookie." Jamison smiled sheepishly, and I winked at him to let him know I was just kidding.

The two girls were now close to me. They were on their knees, still clinging to the men who were trying to get on board. I could hear the nearest one pleading with Wagner. The other one just sobbed quietly.

"Please, let me be with you. I'll be good! I'll always be good. You can do whatever you want. Just please..." The second one started making similar pleas.

I felt my blood rush to my face. There was a roaring in my ears, and I was suddenly dizzy. What was

happening to me? My knees gave way and I slumped against Charles. He took me by the shoulders and looked into my eyes.

"Abigail! Are you all right? What's wrong?"

For no reason, I smiled and held him close.

"Nothing's wrong. What would you like me to do? Can I take off this stuff and cuddle with you?" I started to take off whatever it was that I was wearing. I heard a high sound and saw some lights getting close. The lights were pretty.

"Abigail? What's wrong with you?" said the man holding me.

I was scared. "Is there something wrong with me? I'm sorry. Tell me what it is and I'll get better. Please, let me have another chance." I started crying and dropped to my knees to hug him. He jumped back.

"Oh! Please let me make it up!" I cried. "I'm sorry! I'll be good. I promise."

NO! WHAT'S HAPPENING TO ME? I ... I CAN'T CONTROL...

Some other man took me by my shoulders and picked me up. He was very big. I looked into his eyes and smiled at him. Was he my new owner?

"Wyeth! Snap out of it! What's wrong with you?"

"Why is everybody telling me there's something wrong?" I wailed. "I'm sorry, I'll be good. You can punish me, if you want. I even like it, if you do. Or you can..."

Someone else held me, but this time it was a pretty lady. She was sad and mad. I knew because I could tell.

"Oh, no! She's sharded! Why didn't you get her away before we got back? We called through ten minutes ago!" she said with a mad voice.

I'VE SHARDED? OH, NO! AS WHO? TERROR FILLED ME.

"We tried to get through but..." said the man in the big floating thing.

"We both lost our headsets in the skirmish," said the man who I wanted to hold me. I smiled at him, but he didn't see. I'd try later. "I'm sorry, Sergeant, we didn't know."

"All right!" said the big man. "We'll get her home and take care of her there. Let's mount up! We're going to have company soon. Treat that wounded soldier and give him a two-hour nap. We bug out in three minutes! Kate, take Abigail's station on the terminal. See if you can get her puter pal to help us. Sarah, can you take Abby?"

"Just try and stop me." said the big, pretty girl holding me. She looked down at me. Her eyes were wet, but she smiled.

"Come on, Abigail. Let's get you on board." She tugged me onto the big floating thing. All the people looked sad. I wondered why.

MY HEAD HURT SO MUCH, IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO THINK. WHY WAS I ACTING LIKE THIS? WHY WAS I THINKING WHAT I WAS THINKING? I DESPERATELY WANTED ANSWERS, BUT IT WAS SO HARD TO THINK.

"Okay," I said and was happy. Maybe she was going to be my new owner. "I want to make you happy."

She looked at me, then helped me find a seat. It was hard. Then she took off my big clothing. Then I started to take off the rest of my clothes, but she stopped me, grabbing my wrists. I looked up at her, not knowing what she wanted.

"Didn't you want me to undress for you?"

Her face got red. "NO! I don't want you to undress ... just what kind of girl are you?" she asked. So I told her, and her face got even redder and she got madder.

DID I JUST SAY THAT OUT LOUD? I DON'T FEEL GOOD. SHUT UP! SHUT UP!

"Do you know what we're going to do now?" she asked me. I giggled and shook my head. I'd be happy to tell her what I'd like to do now. It didn't matter

NO! DON'T YOU DARE THINK THAT! DON'T YOU DARE!

I TRIED TO FIGHT OFF THE THOUGHT, BUT WAS COMPLETELY HELPLESS. WHOEVER I WAS NOW HAD TOTAL CONTROL OF US.

to me whether she was...

"We're going on a little ride. Under the ground. We're going to do something called phasing. Do you know what that is?" I thought about it, then shook my head. I reached out my hand to touch her leg, but she slapped my hand real hard, making it tingle and feel good. She looked at her hand and looked sad.

Then she shook her head like she was mad.

"What the hell are you doing, Sarah?" said the big man. "You don't have to be so rough!"

"I-I'm sorry, Sarge," said the big girl. Her name was Sarah. "I don't know why, but I had an uncontrollable urge to hit her." I reached for her again and she looked at me. Her eyes said she wanted to hit me, and I was happy. But then I was sad because her eyes stopped saying that and she took my hand.

"Stop that, Abigail. I want you to behave."

"I am behaving! I like being good. Are you my new owner?"

"No! Uh, no, I'm not! Oh, Abby!" She held me close, but didn't seem very happy. Maybe she was sad that she didn't own me. The big man stepped up behind her.

"Take your seat, Sarah. We're bugging out in one minute." The big door went up and closed and the big man sat down. The pretty girl let me go and put straps and buckles on me. I knew she wanted me to stay in my chair. I knew that because she put straps and buckles on me.

"We're going on that ride now, Abby. I'll sit right here. You're going to feel heavy and everything will look different and strange, but don't be scared. I'll be here." She sat on a seat behind me and put her hands on my shoulders. The big thing jerked and moved and we all went on a ride. It was very scary.

Chapter Two

The next three days were very confusing. No one wanted me to play with them, at least,

THE NEXT THREE DAYS WERE VERY CONFUSING. THE ... THE ... IMMORAL CREATURE THAT WAS NOW ME SO CONTROLLED ME THAT I WAS UNABLE TO EVEN BEGIN TO EXERT MY TRUE SELF. INSTEAD,

not the way I wanted to play, the way I was made to play. They kept me in a bedroom, but would only talk to me.

I HAD TO WAIT OUT THE SHARDING EPISODE, SHARING HER WICKED THOUGHTS AND PRAYING SHE WOULDN'T EMBARRASS ME IN FRONT OF MY FRIENDS. A PRAYER THAT WAS ANSWERED WITH A RESOUNDING NO, SADLY. SHE HAD NO INHIBITIONS, AND WAS EXTREMELY OPEN ABOUT WHAT SHE WAS. BUT THOUGH SHE CONSTANTLY FLAUNTED HERSELF IN FRONT OF MY FRIENDS,

The talking was hard and I got tired of talking very fast and just let them talk. They seemed to have a lot to say. But since they were almost all girls, I didn't think about what they said. All my owners had been men, which was nice, so unless I was told not to, I would think about

THEY WERE MY FRIENDS. INSTEAD OF SEEING ME AS THE, AS THE ... AS THE PLEASURE RIPE I HAD SHARDED INTO, THEY TALKED TO ME AS A SICK FRIEND, ONE THEY HOPED AND EXPECTED WOULD GET BETTER. I ONLY WISHED SHE WOULD PAY ATTENTION TO THEM! IT WAS SO FRUSTRATING, LISTENING WITH BURNING INTEREST TO WHAT WAS GOING ON, ONLY TO HEAR THEIR CONVERSATION TURN INTO BABBLE AS SHE LOST INTEREST. UNFORTUNATELY, I WAS SUCH A PASSIVE PRESENCE THAT ANYTHING SHE TUNED OUT I ALSO COULDN'T HEAR. FORTUNATELY, SHE DID HAVE SOME INTEREST IN RAUL AND DR. BARRETT, THE ONLY TWO MALES ALLOWED TO SEE ME LIKE THIS. AND AFTER SUSIE LOST CONTROL AND STRUCK ME-HER, RATHER-EVEN THOSE VISITS WERE RESTRICTED.

men. But there were two men that did talk to me a lot. One even looked at my body sometimes. At first I thought I would like it, but he only wanted to see if I was healthy and not sick. I only got to undress for him once, and my Susie was there, but we still didn't do anything. I don't think he wanted to anyway. So after a while I didn't listen too much to him, too. But I did listen to the other man, because he kept telling me how proud he was of me and how I could get all better. He wouldn't touch me. I said I wanted him to and then my Susie got mad and hit me. Then he got mad at my Susie and then my Susie said she was sorry, but I told her it felt nice and she got sadder and then I thought she would hit me again, only she didn't. He never hit me, but he made me feel nice with his kind words. Deke would sometimes talk to me after he had made love to me and beaten me. But this man talked nice without beating me, which was too bad but anyway I liked him almost as much as I liked my Susie.

THE ONLY OTHER PERSON SHE LISTENED TO WAS SUSIE, WHOM SHE BELIEVED WAS HER OWNER. I WAS TERRIFIED THE FIRST NIGHT AFTER WE GOT BACK. SHE WANTED TO SLEEP WITH SUSIE, AND NOT JUST FOR COMFORT.

My Susie was a nice lady and she was my owner. I think. Only maybe she wasn't my owner like Deke. I think she was my owner like Stays and Cut. Only maybe she was like Deke. I liked men, but she was my owner, so I liked her now, too. She didn't want me and after the first night, put a thing I couldn't see around my bed that hurt if I got out of bed. It hurt a lot and made me feel pretty and was almost as much fun as going to my Susie. I kept trying to hold the field because it made my body all tingly and hot and hurt. But then my Susie got scared and mad and turned it into a thing that didn't hurt anymore, but kept me away. Maybe she wanted to punish me, which was what I wanted if she did.

FORTUNATELY, SUSIE KEPT HER AT ARM'S LENGTH THE FIRST NIGHT, THEN SET UP A MILD SOUNDING FIELD AROUND MY BED SO THE GIRL-SHE HAD NO NAME-WOULD STAY PUT. I FIGURED THAT WOULD BE THE END OF IT, BUT NO. I THEN HAD TO LIVE WITH HER THOUGHTS OF PLEASURE OVER BEING PUNISHED. SHE KEPT PRESSING HER BODY

AGAINST THE FIELD, GIVING HERSELF A CONSTANT SHOCK. WHEN SUSIE DISCOVERED IT, SHE RESET THE FIELD TO NON-PUNITIVE AND THE GIRL LOST INTEREST. IT WAS HARD TO BELIEVE THAT ANY CREATURE COULD BE SO CONSUMED BY PLEASURE. AND I HAD ONCE BEEN THAT CREATURE. RATHER, I HAD ONCE BEEN COMPLETELY SUBMERGED WITHIN HER.

The best part of the day was when they let me leave my room. My Susie or the nice man or sometimes the man who looked at me to see if I was healthy would take me out. But we never saw anyone. They let me play on the bars and mat, but told me I had to stay dressed, which I didn't want to. But then my Susie said she liked it, so I wanted to, too.

WE WENT OUT DAILY TO THE EXERCISE AREA TO WORK OUT. THOUGHTFULLY, THE AREAS WERE ALWAYS CLEARED. ONLY SUSIE, RAUL AND DR. BARRETT SAW ME IN THIS CONDITION OUTSIDE MY ROOM. I THINK SARAH DID, TOO. I NEVER SAW HER, BUT I HAD THE IMPRESSION FROM THE OTHERS THAT SHE STOOD FAITHFUL GUARD AT THE ENTRANCE TO KEEP OTHERS FROM STUMBLING ONTO ME. THE GIRL LIKED GOING OUTSIDE THE ROOM BUT WOULD BE VERY RESISTANT TO EXERCISE, UNTIL SUSIE TOLD HER SHE LIKED SEEING HER SWINGING AND STRETCHING. I KNEW IMMEDIATELY THAT SUSIE WAS TALKING TO ME RATHER THAN THE GIRL. THE BEST WAY TO END A SHARDING EPISODE WAS TO INTRODUCE ASPECTS OF MY LIFE BACK INTO MY LIFE. AND THIS LITTLE TROLLOP HAD BEEN RIPPED OF MOST OF HER INTELLIGENCE AND WAS QUITE TRUSTING, OR GULLIBLE, I DIDN'T KNOW WHICH. I COULD NOT FOR THE LIFE OF ME UNDERSTAND HER APPEAL. IN FACT, THERE WAS A QUALITY ABOUT HER THAT SEEMED TO BRING OUT ANGER AND LOSS OF CONTROL IN PEOPLE, WHICH WAS WHY BOTH SARAH AND SUSIE HAD BEEN ROUGH WITH HER. WHY A MAN WOULD BE INTERESTED IN SUCH A SHALLOW-AND POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS-THING WAS BEYOND ME. I KNEW THAT AS A MAN, I'D CERTAINLY NEVER BE INTERESTED IN A WOMAN LIKE THIS.

BUT SHE WAS TO BE PITIED AS MUCH AS ANYTHING ELSE. NOT ONLY WAS SHE HELPLESS TO HER NATURE AND LUSTS, SHE HAD BEEN RIPPED TO THINK ONLY THESE THOUGHTS, TO GIVE ONLY THESE SERVICES. I ALMOST CRIED FOR HER. TO BE CAUGHT IN SUCH A HORRIBLE LIFE. I KNEW-INTIMATELY-ALL THREE OWNERS THAT HAD USED THEN ABUSED HER DURING HER SHORT LIFE. THROUGH IT ALL, SHE HAD FAITHFULLY PERFORMED HER HIDEOUS DUTIES, UNAWARE THAT SHE HAD ANY VALUE BEYOND THE MOMENTS OF PLEASURE, WHETHER SOFT OR CRUEL, THAT SHE AFFORDED HER TWISTED OWNERS.

SHE WASN'T EVEN A REAL PERSON. SHE HAD NO SOUL, BUT INSTEAD "BORROWED" MINE. THAT MADE ME THINK, WHICH WAS ALL I COULD DO NOW ANYWAY. WAS I RESPONSIBLE FOR THE SINS OF THIS WOMAN, THIS MAN-MADE CREATION? AND WHAT OF THE OTHER PERSONALITIES THAT HAD OCCUPIED MY SOUL AGAINST MY WISHES FOR ALL THESE CENTURIES? I SPENT MANY HOURS PONDERING THIS, ESPECIALLY AT NIGHT, WHEN SHE WAS ASLEEP AND MY MIND WAS CLUTTERED ONLY WITH HER DREAMS AND NOT HER WAKING THOUGHTS. BUT EVEN THAT TIME WAS LITTLE

SOLACE, FOR HER DREAMS WERE VERY VIVID AND VERY DARK. HER LIMITED AND RIPPED CAPACITIES SAW THE WORLD QUITE DIFFERENTLY FROM ME. DURING THE DAY, SHE SIMPLY BABBLERED WHATEVER THOUGHT OR EMOTION CAME TO HER, INCREDIBLY PATIENT WHEN LEFT ALONE, AND EVER ATTENTIVE WHEN PAID ATTENTION. BUT AT NIGHT, THE HAUNTING ILLUSIONS OF A WOMAN UNFULFILLED, A LIFE WASTED, WOULD TOUCH THE CORNERS OF HER/MY SOUL, AND TUG AT IT, MAKING THE ABYSS WE WERE TRAPPED IN JUST THAT MUCH DEEPER, THAT MUCH CRUELER. IT WAS AS WELL, I THOUGHT, THAT HER RIPPERS HAD GIVEN HER THE MIND OF A SIMPLE CHILD.

IT WAS ON THE FOURTH DAY

that my body was given back to me, although she was still with

I PROMISE I'LL BE GOOD! PLEASE, LET ME BE ME AGAIN! I'M SCARED!

me somehow. I couldn't hear her, nor did she control my actions, but I somehow sensed her. Maybe she had somehow known I was in the background earlier, though she gave no indication of such knowledge, nor

WHO IS THAT TALKING? WHY DOES SHE HAVE MY BODY? I'M CONFUSED! I WAS DREAMING, I THINK, AND THEN I FELT TINGLY IN A SAD WAY . PLEASE HELP ME! I'LL BE GOOD! I'LL BE VERY GOOD. JUST DON'T LEAVE ME LIKE THIS!

had she said anything. And her thoughts had been open to me, as mine probably were to her now. It was a frightening thought, that she could come back

WHY ARE YOU SCARED OF ME? I'M A GOOD GIRL. PLEASE, LET ME MAKE YOU FEEL BETTER. I PROMISE I'LL MAKE YOU LOVE ME. WHY DON'T YOU ANSWER? ARE YOU MAD AT ME? CAN YOU EVEN HEAR ME? I CAN HEAR YOU, BUT NOT WITH MY EARS. I DON'T UNDERSTAND! HELP ME, I'M SCARED!

at any time. After my last sharding episode, when I had shut down physically and taken on the persona of a building maintenance computer, it was several days before brain scans showed that the false persona had completely receded.

I woke up that fourth morning in broad daylight-at least, it looked that way from the lighting. I knew immediately the episode had ended when I could feel my eyes open at my command. Almost afraid to try for fear of overdoing it and losing my control, I cleared my throat and spoke.

"Computer, what time is it?" YES! I said it, not that thing.

I AM NOT A THING! JUST BECAUSE I'M NOT SMART AND JUST BECAUSE YOU PLAY WITH ME

ANY WAY YOU WANT DOES NOT MAKE ME A THING, DOES IT? UNLESS ... UNLESS YOU WANT ME TO BE A THING. THEN I WANT TO BE A THING, TOO. I WANT TO MAKE YOU HAPPY, BECAUSE I KNOW YOU'RE MY OWNER, AND THAT MY SUSIE ISN'T. I'M SO SORRY! I WON'T MAKE THAT MISTAKE...

"The time is 0915."

"Thank you." I looked over at Susie's bed and saw it was empty and unmade. "Computer, please locate Corporal Lendler and request that she report to her quarters at her convenience. Inform her that Private Wyeth is asking for her."

It wasn't three minutes before the door opened and Susie rushed in. She knew at one glance the episode was over, and pulled me out of my bed and into her arms, hugging me fiercely. My heart pounded in relief and I and hugged her back.

MY SUSIE NEVER HUGGED ME

Warm tears ran down my cheeks as the bottled up emotions of the last few days tumbled out. It was wonderful to have the physical touching again! They didn't dare before. Even though I was now about her size, I became the scared little girl of two years

LIKE THIS. DIDN'T SHE LOVE

ago, and let her warmth and caring engulf me. We had become like sisters, and this woman was the only family I would or could have. Now that I was a sharded Cue, it was too risky to try to integrate me into society with a family. I would have to remain with the Third until I was an adult. I had already made up my

ME? AM I SO BAD? I'M SORRY! PLEASE!

mind that I would stay with them even after then.

I don't know why I thought these things, they just poured out uncontrollably, along with many other thoughts

PLEASE ... SAY THAT I'M WORTH ... LOVING...

and emotions and ideas. Mike! I needed to check in with him; he'd be so worried. And I'd need to get to the exercise area and do some real workouts. I wanted to find out about the two ripped women, and maybe get in some hoops with the girls, oh! I needed to thank Sarah for all the help, and apologize for my, no her, behavior.

PLEASE ... I'LL BE GOOD...

And what about Raul? I blushed at the remembered thoughts she had had about him. This recovery was going to be harder than from the last shard. At least mentally. Physically, it would be much easier. After spending time as a computer, it took a few days to get any muscle coordination back. At least that wasn't going to

PLEASE...

be a problem this time. I hoped Thawell didn't disqualify me from other raids. He couldn't! I was too valuable for them, wasn't I? I'd have to make sure that...

"Welcome back, Abby! We've missed you." Susie's voice trembled with emotion.

"I know. I was aware the whole time, this time. I wanted to scream when you first saw me like ... that. You looked so sad. But I couldn't do, say, or really even feel anything."

She wiped a tear. "You were aware the whole time? How awful for you!" She shuddered. "I can't begin to imagine what it must have been like."

I shivered as well. "I don't want to try to explain right now. By the way," I lowered my voice to a whisper, "I am so sorry about the advances I made on you that first night. I-

"Don't apologize! I know it wasn't you. If anyone should apologize, I should, for losing my temper and hitting you. Believe me, I wasn't offended. If anything, I was a little flattered." She laughed when my eyes got big. "Not for that reason, silly! I don't have erotic feelings for you or any woman. But I was flattered that even in your sharded state you came to me for support." She winked and grinned. "Just not the support I wanted to give. I'm very much honored that even your Shards trust me."

I nodded. "I thought about that, too. I know I had absolutely no control over her. I don't think she even knew I existed. But she saw you as her owner the moment you met us at the hanger, before you had even stepped from the crowd. I wonder..." I swayed slightly on my feet, my legs becoming wobbly. Susie grabbed me.

"Are you okay? Here, sit on your bed. You're still getting over the effects of the shard. Take your time, girl. You and I are on leave until you're up to speed."

I looked up. "Leave? You mean, *real* leave? Or just inactive duty?"

"Real, what's the term you taught me...? Yes. Real, 'honest-to-gosh' leave. I figured you probably wanted to get out of here when you snapped out of it, so I wrangled a personal hov and some free time."

"That's great! I could use a breath of fresh air! And a new dress. And while we're gone, I can drop off my gun with Dusty, I had a couple of new ideas while-"

"Whoa! Slow down! First things first! And first is a shower." She sniffed delicately. "We weren't too keen on letting you into the showers. Not only would you embarrass yourself and everyone else..."

"...you felt the circumstances, meaning her being in the buff with others, would further embed the personality. That's what I figured, too." I giggled. "I suppose I am a bit aromatic. Still, you could have arranged for some private time in the middle of the night."

"We thought about that. But the world didn't stop for you, Abigail. It may have once, but now you're a dog just like us. We've been very busy with the two ripes you picked up on the raid. And we've staged two others in the past forty-eight hours. That cyberjerk of yours-"

"Mike?"

"Who else? Mike told us about the tricks you'd set up for the London diversion raid and the real Denver supply run that was attached to it. It was so well laid out that we couldn't pass it up, so we went through according to your suggested plan."

"Really?" I asked excitedly. I had worked on this combination for several months, and had manipulated

PLEASE

NATech leaves, downtimes and even a high level promotion into the formula. I was glad it wasn't wasted.

"Really. You do have the knack for understanding how people will react, Abigail. When news of a 'botched' raid-I love that word!-in London hit the NATech military news net, they scrambled their phase hover squadrons instantly." Susie laughed, obviously relishing a retelling of what I already knew. "Or tried to. But with two squadrons in maintenance shifts, a third led by some idiot you'd promoted and a fourth away attending bogus 'Attack Procedures Retraining classes', only the Denver unit was ready, and they went. If they weren't NATech trash, I'd feel sorry for them, getting hit twice in four days. We were in and out so fast, it didn't seem possible we ended up with twenty-five kilotons of supplies, weapons and ordinance." She picked up a small bag she had dropped when entering. "We even ended up with some little amenities we're not used to." She started scrounging in the bag.

"Amenities?"

"Uh-huh. Here, these are for you." She held out a beautiful brush, a handful of hair ribbons, and a gold necklace. The necklace was very thin and had a simple cross on it. It was stunning in its simplicity.

"How pretty! Thank you!"

"Consider it the spoils for a job well planned. I have no idea why they were in the supplies, but there they are. Enjoy." She and I both knew exactly why they were in the supplies. I had a feeling that someone deep inside me recognized them, too. She closed the bag and helped me to my feet. "Come on, let's get you cleaned up and fed. Then it's off to Dr. Barrett for a quick check out. And finally, leave!"

"Yay!" I gathered my things. And walked with Susie to the showers. I never felt so wonderful, doing something so simple as walking.

PLEASE

I frittered away the rest of the morning getting caught up. A long, long, hot shower, followed by an equally long session with my hair and new brush. I kept it in a long pony tail most of the time. Most of the women of the day wore theirs short, but I had always liked long hair on women, so now that I was a girl, I allowed myself the luxury. I figured it would be a pain to keep care of, and it was on occasion. But I discovered early on I had the same fascination and enjoyment many women had in combing out and working with their hair, so it was only bothersome when I didn't have the time to do it properly. Today, however, I had plenty of time, so Susie and I braided it up into a single pigtail in the back, using the new ribbons.

We made the rounds, saying hi to everyone and seeing what was going on. Susie was right; they were busy. Company B was still out, though due back in a couple of hours. The newly formed Company C was prepping for another hit, and would be leaving in about five hours. We normally had enough serviceable phase hovs for simultaneous raids, but the high activity of the past weeks had put several of them into the shop. We talked a bit, helping them load what vehicles were present with the cold weather equipment they needed. NATech operated a microsat snooper base down in the Antarctic; taking that station out would make surveillance from space more difficult as the microsat either overburdened the other snooper bases with their telemetry or just continued sending it to the ruined polar base. Either way, Resistance activity would become easier for at least a few weeks.

We finished up and headed over to the rec area. Unlike the mountain base where I had been reawakened, this desert base was much larger and had separate hanger and recreation areas. I was hoping to get in some hoops, but the court was empty. I wanted to shoot a bit, but Susie had never liked the game, so I didn't push it. We had decided to grab a bite for lunch when I heard a shout behind me. It was Sarah.

"Abby! Girl, is it good to see you!" She picked me up off the floor and crushed my ribs with a bear hug. It felt like she squeezed about five centimeters off my bust-something I could ill afford to lose. I put my arms around her and hugged her back. Little lights started popping all around in my brain before she finally put me down. I hugged her a little longer, more for support until I could breathe again. All my guts fell into a ball in my feet. She grinned her big grin, and I again thought that this wonderful, cheerful woman really needed a cigar.

"I saw Susie take out like a shot earlier, so I asked the computer to tell us why. That little creep of yours has been driving us nuts trying to find out about you, so when the computer told Susie, he couldn't wait to tell everyone-

"He *what*?" interrupted Susie. "I can't believe him! That jerk! He knows the protocols for private messages! Knows? He's the computer for crying out loud! How can he override himself?"

"Go easy on him, Susie," I said. "I'm the one who made him like that. And he's not the computer, really. He's his own entity. Not alive, but real."

"I don't know why you made him like that, Abigail. He acts just like my brother did when he was an intolerable, hormone-crazed teenager!"

"He knows his way around the puterverse. And that same brashness is what makes him so ingenious, too. After all..."

"Ha! Listen to you two!" Sarah laughed. "Fighting over a boy! And a holoboy at that! I guess you're fine, Abby!" She slung an arm around my shoulder. "C'mon! Let's grab a bite and you can tell me what it was like being a little pervert." She winked at me. "You still got some things to do that you promised me." I gasped and turned beet red. She laughed again and we marched off to the mess.

* * * *

"Hiya, Dusty!" I plopped my packed bag on the floor, and he jumped.

"Why, if it isn't my little artiste!" Dusty got up from the beat up bench he was working at, genuine pleasure in his voice. "I'm glad to see you back, runt!" He gave me a fatherly hug, the kind that I imagine only daughters ever really get.

"Thanks. I hope it's for good this time. Listen, Susie and I are off for a few days, so we're hitting the city. I have a couple of favors to ask."

"Done and done. I don't know what the second one is, but the first is probably for the proper weapon. The girl about town must keep her fashion sense when it comes to proper clothes, lethal objects and other feminine dainties."

"That's pretty much it." I put a hand on my hip and flipped the other one with mock snootiness. "One simply can't have one's gun clashing with one's skirt." We laughed. "Seriously, I do need one to carry on my person without being obvious."

"No problem." He pulled open a drawer and pulled out a small handgun that could be hidden in the palm of even my hand. He handed it over. "She's not much, but will do the trick. Energy enough for twenty shots if you don't overload it."

"Overload it? You can do that?"

"Uh-huh. To save weight and cut down size, all the sightings, indicators and safety interlocks are gone. All but this one." He pointed to a switch. "Twist this, depress the charger, twist it again, then leave. Sixty seconds later, it explodes."

"Nice, in a Draconian kind of way. How big a hole?"

"Depends on what's left in the pack. Fully charged, maybe two megawatts of juice and a three-meter crater. Here's a handy ized holster you can stick straight to your skin or clothing. It polarizes here and here. As for where you put it, well, I'll avoid any lewd suggestions. Now what's the second favor?"

"Here." I handed him my holstered gun. "I've had a couple of thoughts about the sonic finder. As you know, I never use it, so it's pretty much a waste."

"So you want me to remove it? It would be lighter, but the balance..."

"No, I had another idea." I told him what I wanted, and he was surprised. I sketched out the technical aspects, and he was intrigued. By the time I left to meet Susie at the hov, he was excited and rapidly clearing bench space to start work.

Susie wasn't at the hov yet, but Aaron was. As I'd mentioned earlier, Aaron was one of my wingmen on missions, Sarah being the other. What I didn't mention was that I had begun to have feelings about him. Was it an attraction? An infatuation? It was more than just friendship. I wouldn't call it love, I don't think. But I felt tight in the chest when I saw him look at me, and I had been thinking about him more. And more. He had also been talking to me more.

He was leaning against the hull when I first saw him, but he straightened when I approached. I brought my bag around to hold in both my hands. I wanted to crawl inside. It was hard to look at his eyes. His magnificent, drop-dead gorgeous deep brown eyes. He shifted his feet uncomfortably and didn't seem to know where to put his hands.

"Hi, Abby."

"Hi, Aaron."

Ah, the talk of young love! I didn't know what to say, and neither did he. Part of me wanted to run into his strong arms, another part wanted to run away and hide. I agonized every time we were together like

this. On a mission, we were buddies, watching the other's back and ready to kill or die for the other in an instant. As a triteam, Aaron, Sarah and I were the best, which is why we were on point.

But during times like these, when it was just him and me, and we weren't trying to shoot our way out of a jam, it was very awkward.

We stood facing each other for a few seconds, desperately hoping the other would say something. At least I was. Finally he cleared his throat.

"I-I just wanted to, uh, say hi and let you know that it was great to see you back." He paused, as though waiting for the thud as his flat statement hit the floor. I smiled, still staring at his feet. Determined or encouraged, he pushed on. "I heard you and Corporal Lendler were going into town. Ummm ... is that going to be Alexandria ?"

"No. Alexandria 's too close. We're going to go to Phoenix . I'm from..." I broke off, a little embarrassed. *Smart move, Abigail! Remind him about how you started out. Do you want him or not?* I didn't know! I didn't even know what 'want' meant to me. "I'm from there," I finished quietly.

"Oh."

"So, anyway, thanks for seeing us off. It was really nice of you to." My heart was banging away so hard I was getting light-headed.

"Um, sure. When will you be coming back?"

"I think in five or six days. Maybe a week." I had a thought. "Is there anything you wanted me to pick up for you?"

"Oh, no! Thanks, though."

"Are you sure? I wouldn't mind. I hear they sti-still have nice silver jewelry."

"No, I don't wear jewelry." He must have noticed the cross on my neck. "But it looks nice on you," he added, hurriedly.

A compliment! Ham-handed, and made to cover up a blunder. So why did it sound so incredibly wondrous coming from him? I almost fainted. Probably because I wasn't breathing right. And the hanger was very warm. I carefully looked up at him. He was looking right at me, his slow smile just beginning. He could always get me to smile with it, and this time was no exception. I couldn't help myself. I smiled back and crinkled my eyes, and we both felt a little better. He broke out of his thrall and took my bag.

"I see Susan's coming. Here, let me stow this for you." He put it in the storage compartment, fumbling with the door a bit, banging at it. I suppressed a giggle. He finished up and turned back.

"Say, I know! Can you pick up a jar of that cactus jelly? I wouldn't mind some of that on my toast in the morning."

"Yes! I mean, sure, I can get some for you." Susie was taking her sweet time getting here! The hanger wasn't all that big. "I'll get some right away, so I don't forget."

"Thank you. Well, I guess it's good-bye. Uhhh..." It appeared he didn't know whether to shake my hand, offer me a hug, or give me a kiss. He seemed to be waiting for some sort of clue from me. I couldn't help him, because I didn't have the faintest idea either.

"Um, okay, good-bye. I'll try to, try to ... ooohh!" Susie shoved me from behind, and I stumbled into Aaron's arms. His strong, safe, warm arms. I suddenly didn't have to think anymore. My arms went up his back and I hugged him close. He brought his arms down around me, engulfing me in his tender strength. He put his gorgeous face close to mine, pressing his forehead against mine and looking down into my eyes. I couldn't catch my breath, but let myself drown in his eyes.

"You have a fun time, Abigail," he whispered. "I'll be thinking about you. Take care."

"Good-bye, Aaron. I'll be thinking about you, too." Heart racing, I quickly stood on tiptoe and kissed him, brushing his lips lightly. I then broke away and ran into the hov, my ears burning and my lips tingling. I sat in my co-pilot seat, sick in my stomach and dizzy. It took three tries to attach the harness. When I adjusted it, I stared down in near disbelief at my heaving chest. I was hyperventilating.

The rear door closed up and Susie sat down beside me, a big grin on her face. She didn't say anything as she ran down the checklist, but she didn't stop smiling. I tried to do the standard co-pilot procedures, but after fumbling three switches in a row, Susie reached out and took my hand. It was trembling uncontrollably.

"You've got it bad, girl." She laughed quietly and powered up the hov. I wanted to say something back but knew I shouldn't interrupt her during taxi. That's what I told myself. The truth was I didn't know what to say. I did have it bad.

We taxied out of the hanger and up onto the desert floor. It was blinding bright and brutally hot. The hard sun burned through the front clearplex, making it warm even in the conditioned air of the hov. Susie set the hov to head deeper into the desert. Off in the distance, I could make out the hazy dunes that marked the beginning of the eternal Sahara . Susie made a final course adjustment and locked on the compilot. She turned the chair toward me.

"It'll be twenty minutes before we phase. So, tell me, what was it like?"

"SUSIE!"

"Oh, don't give me that 'Susie!', Abigail. We're the only ones here." She waved at the cramped interior of our small hov, then at the vast expanse of the empty desert. "If this is your first crush, or love or whatever, I want to know all about it. Besides, you'll need a confidant to have any hope of surviving. So let's have it. How was it?"

I smiled. "It was wonderful! I couldn't believe I had the nerve to actually kiss him! I'm still not sure I should have." She laughed.

"If you had seen him after you ran into the hov you wouldn't have any doubts. He walked into the side of the grav skirt, then wandered off toward his quarters. He must have changed direction three times, he was in such a daze."

I looked at my hands, still trembling. It seemed to infect the rest of me, for I started shaking. Tears welled up, and I felt a heavy lump in my stomach. Why? I was feeling so miserably happy. Why couldn't it be simple for once? I looked out into the desert, but found no answers out there.

"Abby?"

I buried my face into my hands and started crying. The morning was suddenly too much, and it overwhelmed me. I leaned over farther, my stomach hurting.

Susie unbuckled and knelt at my side in the narrow space between our seats. She didn't say anything, but put her arm around me, pulling me to her. I had been in her arms like this countless times in the past two years, and probably would be in them countless times in the coming years. And every time was a moment I could step outside my problems and just accept the comfort I required. Floating across the desert, my first love waiting for me back there at my home, I needed her comfort again. And she was, as always, there for me.

I calmed down eventually, though I still felt confused and sick and happy and half a dozen other things. I wiped my tears as Susie returned to her seat.

"Was it like this for you, Susie? You know, the first time you ... you..."

"Kissed a guy? Yes, I'd say so. I was a wreck for about a week. A happy wreck, though."

"But I feel so different! Part of me thinks it's not right, but the other part of me enjoyed it so much!"

"Really? Which parts are those, Abby? Don't say 'this part' felt this, 'that part' felt that. Learn to listen to yourself. Come now. Close your eyes."

"Huh?"

"Do it. Close your eyes." I sat back and closed my eyes. "Good. Now picture the moment again. Remember it as intensely as you can."

I thought through the whole thing. Talking to Aaron, not knowing what to say, but hoping I could say something. Then the moment when we finally seemed to be getting the knack, only to arrive at the awkward good-bye. Then that push by Susie and I was suddenly in his arms. They were so wonderful! His scent, his warmth. I tingled all over at the thought. Then his soft, deep voice as he whispered how he would think about me. I was so caught up in him, I just *had* to kiss him, even though it was only the slightest of kisses, more imagined than felt. I sighed.

"There. *Now* tell me what part of you didn't revel in."

"You're right," I said sheepishly. "I loved it. But isn't it wrong? I mean..."

"All right, all right! You were a man once. We've been over this a hundred times, Abigail! But that was six centuries and who knows how many personas ago." She should have sounded exasperated, but Susie could have an incredible amount of patience where it was warranted. I knew everything she was going to say, and she knew I did. But we both also knew I wanted to hear it again. I started my refrain.

"But it only seems like two years for me," she said, cutting me off by imitating my voice.

"Hey! I don't whine like that!" I protested.

"Yes, you do. When it comes to playing 'I'm a man in a girl's body', you can be a real whiner, Abigail." I shot her a dirty look. "Okay, now pipe down.

"Those two years have been about as full as they could be. You've grown into a lovely young woman. Your personality has continued being transformed by the realities of your mind and body. And for much the better, I might add."

"What do you mean?"

"Just look at yourself. I've never seen such a happy, exciting young lady, so completely content with herself, as I've seen in you. Except when you go on these 'who am I really?' binges, you really seem to know who you are."

"But Aaron knows who I am, too."

"What? That you were male? Sure, he knows that. But to him that's like knowing the Battle of Hastings was in 1166."

"1066," I corrected.

"Sorry, 1066. But that's the point. Both are ancient history, and have no emotional impact on the present. His brain has logged it as a dry, dusty, worthless fact. What he sees, lives with, talks to, and is falling in love with, is the vibrant, stimulating young woman you are now".

"Do you really think so?" I asked hopefully. "Then why do I get these pangs of doubt? How come, while I was in his arms, I wanted to run away, too?"

"That's an easy one. How old are you, Abigail?"

"You know. I'm sixteen."

"There's your answer. And it's an answer in two ways. First, you didn't say 'I'm thirty-three', which is what John would have answered. You answered how old *you* are, which is sixteen. John has become nearly as much a part of history to you as he has to everyone else. He's more your father now, and you are his daughter. Go ahead, tell me I'm wrong."

I couldn't, because she was right. I had lived now as a female for two years since my rescue, and while I had occasionally thought back to the time when I ... when I was ... him, John had drifted further and further away. The door had never slammed shut. It had just slowly and quietly closed until I had become me, this person. I thought about him now as a different person, and Susie perceived it. It was as though he was my father, and I his daughter. All that I carried forward from that life now seemed like vivid stories he had told me, lessons he had taught me, and actions he had trained into me. I was his legacy, but I wasn't him. The thought made me feel very good.

"And the second way that answer is right is that you are only sixteen, and this is your first love."

"I didn't say I was in love with him."

"No? Does your heart ache? Can you feel the thudding in your chest? Can't you still smell him, feel his arms?" I nodded. "You might be right. It may not be love. But it sure feels like it, doesn't it? Get used to never getting used to it."

"Okay. I'll try," I nodded. "So did he really look like he was in a daze?"

"I'll say! He probably still can't find the barracks."

"That was a dirty trick, pushing me into him like that!"

"It was neither dirty nor a trick." She snapped off the compilot and took over the controls. "Phasing in five minutes. You two looked like you needed someone to help you, so I just stepped behind you and shoved you into his arms." She glanced at me out of the corner of her eyes. "You didn't exactly fight him off."

I sighed contentedly. "No, I didn't. Susie, it was so weird, so fantastic! When I fell into him, I was as though his strength sapped all mine. I went weak in the knees and the head. I hate not being in control of myself. With him, it was so ... so ... *different*. I did lose control, and I loved it! I suddenly couldn't think of anything but him. And then, when he hugged me!" I closed my eyes again and hugged myself as the memory stirred the emotion. "Oh! I fit into his arms like I was made for them! I felt safer with him than with powered armor!"

"I've felt that way, too. Never mind who, I'll tell you more when you're older. By the way, here's a tip, Abby. *Never* compare a romantic experience with combat. It cools down the mood mighty fast."

"Oh. Okay. But then when you told me what one little kiss did to him. Oh, Susie! Do you think he really cares for me? Aren't I too young?"

She stared at me. "You mean you've been with us for two years and you don't know what the acceptable age is for marrying?"

I shook my head. "I never really thought about it. I had always assumed I would have to go through life without a husband." I shook my head for a different reason. "Wow, was I an idiot to think that!"

"Yes, you were an idiot. Don't look at me like that, you offered the comment, and I agreed with your assessment. Anyway, girls start marrying at fifteen in our society. There's really no-

"Fifteen! That's young! When I was growing up, it was considered young to get married at twenty!"

"Don't interrupt. Times change. Even though the legal age for citizenship is twenty-five, marriage can and does happen early. Probably because our planet could stand a little re-population. One day, it will probably be back to twenty. As I was saying, there's no stigma though for those who marry later, even thirty or forty years later. So I hate to break the news to you kid, but you're already considered eligible. At least by one, kind, loving, and really handsome guy."

She glanced at the marker. "Two minutes to phase. Hitch up and settle down."

I adjusted my harness and pulled the computer interface close.

"I'm going to say hi to Mike. I feel a little bad that I haven't already. I've just been so busy."

"You want my opinion, he deserves to be ignored. He's been pretty abrupt to everybody once we cut off his access to you. Uh, one thing, Abigail." I looked at her curiously. "Don't tell him about Aaron. I know it sounds odd, but he might get jealous. Find other stuff to talk about, okay?"

I mulled it over and nodded. "You're right, Susie. He's a kind of cyber-brother and pal to me, but he might not take this well. I know I'm having a hard enough time. That's all right, though. We've got lots of other things to do and talk about." I thought about it another minute, then pushed the monitor away.

"On second thought, I think I'll wait until we're in our safe house. Using the puter during phase isn't personal enough. I want to be standing with him when we talk."

"He'll be pretty sore."

I pulled up the internal navputer and adjusted it for my skills and preferences. "I know. But maybe he'll learn to be more considerate with my friends. If he had acted nicer, you might have had me talk to him sooner. Maybe not even cut off his access to me."

"I'd like to think that. But I don't." She flipped a power lever and the McDonald phase unit began charging. "Let's see. We'll be making a three-leg trip, to throw off sounder probes. We'll have totals of six hours of ground travel to recharge the unit and another eight hours of phasing. This tub doesn't go near as fast as our combat ones do. It's about 1600 now. Fourteen hours travel makes it 0600. Knock off nine hours time difference and it'll be 2100 when we hit Phoenix . Thirty seconds." She reached for the covered switch between us and rotated it to armed position.

"Is that 2100 tonight or 2100 tomorrow night?" I asked.

"Who cares? We're on leave!" she laughed.

I left Susie to her piloting and looked out over the desert. It was very beautiful, nearly as beautiful as my own native desert. I wondered if there would come a day when, instead of Susie and I going on leave, it would be Aaron and I going on our- and here my heart made a heavy thud and landed on its back- on our honeymoon. Girls married at fifteen. I was already at the marrying age. Could I? Would I? It didn't seem anywhere near as impossible as it had the day I found out who I was two years ago. It did seem just as scary. But it was the kind of scary that I wanted to face up to, especially if the reward was Aaron.

Susie activated the McDonald phase unit. I felt the air become bone dry and warm. I concentrated on the navigational display, waiting for the sudden dip that told me we were going down into the sands.

I suppose today was starting out all right, after all.

PLEASE ... I DON'T WANT TO GO TO THE ROOM...

Chapter Three

It was night when we hived into Phoenix . It had been a long day. We jumped up to Europe to get lost in the normal traveling crowd, then ducked over to Chicago , putting an extra twenty miles of rock between us and the New York glasslands when we phased under it. One drawback to phased travel was that you were a great deal more susceptible to radiation poisoning, and that section of North America was going to be hot for another half dozen millennia unless someone came up with a faster way to clean out radiation. Our third phase got us to just outside Phoenix . I was looking forward to seeing the Valley of the Sun again. We had made several raids to the area, but that was before I went into combat duty. So that made my last visit here about 650 years ago, which is a wee bit of time. I somehow doubted I would recognize it, and it seemed a little ludicrous to maintain that I was “from” there. But I was.

We came around the Superstitions and the valley opened up in front of us. I was leaning forward tight against my harness to see better. I could have seen a great deal more by just calling up the holo display, but this was real.

The valley was lit up by millions of stars that dotted the crystal clear night sky of the desert. There was no pollution, and I could make out lights as far away as the White Tanks, over seventy kilometers to the west. What light there was on the ground seemed to have little impact on the night sky.

My first impression verified what I had suspected; I didn't recognize too much. Downtown, located near the center of the valley where the Salt River Bed flowed, was gone. Only inky blackness filled the middle of the valley, accented by occasional small clusters that could have been only several homes at most. Everyone else had moved to the various mountain ranges that surrounded the valley. South Mountain and the Sierra Estrellas had the greatest concentration, though even those groupings were only modest in size.

It was the number of everyone elses that made the biggest change. I had looked up the local history before leaving. When I last visited in 2024, shortly before my “death”, Phoenix and its suburbs had just reached two million. The population had peaked at four million just before the hyperidors were perfected. Then emigration became the thing to do, and the population halved. It became a refuge city during the Terran/Mars Wars, getting to three million briefly, but that was it. After the wars, the population again emigrated or moved, and the valley returned to its natural desert state. Today, there were less than one hundred thousand living in the Valley of the Sun.

We skimmed over the glassmac-much of the world used a rock hard surface of glass for organized ground travel-and turned the hov northwest. Our hosts' home lay near Thunderbird Mountain . As we

shot along the road at 200 kph, I tried to take in as much of the scenery as I could. I couldn't get over how magnificent the visibility was. Even in the black of the desert night I could make out cacti, larger outcroppings of rock and the like. When we skimmed over the glass bridge spanning the Salt River, I could see the reflection of the stars off the water beneath us. It was all very exciting, and I was wide awake, despite the bone weariness that came with extended phased travel.

Less than ten minutes later, the homing indicator pinged and the hov slowed down. Susie turned off the main road and nudged the craft across the desert toward a home nestled in the crook of two arms of the smallish Thunderbird Mountain. There was no road, but there was a cleared path that gave us easy clearance. As we approached, a light came on, flooding the immediate area with what looked like bright moonlight. No doubt the home's computer was keeping an eye on us, expecting and offering friendliness, but prepared for a quick defense just in case. Susie pulled us along side two other hovers and powered down. The craft made a gentle grinding sound as its weight settled onto the rocks and sand. Susie began stand down procedures while I asked for, and received, permission to link up our puter with the house. Inside the adobe home I could make out movement as our hosts prepared to greet us.

Finishing up, Susie lowered the rear door and we stepped out. The heat and smell of the desert washed over me, demanding my immediate attention. I stretched and looked up into the sky. It was so beautiful! I spun around, taking in the beauty and serenity of the land. How I had missed it! The smell of the sagebrush and mesquite, the utter silence, even the occasional puffs of dry, hot air that wandered over the desert, giving the faintest promise of coolness despite the warmth, and telling stories to those who could translate the rich smells and interpret the hushed sounds. The thrill of the sensations washed away—at least for the moment—any sleepiness I had.

Susie handed me my bag which she had pulled out of storage, and we walked up to the doorway of the adobe. A man and a woman waited for us. They were older, perhaps in their sixties, and they were clearly husband and wife. He was tall and had a head of silver hair with traces of black through it. She was about normal height, though still taller than Susie and I who were both shorter than most, and had gray hair. Her smile spread across her face and into her eyes, which had the telltale crows feet of someone who very much knew laughter and desert sun. Both were deeply tanned, and he looked as though he were perhaps from the Apache people.

Susie dropped her bag and offered both of her empty hands, palms up. As the elder visitor, she spoke first and to the man, who was the elder host.

"Greetings. My name is Susan Lendler. You are Thomas Kovin."

He raised both his hands as well. He smiled and returned the greeting, addressing me. "Welcome to our home. I am Thomas Kovin. You are Abigail Wyeth." I stepped forward, bowing to the woman. Because I was the youngest of all, I bowed deeply, keeping my arms straight at my side.

"I am Abigail Wyeth. You are Rachel Kovin. Thank you for your hospitality."

She bowed to me, then to Susan, speaking to her. "I am Rachel Kovin. You are Susan Lendler. Our home is now yours. Come in, and rest."

The formalized greeting procedure concluded, the final invitation sounded great. As I said, prolonged phasing was an exhausting way to travel, especially for teens like me, and we had just done eight hours. I picked up our bags and followed Susie onto the porch and into the house.

Some people moved to the desert to avoid the cold, then cooled their houses to avoid the desert heat. Others came to enjoy the distant scenery, then decorated their yards with the trappings and plants of another terrain. A very few came to the desert to adapt to it, accepting what it offered, enjoying the extremes as much, if not more, than the moderate features. Yet even then their homes would still carry the traces of where they had come from, their first home.

Rachel and Thomas Kovin were none of these. They were from the desert country of the Arizona , New Mexico lands, and they had no other home. The adobe look of the outside was real, as was the abode inside. The rough-hewn wooden logs hanging dark and heavy from the ceiling they supported were also real. The standard amenities I saw were designed to contribute to the overall feel of the house. No doubt others were hidden away until needed. I don't know what Susie was thinking, but I was very, very satisfied.

"We don't have much, but it is yours for as long as you stay," Rachel offered with honesty. "This probably isn't as fancy as-

"Are you kidding?" I broke in, surprised and elated. "This is great! Oh, I feel perfectly comfortable right now! I love your home! Is that a real kachina? And that wedding vase? Is that from the White Mountains ? And how did you-ow!" Susie had kicked me in the shin.

"Forgive her, please. She's sixteen." Susie seemed to think that alone was enough explanation. Judging from the amused smiles on the Kovin's faces, it probably was, too. "Your home is very lovely, and we are both glad you have allowed us to visit."

I bowed in apology. "I'm sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Kovin. It was rude of me."

She waved it off. "Don't worry, child! It's nice to see some excitement in the house again! And please, I'm Rachel and he's Tom. Anyone who fights NATech has our immediate friendship. Tom, why don't you take the girls' things into their room."

"Certainly, Mother." He picked up our bags with no effort. He glanced at me. "Tell me, Abigail, how did you know about our little collection?"

"I was born in Arizona and grew up near here, Mr. Kovin. In fact, my home was only about ten

kilometers south of here."

"Don't call me Mr. Kovic. You'll make me feel old." He frowned. "Ten kilometers south, eh? I don't recall there being anything there in quite..." He broke off, obviously remembering. "Your pardon, young lady. I'll move these things into your room. We have a separate bath and bedroom for you two. I hope you don't mind sharing a bed. It's pretty big, though. Mother? Why don't you draw some drinks for us? I'll have a tequila, please. Um, perhaps one of you could help me? I'm not in the habit of pawing through other people's suitcases, so you may want to unpack yourself."

"I'll come with you, Thomas," Susie volunteered. "Rachel, may I try a Mexican beer, if you have one? Abby's told me all about them, and our bases are dry." She coughed delicately. "In fact I'm a little dry, so it should ... ummm ... 'hit the spot'. One of Abby's phrases." She followed Thomas down a short hall and around a corner.

Rachel walked over to the open kitchen and started getting the drinks and setting out a bowl of tortilla chips. I stood quietly, my hands behind my back.

"So, Abigail, you're from here? That's why you feel so at home. I'm glad! We don't get to host soldiers on leave too often. Could you look in that cupboard? I think I have some salsa in there. As I said, we don't get too many visitors, so it's a pleasure to serve, and a double pleasure to serve a native."

"I couldn't believe we were lucky enough to get you! It's so nice of you to put up perfect strangers."

She chuckled. "Well, you're neither strangers nor perfect, Abigail. We've known about the Third's personnel for some years now. Thomas and I have kept up on Susie's service, and we even know a little about you." She paused. "I have to admit that you're the first Cue we've ever hosted, though." She had poured out Thomas' and Susie's drinks and looked up questioningly at me.

"I'm sorry, I didn't ask you what you might like. I have some lemonade, sun tea." She seemed a little hesitant. "Or I could get you a beer, too." She smiled weakly. "I'm afraid I don't keep up perhaps as much as I should."

I smiled. "I'll have a lemonade, please. And Rachel? Please don't be nervous around me." I held my arms out and turned a circle. "I'm exactly what you see, a sixteen year old girl. My behavior earlier was proof of that. I have a lot more experience and memories than a normal kid my age. And I have managed to hold onto some of the tact I once had, though it's harder now. But inside and out, I'm a teenager with no drinking experience as who I am now. If I had a beer, I'd probably throw up." I looked off, remembering. "Though there was a time when I loved a beer and a shot."

She stared at me, and I giggled. "That was a long time ago and a very different person. A *very* different person. But still me, too."

She pulled down another glass and put iced lemonade into it.

"That should make it a little easier, I suppose. I raised two daughters, so I can probably keep you under control, too. Well, not under control, but..." She set down the glasses and stomped a foot.

"My! But this is starting off wrong! Let me be up front, Abigail. I just don't know how to treat you. What can I ask about you? I don't want to be rude, but I'm so very curious and finding out the rules right up front is the best way."

I was getting to like this woman a lot. She reminded me of a no-nonsense teacher I'd had back in the fifth grade. Be blunt, offer no offense, and things would clear up quickly.

"Fair enough!" I replied cheerfully. I noticed Thomas returning, listening in. "This will be easy: Feel free to ask anything you want. Anything."

"You don't mind? I know it isn't polite, but..."

"Not polite? As long as we're laying out the guidelines, I'll be honest, too. I know a little about you and Thomas, Rachel. You two have done so much to help people like me that I can think of nothing I would refuse you. Besides," I giggled, "being the center of attention is a real ego stroker. So, please, ask away."

They seemed very happy with that, and a sense of relaxed familiarity settled in. So for the remainder of the evening we sat on the two couches and talked and snacked and had a wonderful time. Rachel and Thomas were fascinated by my story, and seemed a little unbelieving that a girl my age could speak with such knowledge. But they were most excited about my being from an Arizona of six centuries ago. I found it impossible to satisfy their curiosity about the city and area. They knew that Arizona and New Mexico had been states, only portions of the much larger USNA, but were surprised to find out even then had been considered linked by history and culture.

It was less than an hour for me. I was still a growing teen, and didn't have the endurance of the others. And the day's travel had been wicked on my whole body. Somewhere along the line, I drifted off, falling asleep with my head in Susie's lap, listening to the soft, pleasant conversation. Slowly the words drifted into mumbles, then murmurs, then snips and snatches of dreams.

I partially awoke some time later. Thomas was carrying me to bed, an impressive feat of strength despite my small size, and I had my arms hugged tightly around his neck. He placed me gently in the bed and murmured good night. Susie moved about, and I felt my shoes getting tugged off, and then I was asleep again. I remembered thinking-in that groggy, nonsensical type of logic that precedes unconsciousness-that I really hoped it was tonight, and not tomorrow night. This was far too nice to be cut short by an arbitrary date line.

* * * *

Thomas pulled the door shut-inside the house the Kovins used old style wooden doors-and Susie began getting Abigail ready for bed. Long distance phased travel is grueling on adults, but it was just short of devastating for children and teens. It depleted their endurance and left them exhausted. That Abigail had lasted even this long was a surprise-though just a mild one to Susie. Abby had proven herself very resilient. Still, the day had finally taken its full toll, and she was completely out now, and would stay this way for the night.

She debated trying to change Abby into her nightclothes, but decided against it. Abby wouldn't wake up, and it was just too much trouble. Instead she pulled off her shoes, socks, blouse and skirt, then pulled the sheet up over her sprawled form. She was decent enough, and far more modest now than at their quarters where she would sleep in the tiniest of tops and skimpiest of bottoms. Susie never said anything about it, but it had taken her weeks to get used to the outrageous things Abby wore at night. She was thankful for her own very dark skin; it hid the blushes until she adapted to it. Fortunately, Abby was a proper girl in any form of mixed company. Looking at the sleeping girl, Susie always marveled how at peace Abby was when she slept. Looking at her lying there, it just wasn't possible to believe the history that lived behind that quiet, gentle face, that soft, gentle form. She laid out a long cotton nightgown for Abby to use in the morning. She kissed her lightly on the forehead, then went back to the great room, quietly shutting the door behind her.

Thomas and Rachel were still relaxing on the sofa, talking in low voices. Both had thoughtful looks on their faces. Thomas stood at Susie's appearance, then sat down again after her. Susie looked at them expectantly.

"So, what do you think? Something else, isn't she?"

"She's all that," Thomas admitted. "She must have good stamina to have lasted this long after your travel. I was expecting to carry her straight from the hov into bed. Most kids would have been worn out long ago."

"Abby's got a strong will. When we first rescued her, she managed to wake herself out of Healer's Sleep. She did it again two months later, just after her first shard. We still don't know how."

"Why don't you just ask her?"

"We did. But that strong will can be pretty stubborn, too. She told us how she did it might come in handy again, and that she'd keep such information to herself. It's times like that when it's very easy to see she worked for NATech."

"That young thing?" Rachel sounded doubtful. "I've read everything you and Betty, rest her soul, have logged on her. It's so incredible, even for a Cue. She's such a sweet girl."

"She's a very sweet girl, Rachel," agreed Susie, "but during a raid against NATech five nights ago-a raid she planned to the smallest detail-that very sweet girl killed two soldiers and badly wounded two others in close combat. She's also the regiment's best and most feared fighter. Abigail and her two wingmen can destroy an entire NATech cohort in seconds. Her earlier life's combat solutions from 650 years ago are still used as a model by the very elite NATech Xeno Forces and by some of the larger city police special forces."

While she talked, the Kovins' look shifted from thoughtful to slightly stunned. Both of them had been very diligent in keeping up with Abigail's progress. For very good reason, as Susie knew. Thomas shook his head as though to clear it.

"It's difficult to comprehend, Susan. We knew a good deal about her, though not as much as you've told us. And we knew she was only fourteen when she was Cued. But to put those two facts together when we actually met her..." He paused. "I suppose it will take time."

"It sure will, Thomas. We've been roommates two whole years, and Abigail still knocks me off stride on occasion. The first time we had combat drill, I pushed her too hard and she nearly killed me. I mean that literally. I was lucky Raul stepped in when he did."

"But she must be able to do more than just fight, dear," said Rachel. "While Thomas and I have been kept up to date, we haven't been given a whole lot of detail. Just that a few people in the Resistance have big plans for her."

"You're right, Rachel," Susie nodded. "She can do a lot more than fight. She was one of the main forces behind NATech during the early 21st Century. Back then, she tells us-and I believe her-NATech was a benevolent psuedo-branch of the North American political region known as the United States . NATech was located somewhere in the Rocky Mountains , but she's not told us where."

"Isn't that a little suspicious?" Rachel had less than little love for NATech: she hated it with a passion that only a mother who had lost two daughters could. One was killed when the Fourth was destroyed; the other had joined NATech and was never heard from again.

"Ordinarily, yes, it would be, Rachel. But this is far from ordinary. We believe she's withholding information because she's formulating her own plan to bring down NATech. We've spotted some trends in her strategies over the last nine months that seem to be part of a grander scheme that we estimate will take from five to twenty years."

"Estimate, Susan? You can't mean to say that your best people can't figure out what she's up to?"

"I mean to say exactly that, Thomas. When it comes to creative planning, imagination, and incredible foresight, we all readily admit Abby has no equal. As John Wyeth, she not only oversaw the legendary Pisces project, there's every indication she conceived, planned and, as her first ripe, implemented it."

" *She* created the Pisces project? Susie, if that's true, you've stumbled onto one of the most important people NATech ever had!" Thomas nodded his head. "I can see now why you're willing to take these security risks."

"And there's more, too, though I'm not at liberty to say. Ever since we rescued her, I've remained her friend and confidant. Her friend by choice and her confidant by choice and by duty. My work in research has taken second priority, and I am no longer a Cue counselor. I've given my promise to Abigail not to tell, and I won't, but she's, umm ... developing something now that makes the Pisces project look like a child's plaything."

"It's a pity the Rock destroyed the Pisces," Thomas interjected. "I've always wondered what they as a race would have accomplished."

"They did leave a legacy though, Thomas," Rachel said softly. "Without them there would have never been a Resistance."

Thomas nodded in agreement and Susie continued.

"Abigail was devastated when she found out about the Rock. I have an idea that's one of the things she holds NATech accountable for."

"So she wishes to bring down NATech because of revenge? Or hatred?"

"I don't think it's that, Thomas." Susie thought a moment longer, then shook her head definitely.

"I know it's not that. I think it's a combination of a deep sense of justice and more than a little guilt. The NATech of her era was not even close to this. But it is the same NATech, and she was one of its earlier and more influential members. She feels a heavy responsibility for our present and-as she calls it-stagnant culture, and wants to make what amends she can. The best way is to clean out the worst rot, which is NATech. And we're going to help her out any way we can."

"She's a very special person," Rachel murmured quietly. She looked up at Susan with misty eyes. "I had a daughter like that, once. She was very firm in her convictions, and was willing to pay the price for them. I only hope the price Abigail and you have to pay, Susan, is not as high."

"What can we do, Susan?" asked Thomas, equally quiet.

"Just providing us a home for this week is already a lot. The extra work you've done setting up our identities will help, too. And I want to thank you for the generous account you've given Abby and me." Susie laughed. "I only hope she doesn't spend too much on clothes. Our hov is pretty small, and we've almost no extra room in our quarters. She may have been and still be one of sharpest minds around, but

she's also an impulsive teen now! One of her strengths has been her smooth transition into this new life and physique. She is genuinely enjoying the differences, challenges and advantages. No," said Susie, getting back to the first thought, "you've both done a great deal already. Thank you."

"You ask too little. We've enjoyed getting active in this side of the resistance again, so what we've done is nothing. Shall I call the TAU Council?"

Again Susie was undecided. Susie knew that Thomas Kovin held a high position in TAU. How high she didn't know. If he could call the Council, it was likely he actually knew one of the three who presided as Those Above Us. The TAU Council would eventually have to be called, but Susie wasn't sure that the time to tell Abigail about it had arrived. After a moment's thought, Susie shook her head.

"No, not this time out. Let Abigail continue to think you two provide only a host home for dogs on leave. I'm not saying we should deceive her. Not only would it be wrong, it would be risky. Let's just not bring it up. She's just come out of a pretty bad sharding episode, and she can use the diversion. I want this to be a real vacation.

"About the only other thing I can ask is to try to treat Abigail just as you are doing now. Be up front and honest with her, and let her feel and act her age. This is her first real leave, so I don't know what to expect."

Rachel chuckled. "That is one area where we do know more than you, Susan. A sixteen-year-old, on vacation? She'll have a wonderful time! I only hope you can keep up with her."

"I have to," Susie said simply. "As quick-witted as she is, she's also very much a product of her own body, so she has frequent mood swings and can be tactless, impetuous and headstrong, despite her more mature soul. It could be a disaster if the wrong people found out she was a Cue. Not only for her, but for yourselves as well."

No one wished to linger on the consequences of that mistake, so the talk drifted off to other subjects. Susan slowly began to feel the same comfort Abigail had when she first met the Kovins. Years of hard experience and constant living so close to danger had made it difficult for Susan to warm quickly to those she didn't know. She envied Abigail her openness and her trusting soul.

Later, as she readied for bed, Susan thought back to their conversation. She looked into the quietly reposed face of Abigail, softened further by the blurry shadows of the starlight pouring in through the large window. So much behind her. So much ahead of her. And for better or worse, the Resistance had begun shifting their hopes onto this young woman's thin shoulders. Susie hoped, as Rachel did, that the price that Abigail finally paid for this trust would not be too high.

* * * *

Morning sunlight peeked through the clear eastern wall and into my eyes. I turned over onto my other side, putting my back to it. I found I was in bed with Susie, who was still fast asleep. For a panicky moment, I thought that *she* had come back, and had...

I then remembered where we were, and panic was replaced by relief and a growing excitement. I rolled over and propped myself up on my elbows, yawning. I looked out of the wall-sized window. It was polarized to accept light, but not project it, meaning I could see out but no one could see in. And what was out there was something to see. I got carefully out of bed, so as not to disturb Susie, and walked up to the window.

Being nestled on the southeastern edge of Thunderbird, I could see the northeastern side of the valley, past McDowell mountain range and out to the Superstitions. We were a little higher than the floor of the valley, so the view was doubly impressive. Far more impressive than the smog-choked city I had known.

The warm sun pouring in through the powered glass made me stretch and yawn again. Since there was plenty of room, I began my limbering exercises. Five minutes of stretching left me a little flush and wide awake. I suddenly had the urge to go outside.

I looked around for our things and found a gorgeous pine dresser. Inside were my clothes, so I grabbed a change. Susie had laid out my long nightshirt on the bed but hadn't bothered trying to get it on me, leaving me in my under things instead. I pulled it on and stepped out into the hall. The bathroom was directly across from me, so I made for it.

I had originally planned to quickly wash, dress, and head outside for a little explore. But I exercised woman's prerogative the instant I spotted the bath. A bath! Of all the things I had tried and done as a girl, I'd never had a bath before. We obviously didn't have time for baths in the military so it was strictly group showers. I had waded through a few streams during several combat missions, but that hardly counted as a bath. The only time to get this luxury was when on leave, and this was my first.

Excitedly, I returned to my room. On top of the dresser was my Bible, which Susie had laid out for me when she unpacked my bags last night. I snatched it up and went back to the bathroom, closing the door behind me. My anticipation building, I turned the spigots all the way on, and the tub began filling. Only it wasn't a tub per se. It was easily twice as large, but irregular in shape and very soft to the touch. I looked around the bathroom and found a glass jar of bath oil and another of bubble bath. Being new at this, I had no idea how much to put in, so I guessed. I used a little too much of the bubble bath, and bubbles started foaming up very high. I didn't care. I stripped and stepped into the tub.

Describing a girl's bubble bath almost seems wrong. It was so fabulous, it strikes me as very personal. So I don't want to go into the incredibly ... well, trust me, it was fantastic!

I finished up way too soon, spending only an hour soaking and reading. I could have spent three hours. But I really did want to get outside. I wanted to hike around and get the feel of the land. I also wanted to

get into our hov and talk to Mike. I'd been putting him off far too long. As I toweled off and dressed, my stomach reminded me that eating breakfast should get top billing.

Tightening my shoes-all military boots, trappings and identifications were left at the base for obvious reasons-I stood up and gathered my things. Susie was still asleep when I looked in on her, so I quietly tossed my clothes into a heap in the corner, and went to the main wing of the house.

Our room and bathroom were an extension of the original adobe house. Also constructed of adobe, our little wing afforded us enough privacy without allowing too much. Leave was not meant just to rejuvenate us. It was also a chance to let those giving us their support have an opportunity to know us and us them. So we were given precious, wonderful privacy, but we were also members of our host family, and expected to act accordingly.

I went into the kitchen area to scrounge some breakfast. The house was set up very simply and, in my opinion, very elegantly. There was a great room, with sections for the kitchen, dining and living areas. One hall in the back went to our bed and bath. A second hall, close on to the kitchen, went undoubtedly to the Kovins' bed and bath.

There were still some dirty dishes from the night before, so I quietly washed and dried them, then put them away. In doing so, I discovered their supply of hot chocolate, so I fixed myself a cup. The cooling area displayed some corn tortillas and refried beans, probably from last night's dinner that we missed. Refrigerators had gone the way of the dodo. In this age, an energy field was used to confine and chill a section of counter top that had shelves and cupboards. Since the field was flexible, it was very easy to adjust size to suit need. Many homes were cooled using the same type of field. The properties of the field made it easily penetrated by mass, yet it retained the desired temperature without affecting the outside air. I made a cold burrito, liberally sprinkling it with salsa, and headed out the door, my mug steaming with chocolate.

The sunlight outside was brilliant. The air had just the faintest bite of cool left over from the night. I sucked in a couple lungs full of desert air, laced with the smell of mesquite and dust. I looked up into the solid blue sky, unblemished by even the tiniest cloud. Like the sky in the Sahara , it seemed to stretch on forever, and had a depth that was positively mesmerizing. The clarity was such that even with the sun risen over Camelback, I could still make out a few faint stars.

Circling around to the back of the house, I climbed Thunderbird Mountain for a better look. Thunderbird was no Matterhorn . I doubted it was more than one hundred meters high. Yet it stood above the valley and had little to obstruct its view. I reached the top in less than ten minutes, huffing and puffing since I hurried, and sat down on the rock, eating my burrito and drinking my chocolate.

As nice as the view was from my window, it was infinitely more breathtaking from the top of the mountain. To the north lay open desert. There were a few very small groupings of buildings, and I caught the glimmer of silver that betrayed the location of the glass road going through. But other than

those, the desert could have been from a thousand years earlier. And the view south, into the valley, was even more exciting.

For centuries, man had tried to bring the valley under his control. Tribes of nomadic peoples that had drifted into the Salt River region and shifted from hunters to planters had been the first. Other, fiercer tribes came, and pushed out the first. Then the Spanish, followed by the Americans, who had blended their culture with the Spanish-remained the longest. With time came many technological advancements which were used to press the valley into submission. Of course they were never to succeed completely. Though nothing created is infinite, the patience of the desert comes close. So it waited, knowing that failure would come. It would occasionally and briefly tire of waiting and would lash out, sending lightning fast flash floods over its sandy skin or whipping up blinding sandstorms and wicked dust devils with its heated breath, as if to show the people who tried to plant grass and grain that the desert had not submitted. But then it would return to its silent endurance, knowing time was on its side the desert would ultimately win, when man would give up.

But man never did give up. Looking out over the warming valley, it was clear that man had learned not to fight the desert, but to live with it. The populations were nestled in the foothills, using the convection winds and vast, unending supply of solar energy to generate power. There were no longer huge tracts of cash crops-or credit corn as it was called now-but instead smaller fields of produce, using only the water supplied naturally. Over the desert floor were a number of glimmering ribbons-glassmac roads with occasional hov craft zipping up and down them-but they looked almost as much a part of the desert as the mesquite and saguaro because they had been made from the sand they covered. To all this, the desert, in my active imagination, had given its quiet approval. The scars of a careless expansion were gone, and the two, desert and man, now seemed to be content with each other.

I looked over toward the very center where the Salt River cut through. I couldn't make out the shimmer of water, but I could see the bright green of sycamore and willow trees that always marked the presence of a reliable water source. I wondered if I would get a chance to go swimming. To do that, I'd need a swimming suit. There were a few beaches that allowed nudity but I had absolutely no interest in them. So a swimming suit meant shopping first. A chance to mingle with nonmilitary types for a change! We could go to restaurants, take in the sights, oh, so much! I wanted to take Susie up into the Superstitions. And I was definitely going to spend a lot of time with the Kovins. I hoped we had enough time. A week hardly seemed adequate.

The first thing, I decided, would be to see the city. Maybe Thomas and Rachel could give us a tour of two or three of the settlements. I wondered impatiently what time they got up, then regretted my impatience. They were our hosts, and I would adjust to their time schedules. Still, I hoped wistfully, it would be nice if they were early risers. I looked down toward the house.

I did see movement, but it was Susie. Even from this distance, her rich, black skin made her easily identifiable. I had always admired how smooth and perfect her skin was, and wished mine could be as nice. She was holding a mug in her hand and was looking around, probably for me. When she looked up

the mountain, I stood and waved, sweeping my arm back and forth. She spotted me and started walking up. I sat down to wait for her.

As I watched her nimbly working her way toward me, my thoughts drifted to her. Susie had come to mean so much to me over the past two years that I could only begin to describe it. I loved her deeply, more than I ever thought a person could love another. She had been my mother, my sister, my best friend, my guardian, my example, and had been just the right one at just the right time. I wouldn't be the girl I was-or the woman I was going to be-without her, and I knew it. I have thought back countless times to that first morning, when I realized with horror that I was a young girl instead of the grown man I had spent my life becoming. I can't think of any other person who could have carried me through that scariest of times. The changes, the emotions, the feelings that had flooded me, threatening to drown me, were so overwhelming I could have easily succumbed had Susie not been there. I have seen several Cues who did succumb, either to sharding or because of the overwhelming change. Though no one has ever gone through my circumstances (I'm not bragging, but the fact is that of the thousands of ripes who have been rescued into new bodies, I was the only one who changed sex.), they were still overtaken by their new person, and slipped into a stunned, semi-aware state that allowed them to deny what had happened to them, refusing to enjoy and appreciate the second chance that had been given them. I owed my life to Susie, twice over. I'd owed her my first life for rescuing me and returning my soul to me. And I owed her my new life, because once I was able to come to grips with it, I have enjoyed it beyond measure. All the way from the moment I took my first steps until today while I luxuriated in my first bath. All that and more I owed to her. It was for Susie most that I was going to tear down NATech and give to her a life that she so richly deserved.

"You're up early, young lady!" Susie said, still a little distance away. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised, though."

"You've got that right!" I exclaimed, feeling the excitement beginning to build. "We're on leave, Susie, and I don't want to miss a minute! I'm wired!" At her puzzled look, I explained. "That means, hot to trot. Loaded for bear. Java choked." I giggled at her frustration. I got a kick out of explaining defunct expressions with other equally extinct phrases. "I'm really excited. We've got lots to do. First, though," I patted a rock next to me, "you need to have a seat and enjoy the view."

She obligingly sat down next to me and looked out over the valley. She inhaled sharply at the beauty. I smiled at her reaction. I loved showing off my country.

"Pretty sweeping, huh?"

She nodded. "This is gorgeous! I see now why you were so excited about visiting here, Abigail. It's incredible how far you can see from up here! Do you know the names of the mountains?"

"I sure do." I pointed out the range to the far south. "That's South Mountain . Over to the west are the White Tanks, there's the McDowells, the Superstitions, and this," I stomped both feet on the ground,

“this is Thunderbird, the runt of the litter.” I picked up my burrito and started munching on it, watching Susie as she studied the mountain ranges and enjoyed the smell of the air. She saw me watching her and smiled, then made a face when she saw my breakfast.

"Is that a burrito? For breakfast? Abby! That's disgusting!"

"No it's not, it's delicious! Especially with the hot chocolate. Care for a bite?" I offered her my nearly eaten burrito.

"Please. I'd like to live to see my thirtieth birthday, and not eating that thing is one way to get there. Thanks. I had a roll a few minutes ago. I'll just finish my coffee and pretend I didn't see that."

She got up to look on the other side of the small peak we were on, leaving her coffee. I glanced at it, feeling the temptation to try it. Maybe I would like it now. Giving in to my curiosity, I took a swig. Hot, black, and disgusting I felt my stomach churn and my face scrunch up and quickly put the cup =back down. I choked down the swallow I had taken, but washed it down with some hot chocolate, my curiosity satisfied. One of my few regrets. I had tried it once before, and it had tasted bad then. It was worse now. As John, I'd practically lived on the stuff. Oh well, a small price to pay, I kept reminding myself, a small price to pay.

We spent the next hour on top of the mountain, talking and enjoying the warm, warm sun. We talked over our plans for the week and just generally wasted time. Susie had brought along her brush, and I had some ribbons in a skirt pocket, so we did each other's hair. Between the very warm morning and total freedom from schedules and duties and assignments, I could feel my muscles relaxing, as though I'd been given a deep, full body massage while lying in a tub full of hot water. Uh, maybe that's a little too descriptive. Sorry, but the experience of my first bath had really left an impression. I mentioned it to Susie, and she understood exactly what I meant.

The morning was wearing on, so we picked up our empty cups and wandered down the mountain and back to the house. We had seen Thomas and Rachel moving about their property. It wasn't really a yard, for they had left the desert untouched except for some discreet clearing to allow the passage of hogs out to the glass road about two kilometers distant.

They had spotted us as well, so by the time we had returned, they had set out several chairs under their front verandah, and Rachel had some lemonade laid out, sweat dripping down the thick glass pitcher. It was a scene that could have been from my time, yet seem timeless in both. I thought for about the twentieth time how fortunate Susie and I were to be hosted by them.

"Pull up a chair, girls!" Thomas waved a hand to a couple of empty chairs and poured out two glasses of lemonade. We plopped down gratefully into them. It was probably no later than ten o'clock, but the cool of the morning had vanished, and the heat of the day was well under way. "I should imagine you've made plans, but there's always time for a cold drink, eh?"

We sat and chatted quietly. Rachel kept looking at me out of the corner of her eyes. She seemed a little worried and ... and ... something else I couldn't quite place.

"Is everything okay, Rachel? You're looking at me a little funny," I observed with my usual tact. And, as usual, I realized immediately I had acted rudely again. I could get so frustrated with myself. All I had to do was think before opening my mouth. Sounds easy-but it was so hard!

"No, no, dear." At my look, she continued. "Well, all right. Susie told us a little about you last night. Did you really kill those men?"

So that's what it was. She still couldn't get over my being a Cue. I should have anticipated this. The personnel of the Third dealt with my kind all the time, and they still got caught up on what was on the outside. Or what was on the inside. How much more difficult for those who had rarely, if ever, experienced it. I smiled at her to reassure her. My smile, and the fact I was swinging my legs while I sat, probably didn't add a whole lot of weight to my words. No matter; I was who I was, and couldn't or wouldn't change.

"Yes, I did, Rachel."

Thomas leaned forward, listening intently. Rachel became very attentive, waiting to hear and perhaps a little fearful, too. And Susie became very still. She was touchy when talking about missions or me. Susie could be as protective as a mama grizzly when attention turned toward me.

"Yes, I did," I repeated. "In many ways, I'm like all the other dogs. I don't want to kill, and I try not to. But one of the men I killed was threatening a comrade. And the other tried to stop me from getting to his side. When I have to choose between a buddy and an enemy, there is no choice." I paused, then gave it to them cold. "So I killed both of them, shot a third, and savagely wounded a fourth. And I would do it again."

"But you're so-" She cut herself off, then shook her head. "You're so young was what I was going to say. But I don't know how old you really are..."

"I'm sixteen, Rachel."

"No, I mean, *really*, dear. I don't know your *real* age. And it's-"

"I *really* am sixteen, Rachel. My memories and experiences are older, but I'm not. Not anymore."

"Abigail?" Susie broke in, trying to deflect the conversation. "The morning's getting on. Maybe we should think about-"

"That's okay, Susie, I don't mind. If I can answer some more questions for Thomas and Rachel, make them feel more at ease, we'll all be better for it." I looked back at Rachel. Taking a deep breath-this wasn't going to be easy-I plunged in.

"Rachel, I am thirty-three years old. To be more accurate, I have thirty-three years of memories and living experiences. As John Wyeth, I was born in 1995, over six and half centuries ago. I graduated from Arizona State University in 2015 at the age of nineteen. I was drafted into the army that same year and served three years as the officer of a recon platoon in the Ethiopian campaign until 2018. While serving, I was contacted by..." I stopped, to tone down my voice, which had started to become harsh with the memory. "I was contacted by NATEch and became an agent for them in 2018. I was made a project leader in 2020 and was promoted to Twenty Year Project Leader in 2022. As a Twenty Year PL, I-

"Excuse me. What's a Twenty Year Project Leader?" asked Thomas.

"The credo of NATEch in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries was 'In Twenty Years.' NATEch developed imaginative scenarios of what society and technology would be like in twenty years. Using those models, we anticipated potential problems, challenges and advancements. Having identified them, we worked out possible solutions, answers and applications."

"I see. And is it true you headed the Pisces project, the program that put genetically altered humans under the oceans to start a new society and race?"

"Hum. Well, yes, it is true, Thomas. I originally conceived of the idea, though not at quite that scope initially, and was given approval to use the resources needed to develop the strategies. It was the last project that I worked on before I was accidentally electrocuted."

"Oh! How awful!" gasped Rachel.

"It wasn't too pleasant," I agreed. "I don't remember anything after the accident. The next thing I do remember was coming to in Healer's Sleep, with Dr. Barrett talking to me."

Thomas chuckled. "What a welcome! Hearing Phillip's stone gravel voice greeting you! That was probably worse than the electrocution. At least you don't remember that." He looked at me with keen curiosity. "Since you seem to be in a talkative mood, I find myself very curious..."

"About how I adjusted to the gender change?" I interrupted. He nodded. "At first I didn't notice, because I was in Healer's Sleep. After I woke up-

"Sorry to interrupt again, Abigail. But how did you manage to rouse yourself from Healer's Sleep?"

I smiled at him and continued. "After I woke up, I still didn't notice. It wasn't until they caught me trying to escape and told me point blank I was a little girl that I did see." I reached out and took Susie's hand.

"It was Susie who kept me calm and sane enough to make the adjustment."

"And what was the adjustment like?"

I shook my head. "It's really hard to explain, Rachel. I can't give you a point of view that we share. You and I are both women, so I can't explain the change from being a man. Thomas is, and I was, male. So I can't explain to him the change to being a female. I've tried to express it in words before, but it's tough. I am just as much me now, as a female teenager, as I was when I was a full grown man. I suppose it's like looking back at yourself as a little girl, then as a young lady, then as a mature woman. All individual phases of your life, but always it was *you*, Rachel. It all felt, I don't know, natural. Yes, that's the word. It just felt natural for me to go from boy to teen to man to young girl. Although it's a unique path, it feels natural to me. The only real difference is that my change from John to Abigail was so abrupt. But it still felt-feels-right.

"It has been a wonderful experience, though! To be able to go through life again, knowing as much as I do. But it's still a very new set of experiences. I'm not even going to tell you the muff ups I made the first few months. Even going to the bathroom the first time was an adventure. And convincing myself it's all right to wear a skirt. And a bra! Since I was already fourteen, I needed one right away. I almost choked myself the first time I tried to put it on! Now that was..." Susie cleared her throat, and I looked at her. She looked straight into my eyes, and I realized my goof. My ears burned red, and I stood and bowed to Thomas.

"I am so sorry, Mr. Kovin! I was indelicate and improper. Please forgive me."

He stared a moment, then laughed. Seeing how embarrassed I was, though, he did get to his feet and bow back, allowing me to straighten. Bowing out of respect had come from the Japanese culture of centuries before even my time. It had become such a distinguished and accepted form of greeting, apology and submission that by the twenty-second century the practice was universal. I had taken to it quickly. Done this way, it was no longer a question of masculinity but of respect and status. I preferred it, partially because it was so translatable, and partially because I was really lousy at curtsies.

"Don't worry about it, Abigail. I'm the father of two daughters. Most of my life was spent listening to things like this. But I accept your apology. Please. Continue."

"Well, that's pretty much it. I was just going to finish by saying that I'm continuing to change. Grow, rather." I tapped my head. "I've never forgotten who I am. When I'm me, I mean. My ripes don't count. I don't know much about them and I don't want to know. What I have found out isn't pretty, so I'd just as soon not find out more.

"Like I said, who I am isn't different, but how I see myself and others around me is constantly changing. A lot is because of experience. Some of it is because of my body chemistry. When I first woke up, I was a man in a girl's body. Within a few days, though, I began 'settling in', as it were. As I became more and

more used to seeing myself as Abigail, I started becoming Abigail. I didn't bother fighting the transformation of my being, my soul, from male to female. There was no point denying what I was. Every moment, every thought, every breath, was now as a young girl. The physical reality quickly began shaping my spiritual reality. Before long I couldn't fight it, nor did I want to. Being a girl made me want to keep being a girl. Now I'm a girl looking forward to being a woman. That's what I am and what I want to be, inside and out, heart and soul."

"Have you considered gender resequencing?" Thomas offered. "It's done exclusively to the unborn now whenever gender multiplicity is detected, but I imagine the technology could be modified-" he tapered off at my head shake.

"It wouldn't work because there *is* no gender multiplicity in me. There never was physically, and there isn't any more mentally.

"In the twentieth century-the century I was born-the term for gender multiplicity was transgenderism, and there was no cure. Surgery to alter the body to match the brain's gender was available, but only after puberty, when most of the 'damage' was done. And it was expensive, risky, and ultimately artificial. Worse, society had little tolerance for the transgendered person-it wasn't until 2020 that they were given all the civil rights everybody else received at birth. Until then, they could remain the gender they'd been mislabeled as and be accepted by society but die inside, or they could seek treatment and gain a measure of peace and normalcy, but be damned by society for doing so. Essentially a Hobson's choice. Had I been in *that* position, then perhaps-" I shook my head again, this time as a mechanism to get back on subject.

"Sorry. That's my little soapbox." At their blank stares I added, "My pet peeve, the subject I'll gladly talk about. I studied it in detail shortly after being Cued, trying to get insight into my own situation.

"But my situation is nothing like theirs. Yes, my *mind* is-was-male. But my body and brain have always been female, unlike a transgendered person, whose brain is one gender and whose body is the other. For me, having my mind and soul inserted into a female body *made* my mind and soul female as well. To undergo gender resequencing now would only *create* gender multiplicity."

They wanted to understand. Oh, how much they wanted to understand! But they couldn't. Not even Susie fully understood, though she did more than anyone else. I was the only one who could, and I couldn't explain it. I had become better at trying to explain it. The first few times I'd tried, with some of my friends at the base, I had come off sounding like some sort of kinky pervert. At least now I sounded sane, but it didn't change the fact that mine was a unique case of natural change. Was that a contradiction in terms?

I stood up and stretched.

"I hope you don't mind, but I really want to get out. I've never been to town, and there's a bunch of stuff

I want to do and try! May we be excused, please?"

Thomas stood and dismissed us. Susie and I grabbed our things and climbed aboard the hov. Not ours, but the smaller one belonging to the Kovin's. It was a little runabout. It had no phase capability, so it was lighter, quicker, and best of all, had no top. We piled in and Susie started it up. I was licensed to operate this style of hov, but we wanted to keep things looking as normal as possible.

The Kovins were waving to us as Susie turned the craft and pointed it toward the narrow clearing that wound toward the road. Thomas walked up and placed his hands on the side of the craft.

"You two girls take care. Stick to Phoenix and Mesa . Scottsdale is a rough place to go, and Glendale 's worse. What time do you plan to be back?"

I started to say sometime tomorrow afternoon. I had no intention of sleeping for the next thirty-six hours at least. Susie cut me off, though.

"I don't imagine we'll be out later than nine or ten, Thomas."

"Susie! You can't mean that! We've got shopping, sightseeing, hiking, swim-"

"Stop whining. Like I said, about nine or ten. Take care." She pulled us out at a quiet pace while I sulked beside her.

I didn't sulk too long. I didn't have it in me, and it messed up my fun. Susie slipped us onto the glassmac and opened it up. The little buggy could really move. The windshield, which looked like it had been pried off an ancient 1950's style automobile, deflected enough air around us to allow shouting, but let enough in to blow our hair around. Mine, rather. Susie, in keeping with the style of the day, had short hair. I enjoyed the feeling, but didn't like it constantly getting in my eyes. So I tied in a couple extra orange hair ribbons, and it stayed put.

I turned around to watch the land skim by as we made for Phoenix , nestled up against South Mountain and winding around to the Sierra Estrellas. The city numbered about fifty thousand, half the population of the valley. I could feel the excitement of exploration and new experience rising up in me.

We were approaching the span that marked the Salt River , so I tugged on Susie's sleeve.

"Could you slow down on the bridge?" I shouted over the wind. "I want to see if there are any swimming places as we go over. You know, for later." She checked to be sure the proximity sensor was set, then nodded, and the craft slowed down.

We crept out over the span, giving us a spectacular view into the river. There were a number of people enjoying the water, some on the shores, others tubing. I spotted a couple of wider, sandy areas upstream

that were being used as primitive beaches. The Salt was flowing bright blue and crystal clear. Rachel had said that while they still dammed the river up in the Goldfield Mountains , there was far less demand for the water, so the river flowed constantly now, which kept the water clear.

We reached the other bank and Susie picked up speed. Within a few minutes we had traveled the remaining ten kilometers and were entering Phoenix .

It was nothing like the Phoenix I knew. Cities of this time had changed considerably, and Phoenix was no exception. Since hovercraft were the primary vehicle, they had little need for streets. There were several main thoroughfares, marked by their faint shimmer They were used for orderly entry and exit of the various divisions. =Other than those, there was little organization according to traffic. Instead, the city was set up according to terrain and need.

We skimmed through the outskirts and made for the main complex, set at the western edge of South Mountain . A number of people were out and about, in hovs, on private scooters or just on foot. A few were even using horses. Horses! In this day and age! I could feel my heart racing as we began to blend in with the city.

"Abby?" I turned away from my people watching.

"Yes, Susie?"

"I know I don't need to say this for your sake, but please let me say it for mine."

"About my being a Cue?" I laughed. "That's okay, Susie. I don't mind. I can probably use the lecture anyway. Have at!"

"Thank you. While we're out among the civilians, it's absolutely top priority to keep our identities quiet. Especially yours. Since you're a Cue, you have no rights whatsoever. We've been set up with solid identities and some credit-"

"Really? How much credit?" My ears perked up. Susie's lectures could be boring. I thought the thought again and realized it was just my teenage attitude of superiority and know-it-all state of mind that made me want to tune her out. Knowing that from a mature point of view was easy, but disciplining myself to actually listen was very hard.

"Enough. Don't go wild, or I'll put you on an allowance. So help me I will. I don't care if you're the smartest Cue this side of the twenty-seventh century or if you're the point man for Company A. You watch your spending! Our quarters are small enough without you cramming in more things."

"Okay! I know. Now let's get out and walk around! There's a spot over there to park it."

"Let me finish! Brat. Look, we can have a lot of fun in the next week. I'm not here to just baby-sit you, I'm here to get some R&R as well. But you *must* be careful, Abby! Don't let your knowledge slip out, or your history, especially your ancient phrases. They're always a dead giveaway. And whatever you do, *don't fight!*"

"Get real, Susie! I didn't come all this way to fight somebody. But if it's brought to me, what can I do? A girl has to defend herself." I patted the inside of my thigh. "That's why I brought along-"

"*What?* You brought a gun? Give it to me this instant! You're not old enough to have a permit! OH! I'm going to kill Dusty when we get back! Let's have it."

I was very tempted to argue with her, but kept enough of my good sense and obedience to do as she said. I pulled it free from under my skirt and handed it over. I couldn't resist one last try though.

"So what do I do if we get in trouble, Susie? Cry?"

She looked the gun over briefly and stored it in a secure compartment. We had come to a stop, but the sight/sound privacy shield was on.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, you do. Look, Abby, I know you're better than I am in a fight-"

"I'm lots better."

"Listen! All right, you're lots better. But if you show *any* of your skills out here, it's over! You'll be spotted for what you are in a second. Both as a dog and as a Cue. There's no other way a girl your age can have your abilities. The local law is very tolerant of the Resistance. They'll even cover for us. But NATech is everywhere. You *will* get caught. And then I'll get caught." She took a breath, then spoke slowly to drive home each word. "And then the Kovins will get caught."

That blew the cool wind of reason over me. Susie and I could handle ourselves. Maybe Thomas and Rachel could handle themselves. But they lived here. If we messed up, they might escape, but at the cost of abandoning their home. I hung my head, suddenly sobered and more than a little ashamed.

"I didn't even think of them! I'm sorry, Susie. You're right. I will be very careful. I promise. If we have any problems, I'll let you handle them."

"Good!" She reached out a hand and lifted my chin. "Hey, no frowns, poppet! We won't have any problems, this is leave!"

Cheered up-my emotional barometer made a roller coaster ride look like a lazy afternoon nap-we locked up the hov and headed for the mall.

Shopping! I had little use for the experience back then. Go in, get it, leave. I had been very well paid by NATech so I didn't worry about price, just speed and convenience. I missed the whole point. The countless differences between then and now continued to amaze me.

Whether it was the change of gender, my youth, or just the fact I hadn't had leave in *forever*, I don't know. But now I got the point. We wandered around from shop to shop in the market place. The idea of stores is pretty much unchanged over thousands of years. The malls now had reverted back to being individual shops located close together outside. This one was more of a marketplace than a mall. The desert terrain remained in the tight places between the shops, and there were also many open areas, private homes, eateries and desert parks. The entire area was treated with a faint cooling field, just enough to take the edge off the heat without affecting the native flora and fauna. It was the perfect place for two girls with time and credits to spend on relaxation. And Phoenix knew it, too.

Phoenix was also the perfect place for a couple of Resistance dogs to spend their time and credits. NATech was the equivalent of Earth's government, but it in fact wasn't a government of any sort. They ruled by might. The official power of government was in the hands of local municipalities. Due to massive emigration to the stars, the Terran/Martian Wars of three centuries ago, and the restrictions NATech imposed on immigration, the population on Earth had dwindled to a little less than one billion. NATech kept that number pretty well set, calculating it to be the greatest number they could have the greatest influence over with the least relative effort. Like a power-mad dictator, they didn't want to govern. They wanted to control.

So each of the smaller governing areas, towns and cities mostly, took on the flavor and attitudes of their populations. Denver , London , Bonn , Sydney , Hetical, Raven, San Paulo, and many other cities, took on the flavor of NATech. Many more cities had neutral feelings about the conflict between NATech and the Resistance. And a few cities were openly in favor of the Resistance, but remained passively so. NATech couldn't bring punishment against the city without bringing unwanted attention to itself and its control.

Phoenix was one of the latter cities. The people were very supportive of the Resistance, and their government reflected that. They reasoned that since NATech had placed themselves above the law, the law was not bound to serve NATech. In other words, what NATech had done to the Cue population, Phoenix did to NATech. If soldiers of the Resistance wanted to come to Phoenix , a blind eye and helping hand was turned to them. NATech received only the barest, minimal, required cooperation. As long as you didn't volunteer information, Phoenix didn't ask.

We spent the rest of the morning going to stores, looking at the latest fashions, and trying on endless numbers of outfits. Susie was bitten pretty bad by the shopping bug too, and by our second trip to the hov she had nearly as many things as I did. It wasn't too much, but we were going to have to slow down some. Two more days of this and we'd need to make a couple of trips to ship the clothes back to base.

Susie snapped on the hov's security shield, and we walked back to the market place. She was in a very

light mood. It was only the first day, and I could see the effect our leave had already had on her. I had not seen her this relaxed in a long time.

"How about we pick up some lunch? I'm in the mood now for some of those burritos you were munching on this morning."

So we stopped at one of the outdoor eateries and sampled the local cuisine. I ordered some tacos and had a cup of liquid that Susie called Wondaire. It was a little like soda pop, but not quite as sweet. It tasted a little like fruit. The most surprising thing was that it got colder after you swallowed it. Different.

While we were eating, I noticed a couple of men at a nearby table watching us. They seemed openly interested. One was tall and thin, the other more average in build. They each looked strong. Both of them were kind of cute, but there was something about them that didn't feel right.

"Susie?" I asked, keeping my voice low, and talking through my taco.

"I see them, Abby. They started tailing us about an hour ago."

An hour! I had only just spotted them. I was having too much fun, and had let my guard slip. I said as much to Susie.

"Don't worry about it. In fact, I'm glad you did let your guard down. It shows me you're having a good time. And it's exactly the way you're supposed to behave. Normal teenagers don't have a very keen sense of awareness outside their immediate interest. Don't be upset with yourself, Abby. You're just acting your age."

"I suppose. There's something about them that doesn't feel right."

"Good girl. I get the same feeling. They're either NATech goons or local jerks. I can't tell which." Yes, she could, I told myself. She tried to hide her protectiveness of me, but I was learning to see it. This was one of those times.

"You think they're Rippers, don't you?" I felt a lump in my throat just saying the word. Rippers were people who hunted Cues, sharded Cues and discarded ripes to attack. The shards made the best victims. Since we had no rights and were considered beneath the law, they could attack with impunity. Our only defense was that we could also fight back without fear of the law since Cues are not held responsible for any of their actions. Ripes and shards had the worst of it because they were usually physically or mentally unable to cope.

"They're too obvious to be NATech. And they look just a little too much at ease to be just local lads, um ... what's that term?"

"Hitting on us?"

"Yes. Hitting on us. I shouldn't say that. I'm breaking my own rules by using archaic speech. Anyway, Abby, the answer's yes. I'm afraid that they are Ripers. We'll have to be very careful."

"Okay," I said meekly, and with more than a little fear. That pretty much ended today's fun. Maybe the week's. I'd have to be so careful not to slip up that it would be as bad as being on a mission. It made me angry at them.

Then I realized I *was* angry at them. Those jerks! My sense of indignation was pretty easily set off. No doubt it was my immaturity, so I tried to push it down. Wait! I was supposed to act my age, Susie said. Maybe that's just what was needed here.

"No! Let's not be careful, Susie," I suddenly decided. "Let's take it right to them! How quickly can Thomas get a couple of his people over here?"

She stared at me, setting down her burrito, stunned. "What did you say?"

"Thomas. I'm sure they have people for just this sort of occasion. How quickly can they get here?" Ruin my fun, would they?

"They have a number of members on standby. I think they can have a team here in less than five minutes. But how ... how did you know..."

"Hey, give me some credit." I tapped my head. "It's not all air up there, you know. Two girls on leave in a strange town? One of them a Cue? Of course they're going to keep a watchful eye on us. Susie, get hold of Thomas and have a couple of their people over here pronto. Make them tough, good actors, and ready to fight for our honor." I put down my taco and stood up, straightening my hair.

"What do you mean, fight for our honor? Abby! Come back!" she called after me, but I wasn't listening.

Their table was only a few meters from ours, so I walked over to them, putting a smile on my lips and an extra slink in my step. When I stopped in front of them, I put my hands behind my back and smiled shyly. They were openly leering. I felt dirty.

"Hi, boys! I hope I'm not being too forward, but my girlfriend and I were watching you watching us. Did you want to get together for some fun?"

To say I caught them off guard would be understating it. If I had turned into a mermaid in front of their eyes they wouldn't have been more surprised. I giggled at their stares and sat down very close to the one with the average build. I smiled at him.

"We've only come into town, from Albuquerque , and we were hoping to spot a couple of guys with some local knowledge. Are you both from here?" I looked hopefully and earnestly into his eyes.

"Yes! er, yes, we're both from locals. I mean, we're both locals." He could have just arrived from the moon and he would have said yes.

"Oh, good! Maybe we can hang out with you two today." I put my hand on his leg, high up. A vein in his neck started throbbing. "And maybe tonight, too. I mean, this evening."

They were flabbergasted. They had undoubtedly picked me out as a Cue, and no doubt had a ready-made scheme to get me away from Susie. And now, here I was, throwing myself at them. The one I was next to bought it hook, line and sinker. The other wasn't so sure.

"Nice try, girlie, but you're not fooling me. We've been watching you! You're a Cue. Me an' Derrick have..."

"Derrick! What a nice name!" I cut him off before he went too far. I needed to keep them off balance. I stopped and looked tried to look stupid. "A Cue? Isn't that one of those people that are other stuff, too? No, I'm not a Cue. My name's Gail!" I pointed over at Susie who had just finished her lunch, and other things no doubt. "And that's my best friend, Josie. Josie! Get over here and meet Derrick and ... and..."

"Sean. Look, maybe we made a mistake." He stood up abruptly. "Derrick, let's get out of here."

Derrick didn't want to get out of here. I was practically hanging on him now, my arms around his shoulders. He made a feeble effort to rise, but I just squeezed his shoulders gently and he settled down. Or at least most of him did.

"Please, Sean!" I pleaded. "You can talk to me a little longer, can't you? I mean, we've only just met, and we need someone to show us around..."

"Gail!" Susie said cheerfully. She'd obviously heard my name. She should have, I said it loud enough. "Look what you've got! You're going to share, aren't you?" Susie stepped up to the taller one and smiled at him, squeezing his arm. Whatever alarm bells he had going off in his head were drowned out by the blood roaring in his ears.

"Well, maybe we can show you girls a good time. You're just as good as what we were looking for, anyway."

"Wrong, Sean. We're better." Susie could really throw herself into the act.

"Heh. Yeah, I'd say so. Come on, let's go find some place to be alone." Derrick put his arm around my

waist and pulled me onto his lap.

"What's going on here?" A rough voice behind me said. Thomas must have been keeping a very close watch to have someone here so quick.

"Oh! Gail, look! Yergo is here!"

I jumped up out of Derrick's lap and spun around. Thomas had sent two guys all right, cleverly disguised as one. Yergo was huge, with blond hair, a thick mustache and an indignant look on his face. I gasped and ran to him.

"Yergo! Josie and I were only making friends. Boys, this is Yergo. He's from Albuquerque , too." I looked at Yergo, "Be nice! Don't hurt him like the last guy."

"Last guy?" Derrick's face went white. Any thought they had about my being a Cue had vanished. "Look, uh, Yergo, this is all a misunderstanding! We didn't mean..."

"You didn't mean what? Are you fooling around with my sister?" He put an arm around me and held me like a brother would. I looked up and cried out loud, beating futilely on his massive chest. This guy was built like the Rock of Gibraltar. With hair.

"Yergo! You promised! No more beatings! Leave them alone! Can't Josie and I have a nice time without you breaking people's bones? Derrick's nice! He said he and Sean were going to show Josie and me a good time today." I paused for just a split second. "And tonight."

"What?" Yergo exploded. "I've heard enough! I'm gonna rip..."

But it was too late. Derrick and Sean broke and ran. They looked as though they had forgotten something in Tucson and were in a hurry to go get it. They didn't even bother looking back. The scene we'd made had a dozen people openly smiling. It would have been funny if it weren't so pathetic and slightly sickening. I thought about the way they had looked at me and shuddered. I had learned my lesson; I would hide my Cue status very carefully from now on.

"Yergo" felt my shudder and hugged me with his powerful arm. I looked up at him.

"Looks like they had another appointment. Thanks for the help! But Susie and I still don't have anyone to show us the sights."

Susie slid under his other arm. "We do now! Abigail, meet Steve. Steve, Abigail."

Steve grinned, obviously pleased to be our bodyguard and tour guide.

"How do you do, Abigail? I'm glad to be of service."

"Please. Call me Abby. Steve's a nice name." I smiled up at him. "Certainly better than Derek."

Chapter Four

Just as they had been last night, the stars were countless pinpoints of light, pouring their luminescence onto the desert floor. There was no moon, and I could easily make out the Milky Way, spreading like a glowing, glittering gossamer across the sky.

It was very late, perhaps two or three a.m. Susie and the Kovins were fast asleep. I had turned in early after our exciting day out, but was now wide awake. I wanted some undisturbed time alone with Mike, and now was perfect.

The hov opened at my voice, and I stepped in and seated myself at the terminal. I asked for sight/sound privacy and heard the soft sigh as the hov secured itself. I activated the terminal, adjusting it to widest field, boosting the feedback channels to maximum. I had some serious work to do in the next few hours. And some serious fun.

"Access."

The hove exploded with a roar. Groucho popped up in front of me and bowed.

"Good evening, ladies and germs."

"Hiya, Groucho! Seen Mike around?"

The puterverse was springing up all around us, shooting beams of solid light in every direction, painting floors and skies of wild textures and color schemes. There were no barriers to be seen anywhere. Beneath our feet, a massive chasm yawned open and the distant floor flew up at us, shifting from fog to mist to ice before shattering. The jagged pieces tore through the chasm walls, ripping open passageways, doors, and access portals. They all glowed gentle green. Groucho was unimpressed.

"Soitenly my dear. He's been moping for a week now. I wish he were mopping, this place could use a cleaning. He'll be around shortly. Which isn't surprising, he's not that tall."

"Quack!" said the duck.

"Thanks, Groucho. See ya." He and his duck wandered off and were swallowed up by a tidal wave of data that turned into a massive cave the instant the crest hit the shimmering floor.

I held out my left hand and snapped my fingers. A delicate pink stem came out of the ground. Its petals opened and revealed a terminal. Standing on the keyboard was Kiki. She jumped up and down when she saw me, clapping her hands.

"Abby! You're back! Hooray!!" she screamed, her tiny voice sounding like a beautifully tuned violin.

"Hiya, Kiki! I'm glad to be back! It's been a rough time the past week."

"I know. Mike told me that he heard from one of the Fleshes that you were a c-c-c-crazy lady." She twirled her finger alongside her head.

"Now where did you learn to do that? As if I didn't know."

"From Mike, where else?" she laughed, and the whole area hummed and brightened. Kiki hugged herself and twirled. "He's so dreamy!"

"Hey, calm down. You're not ready for a crush. Remember the last time?"

"I didn't mean to do that! Besides, you only had to snap your fingers to get another terminal. It's not like it Flesh-melted." Mike and Kiki, the only puterverse creatures with high enough thinking capacity to understand there was a reality outside the puterverse, referred to my world as Flesh, a concept they could grasp but not visualize. Since any Flesh, as we were called, took on the physical attributes of energy beings in the puterverse, they didn't have an example. Even the scenes that we called up of the real world here in their reality couldn't be viewed by them in the way we saw them. I wanted to fix that some day.

"That's not the point. If you get another flash like that again, I might lose my hands as well as the terminal. Be patient, Kiki. You're not ready for love. I don't know who ever is," I pined, my thoughts touching on Aaron. "Just wait, it'll come soon enough." Kiki was my little sister, sort of, so she was my responsibility. "Now pop up the Tri-file."

Kiki turned her back to me and spread her arms out. A holo display came up and covered the tidal wave, which was still fluid but confined. A stream of numbers started shooting by. On occasion, a starburst of data would obscure the stream, then fade into the back ground. I grabbed some of it, but most of the scroll was too fast.

"Okay, okay. Just give me the high points. Need any help?" Kiki was also my main programmer. Like Mike, she was a creature composed of pure unbound trinary code and was a real whiz at its workings.

"Some," she admitted. "I got stuck in twelve places." She looked downcast. "Sorry, Abby." Always

eager to please, was my Kiki, and always sad when unable.

"Don't be, Kiki. Only twelve out of 4.1 billion? That's very good!" I reached two fingers down and rubbed her head. She smiled up at me. "Let's see them."

We spent the next ten minutes straightening out my code. After my first shard two years ago, I had somehow gained the ability to read and understand programming and code at an exceptional level. I had a hunch it was a left over from the shard, but I couldn't be sure. The last thing I remembered was curling up on the laundry room floor, feeling sick and disjointed as Jackson goaded me deeper into the episode. Then there were bits and snatches, more like half-dreams, of some of the things I had thought and experienced and been, but I had only impressions, no real memories. And then I woke up to Susie's crying. But somewhere in those three weeks, I had gained this skill. And something else. I knew how to program in trinary code. Not that pseudo junk. I'm talking full unbound.

Unbound trinary coding was theoretically impossible, but I was now able to incorporate twos into the streams of zeros and ones that made up the puterverse. What did that do? It increased calculation capability by two orders of magnitude, while allowing for a great reduction in amount of coding. But most of all, it gave computers, their programs rather, something that could never happen. It gave them judgment. Real judgment. And once judgment was achieved, the door opened for emotion, learning, intuition, even completely independent thought. It was a very dangerous knowledge. So far, I had used it only for small things, like access keys, worm programs, and area design. And thousands of puterverse bombs. The only two major projects that I had used it with was when designing Mike and Kiki. Were they life forms? No, only the Almighty can create life. But they were something more than computer, something more than the sum of their parts. What, I didn't know.

"There! That's the last one! Run the debugger, Kiki, and let's wrap this up. I can't wait to give it to Mike."

"Okay, Abby! Running debugger. Debugger operation complete. Accuracy of program is estimated to be pure, with contamination at less the one part in 698 trillion." She opened her arms again, the maestro in front of her orchestra. "Compiling."

The vast display wave collapsed in on itself. It groaned and twisted and grew darker. It began trembling as it receded further and further. I began to feel myself being sucked toward it, so I pulled up a rail between me and it.

When it could collapse no further, it initiated a structured oscillated implosion with the trinary code aligning along the fifth axis. Soundless, it faded, leaving only a shower of sparkles suspended a meter off the ground. Kiki jumped down and skated over. Stopping underneath it, she raised her arms. Being only twenty centimeters high, she had to wait for it to finish. The sparkles faded and dropped down, and Kiki was holding a lovely diamond. She carried it over and offered it to me.

I bent over, accepting it. The many hundreds of facets glittered and glowed as the trinary code inside flashed and rolled beneath the surface. It was in constant motion and gave out many colors and scents, daffodil being the strongest. I placed it against my chest, and it bonded to my body, settling in the middle of my chest.

"Oh! That's gorgeous, Abigail! It makes you look so beautiful!" I looked at the reflection on the frozen wave. The diamond had made my form become much more mature, and the light yellow light I normally gave out had deepened to gold. Kiki had a puterverse view of everything, but she was right, I was beautiful.

"Thanks, Kiki! I'm going to see Mike now! I'll catch you later. 'Bye!'" I started off toward the most likely location I'd find him: our spot.

"Bye, Abby!" she shouted, standing on tiptoe. "Tell him hi from me!" She leapt easily up to the top of the flower terminal and lay on the interface. The petals closed up and the stem sank gracefully back into the ground. Inside, Kiki would already be dreaming of her imagined romance with Mike.

As I strolled away from my little corner of the puterverse, the barriers began appearing. I left them alone, unworried by their oppressiveness. I had come a long way from my first explore of this world with Susie and Raul. It had been dark and depressing and very intimidating then, though I wouldn't admit it. I remember how frustrating those walls had been then. Now that I was accessing at unlimited level, they didn't exist for me. One day, they wouldn't exist for anyone.

But I had little interest in them now. It was Mike I wanted to see. I had missed him this last week. I missed his wit, his flippant attitude and his banter. Most of all, I missed his frank openness. He called them as he saw them, which was pretty typical of a teenager with a high opinion of himself. Typical teen characteristics I could also apply to myself. He was always a challenge. I enjoyed challenges.

I lost patience with walking, so I opened my arms out wide and jumped lightly into the air. My arms poured out light trails behind them, stretching down my sides and sweeping in toward my feet, where they joined before tapering off further along. The light trail caught the atmosphere, then crystallized and became wings. Since the atmosphere of the puterverse was not air but instead ambient energy, my wings were solar, not aerial wings. Lifting myself by will power and the energy sources now at my command, I rose to several hundred meters above the surface.

I knew where I was and where I wanted to go. A good five kilometers ahead and a little off to my right, I spied the Quantum River, its vast width such that the opposite shore could only be imagined. I swung over for it and let my wings push me along quietly on the electron breeze. Below me, I saw the hazy outlines of the black barriers that chopped the plain into small pieces. Here, they were only smooth blotches on the floor of the puterverse. At lower levels, they formed an unsolvable maze. I'd long since learned it was no accident. The barriers reached up about fifty meters. If they became aware of my presence, they would rise up even higher in an effort to cut off my progress. But they never did, for I had

UTC, and they were useless against me. I had been moving with impunity for just over a year now.

I doubled the length of my wingspan so my newly formed arms now reached two meters on each side. Sharpening the edges of my feathers a little, I increased efficiency of electron collection. My rate of speed quadrupled and I shot off toward the Quantum. As I approached the river, I turned downstream, putting the river on my right. I flew toward a hazy landmark, at least twenty kilometers away. It was a partially completed span, arcing out a small distance over the river. At the base of it was our spot, where I knew Mike would be. Even at this great distance, I could make out a slight green glimmer. Anxious and impatient to greet him, I pushed myself even faster.

I angled down two minutes later, coming in for a landing. He was reclining on a bench beside the river, staring into its depths, but jumped to his feet when he saw me. Five meters above the ground, I abruptly altered back into my normal form. My wings silently exploded like fireworks, and the released energy dissipated in the electron breeze. I fell to the ground, landing lightly on my feet. In the puterverse, you can do pretty much whatever you've got the imagination, know-how, and guts to do. I didn't really even need the wings. But they were pretty and gave a visual manifestation of what I desired. I straightened and ran to Mike. I stopped just short of him, and we faced each other at about two meters distant. He smiled, a bright burst of light escaping from his mouth.

"Well, it's about time!" he complained lightheartedly, more joy and relief in his voice than annoyance. "You've been driving me crazy."

"Short trip," I giggled.

"Wow! That's quite a hot body you've got! Hubba! Hubba!" he observed with his normal crudity. "You must be packed with code." He laughed and held out his arms.

"Pervert. Ready?" He nodded and closed his eyes, the turquoise gleam in them disappearing.

I lightly tapped, then brushed my fingers along the diamond at my chest. It started to shine. My body glow went from gold back to its normal bright yellow, my mature form returning to its normal state. The diamond began pulsing, matching my heartbeat. I waited until I could actually hear the pulsing, then threw my arms wide and pressed my hands against Mike's.

Upon contact, our bodies began to meld together. In the puterverse, I didn't have a physical body of course. No one did. So an energy form was used instead. As such, my appearance was quite different than my real body. I kept the same height and dimensions as normal. (Okay, so maybe I fudged a bit on my bust, upping it a few centimeters. A girl has her vanity.) But that was about the end of the similarities. I was complete energy top to bottom, and glowed. My toes were gone, having become part of my feet, as though I was wearing a pair of twenty-first century pantyhose. My hair stayed in its braided pigtail, but looked no different in texture than the rest of me. Since my intimate features, except for the general outline of my hips and breasts, were also gone, there was no such thing as physical

modesty, so I wore no clothes. But I wasn't naked. There, confused enough?

Our forms began blending together. Wherever we touched, our colors folded together into brilliant lavender. First our hands, then our legs and arms, then our lower torsos. The entire landscape had taken on a purple hue, soaking up our excess energies. We were almost touching at our chests, both of us staring at the diamond still embedded in my chest.

The diamond began pulsing with my heartbeat. The bits and bursts of data were cascading and bubbling inside. Slowly, the light grew brighter. The raging cauldron of trinary code eroded the diamond casing from the inside. Without forming a single flaw, the diamond took on a look of fragile splendor. The pulse of the diamond quickened, as the beauty of it excited my heartbeat.

I looked around, feeling dazed and lightheaded, but happy. The landscape had become a sea of purple, with flashes of white lacing through it. Mike was leaning back, trying to contain my energy as well as his, preparing both of us for the final moment, which had nearly arrived. I felt our bodies tighten, and his head snapped forward. His eyes, blazing with the sharpest violet, looked into my eyes, waiting for my approval.

The diamond had now reached the moment of disintegration. Its surface was webbed with thousands of fractures, all in an exquisite, perfect pattern. Inside was a deep glow that had begun building, as though it was the beginning of a new star. I looked back up at Mike and nodded. He closed his eyes and pulled my body into him.

We slipped into one form, neither him nor me, yet both. I felt two heartbeats. I looked at my hand, his hand. I jumped into the air, the action coming just before the thought. I looked down at my-our form. Our curves and feminine form had diminished, but were still evident. Deep inside our translucent form was the diamond. Even as I watched, the glow suddenly surged. We now had one heartbeat. The moment of sharing had arrived.

But it didn't explode. Instead, the diamond shrank for a moment, then expanded quickly out, filling every square centimeter of my-his body. I slipped to my knees, then his hands, and then slumped completely to the violet ground as the sensation of billions of pieces of trinary code enhanced and intensified his-my existence. I-He twisted and writhed on the deep purple carpet. He-I moaned with a delicious pain as everything I-he understood about life and the puterverse was explained to me-him, then doubled. The event was becoming too much for me-him. He-I had to separate. I-He remained another moment though, drawn by the exquisite agony of having his-my very being laid completely open to him-her.

Finally, when I-he could stand it no longer, I pulled gently away from him-her. As I struggled to my feet, he remained on the ground. The lavender washes and liquid purples of the area began showing flecks of green, and bolts of yellow. I eased my foot clear of his, breaking the bond, and the landscape snapped abruptly back to its normal coloration. My yellow glow returned, as did his green glow. But it

was a little brighter now, with a hint of white in the middle of his chest.

I fell to my hands and knees, gasping and exhausted by the experience. Cool needles of electrons tickled in my throat as I deeply sucked in the energy atmosphere. I resisted the temptation to lie down and instead waited out the recharging.

Mike was lying on his back, spread-eagled. He was staring up into the void of the black interface, gasping from our efforts. I crawled beside him and lifted his head onto my lap. He looked at me, then closed his eyes, temporarily weakened by the experience. Since it was my code that we shared, I always recovered faster than he did. We had been using this method of programming for some time now. Trinary code not only bestowed judgment on the program, it constantly modified itself, using its container as a model. I didn't want either Mike or Kiki to be robots, so I always transferred the code to them by bonding our energy forms, holding the trinary code the entire time, allowing it to use me as the model for its modifications. By becoming one being during sharing-download was too impersonal-there was no risk of outside contamination. It was also a very intimate time to communicate and know each other.

Mike's eyes fluttered open and he smiled at me. He said something, but his voice was too low. Worried I may have given him too much code, weakening him to a dangerous point, I bent my ear to his mouth.

"Thanks, honey. Was it as good for you as it was for me?"

I gasped and threw him off. He laughed and rolled over to his knees. That smirk was too much, so I belted him across the face. I got to my feet and glared down at him while he rubbed his jaw.

"You ... you ... pervert! OH! I can't stand you sometimes! What we had was beautiful! And you have to go..."

"Hey, hey! Abby, don't blow your RAM. I was just kidding. Geez, you can be real touchy sometimes."

"Well, why shouldn't I be? I gave you some of my best code ever. And Kiki almost worked herself into a head crash, trying to get it perfect for you. And then you have the gall to talk about it like it was sleazy cybersex! Of course I'm mad!" I stamped my foot, the floor fracturing with fissures of blazing yellow. If I could cry, I would have been on the verge of tears. He must have heard that in my voice, for he became very contrite.

"I'm sorry, Abigail. You're right. It was crude of me and I apologize." He looked at me directly in the eyes. He peered as though he knew exactly what he would find. "It's that shard thing, isn't it?"

I stared back at him for a minute, then went into his open arms. You could cry in the puterverse, after all. I sobbed and sobbed, sad that he had ruined our time, and sad that I had ruined our time, too.

He didn't know quite what to do, so he just waited, patting me on my back.

"How did you know?" I asked quietly. He held me by my shoulders at arm's length and gazed into my eyes, smiling a crooked smile.

"How did I know? Goose! Everything I am is because of you. You know better than I do how much of you is in me. That's why it's so easy to get your goat." His voice softened. "And why it's so easy for me to know what's bothering you. You're mad at yourself for not seeing me for a week aren't you?" I nodded, casting my eyes down.

"Well, don't be. I understand. I like to bug you about your weird guy/girl life, but I won't ever be mean about your sharding. I promise. I do have some tact, after all I just like to save it for special occasions."

"Thank you, Mike. I appreciate that. And I'm sorry about blowing up at you."

"Hey, that's okay. I'll be a little more careful next time. Do you want to talk about it?"

Surprisingly, I did. So we strolled down the riverbank and I told him everything that had happened while *she* was me. Unlike my other friends, even Susie, I told Mike everything. Why not? He was made by me to be a helper and confidant. Originally, he was a puter version of me in every sense. Unbound trinary code was changing him, though, and he was more his own being. But we were still as close as identical twins. Closer, maybe.

I finished telling him about my episode, and he remained quiet. It's difficult to read facial expressions on energy beings. Their features are blurry and have the same color patterns, eddies and illuminations as their general forms. But he looked upset. When he spoke, I knew I was right.

"Why would anyone turn a Flesh into a trained idiot, good only for sex? It doesn't make any sense."

"Some people get a false feeling of power by turning others, very often women, into playthings. By turning lovemaking into an act instead of an expression, they think they can have the enjoyment without the commitment."

"I don't understand. Why wouldn't you want commitment? That's the whole point of intimacy. Without commitment there can't be real enjoyment."

"You're absolutely right. Not everyone sees that, though. You see, Mike, in my world, there are many flawed people. In fact, we are all flawed. And sometimes..."

"You're not flawed, Abigail. Except for that sharding stuff, and that's not-"

"You're wrong, Mike. I'm flawed just like everyone else. More so, in some ways."

"But you created me, Abby!" he protested. "That makes you my--"

"Don't say it, Mike! I'm not your god! I refuse to be called that!"

"But you made me! Kiki, too!"

"That's true. But that doesn't change the fact that I'm not God. God is a very specific, very loving being, perfect in every way, and our Creator. Yours, too, though He used me to make you, just like he uses other women to bring life into the Flesh world." I giggled. "I guess that make me your mother!"

He laughed. "Mommy! Does this mean I get an allowance now?" His brow wrinkled. "Say, doesn't that make our little rollarounds kinda like Oedipus Rex?"

"Hey, put a sock in that stuff or I'll slug you again. No, it doesn't! Those 'rollarounds' bring us very close, even intimate, but I've never thought of it as sex, and you shouldn't either."

"Sorry. I guess it's my hormones."

"You haven't got any hormones. I do, and I sometimes wish I didn't. They can mess up your head pretty bad. Now let's get off this tangent. You're making me a little uncomfortable."

"Ha! I knew it!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "That's because you are worried about them, aren't you, Abby? You're thinking maybe they really *are* something more than you say. Admit it!"

He had me pegged. I thought exactly that. I was tempted to slug him again, but I didn't. Partially because doing so would prove him right, and partially because of the smile on his face. He wasn't smirking because he had me figured out. He was happy because I was thinking about it. And that meant, to him, that he was worth considering. It struck me that I had should have seen this coming, but I had never really thought that much about the relationship between us from a boy/girl point of view. Our relationship had started out as maker and product. It had progressed quickly with the trinary coding to teacher, student, then helper. For months now we had been friends, but had it crossed the line? Did he see me as a woman? He really did have feelings for me. Romantic, loving feelings. And now he was daring to hope that perhaps I had them for him.

It was impossible. I was flesh, he was energy. But impossibility never deterred emotions. How could I even think about having those kind of thoughts? Aaron was the one who filled my thoughts. Aaron! Just his name made me warm and weak. But Mike? I just didn't know. And that was a little scary.

I didn't have to tell him that, though, so I changed the subject.

"Let's scrounge up a fight, Mike. I'm aching to see you try out your new programming."

"Unfair!" he whined. "You can't change the subject like that!"

"Yes, I can. I'm a girl and girls can change the subject, their minds, and their hair whenever they feel like it. It's called woman's prerogative, and I'm using it."

"Are you sure about that?" he asked suspiciously. "Seems like guys should get the same freedom, too."

"Sorry, but it's girls only." I smiled wickedly. "But if you want me to, I can change your programming, Mike. Maybe you'd be a little nicer as a girl. We could call you Michele. Kiki wouldn't like it at first, but--"

"No! No way!" he waved his hands. "You're not touching my energy imprints! Unlike you, I get a choice in this, and I like it just the way I am. Okay, I give! You can change the subject any time you want."

"How chivalrous of you, Mike! Now, what's going on around here?"

* * * *

We spent the next couple hours raising a ruckus around the puterverse. Mike and I knew as much as we did about the puterverse because we weren't afraid to poke around where we weren't supposed to. As I said, you can do whatever you've got the guts and know-how to get away with. That was the problem with adults. They saw the puterverse as an artificial environment, created by a man centuries ago to provide easy and coordinated access to data.

Fortunately, Mike and I weren't adults. We had a ball. He had explored a lot when I was gone, but saved the really good stuff for our times together. With our use of UTC, we could go almost anywhere with impunity. Strike that. We could go absolutely anywhere with impunity. And we did, too. Private files, local government, credit banks, you name it. Even a few risqué places Mike knew about. I don't think he really liked them; he really meant it when he said he didn't understand enjoyment without commitment. But I know he got a kick out of watching my glow turn pink when we "stumbled" into someone's red light district. I didn't tell him that I had added that pink blush to my aural programming to please him.

But the main target of our fun was NATech. I took savage pleasure in-I won't use the word I'm thinking-messing them up. NATech employed fully ten percent of the world's population, so we had lots to choose from. With the reckless abandon of youth, we gave lower servant-status employees massive raises, then tied the files back to the main bank, causing hours of downtime while they chased bugs. We rewrote critical memos, fired hotshots, scheduled quadruple shifts for attack units just about to go on leave. My favorite stunt was patching secured lines into the news media. The fourth estate wasn't gone, but it was strictly controlled. I had always seen the media as amoral: neither good nor bad, just in

existence. It could be used, even manipulated, for one or the other. I gave it an opportunity to use itself for good.

While we had our little joy rides, though, we also worked. With Mike acting as my courier, I had begun placing traps and data mines throughout every section of NAtch. I also planted a number of spawning grounds. I left them there to incubate, feeding on partially disabled trinary code. When I had finally crossed the Quantum River, and found what I suspected I'd find, I would unleash them, and they would rip through the NAtch webbing, destroying everything they touched. I didn't particularly enjoy this kind of wholesale destruction, but I liked their wholesale control of our planet and our lives even less.

We were heading over to NAtch Antarctic site-I was really interested in finding out how our team did on the recent raid-when Mike called out and suddenly stopped in midair. He used ion thrust to move around, much more spectacular than my solar wings, and left a five hundred meter trail behind him. I followed behind and lower, so when I saw the trail shorten, I knew he had stopped. I shifted my feathers and climbed up to him, calling for a platform. It came shooting up underneath him fast enough that I had a landing area. I touched down and released my wings.

"What's up?" I asked, a little breathless. This far from the interface surface, the connection was more difficult to maintain. It wasn't bad, but the electrons were a bit thin up here.

"I just picked up a nearby distress signal, Abby! A couple of dogs from the Seventeenth are on leave in Phoenix, and they've just been ID'd by NAtch goons!"

"Oh, no! How bad is it? Can you establish contact?"

"I think so. But I'm going to need some of your energy." I nodded, stepped up to him and grasped his forearm. Yellow energy flowed from me into him, lightening his green aura while intensifying it. I gasped with pain and clutched a rail. Normally, giving him extra power was not a problem, but this soon after data sharing made it more difficult. But Mike needed this extra energy to boost our signal. He called up a smooth surface the size of a plate. I looked into the solid, dark surface.

There was a great deal of static. I could only just make out a couple of faces. Two men, both bloodied. It was dark outside. I heard occasional slug gun fire. I started to speak, then broke off and looked at Mike quickly. They would be less likely to ask for assistance from a girl my age. Mike understood and adjusted the fragment. It didn't look any different, but I knew the men on the other side would be unable to identify me easily. And they would hear my voice in a deeper register.

"Hello! This is Private Abi-Private Wyeth! I'm a dog with the Third! I'm in the puterverse and I picked up your signal! Do you need assistance?"

He peered into the device. "Yes! They chased us up into the White Tanks mountains and we're pinned here! Our hov took damage and is out of commission. We can make out some lights further down the

mountain. I think they're sending a cohort to take us out."

"How are you armed?"

"We've got a couple..." he broke off, remembering protocol. "I'm sorry, I need positive identification from you."

"Look, we haven't got time! I'm only five minutes away if you send your signal. Let me-"

"If you're a real dog, you know the procedure."

He was right. Dogs died before risking their unit. Even if their unit was one person. Yet if I cleared the transmission, he'd know in a second I was a girl, and he'd be unlikely to send the signal then. I needed a disguise.

"Okay. Identification coming through. Stand by."

Taking a deep breath and closing my eyes, I shifted my form. I forced myself to grow taller, more muscular. My shoulders broadened and my chest deepened. Everything feminine about me, even my yellow aura, was abandoned to the disguise. I felt a little sick in my stomach and for a moment feared I might have triggered a sharding episode. But the feeling didn't get worse-or better-and I retained control of myself. I stepped up to the fragment again. The picture was clearer on both ends now. His peering turned into an open look.

"Sorry for the delay. I needed to secure the channel. Sending ID code, now." I pressed my thumb against the fragment, and Mike sent the appropriate ID with sufficient modifications to make me male. I don't know what first name he gave, nor was I going to ask. The other man referred to his readout, and a look of relief came over his face. He returned his ID, Mike verified, and we were ready to fight together as dogs.

"Company A, eh? Great! We can use you! Here's the buoy. Hurry!" The fragment blanked out.

I didn't even wait to let Mike return the fragment to the platform. Feeling uncomfortable and ill, I jumped off. The rushing electrons burned away my repugnant disguise, and I returned to my proper form. I extended my wings and flipped back up into the air, feeling the wonderful flow of my body returning. My aura was back to its light yellow, and I began to feel right again. Glancing back, I noticed Mike was racing after me, his comet trail leaving a bright green streak.

"I've already alerted Susie, released the barriers on the hov, reduced your access field and began the checklist!" he shouted. "Cold start in fifteen seconds! Anything else I can do?"

"Yeah!" I shouted back. "Go mess around with the navigation systems on the NATech hovs. I want

some extra time to get to them!"

"Abby, I can't tap into systems that independent and compact! I don't have the calibration or the ... the..."
A big smile of realization spread slowly across his face. Despite my hurry, I smiled back.

"I think you do, Mike."

"WOW! Now that's code! Let me thank you properly next time! You be careful, Abby! Bye!" He zoomed off to the nearest NATech direct access link.

Kiki was standing on her little terminal platform, waiting for me, when I landed at our home three minutes later. A person can come off line just about anywhere, but you ran a big risk of leaving a traceable signature, even with the extraordinary shielding I had. And my activities were such that I wasn't going give up the war to win a battle. Besides, Susie didn't need me to drive the hov. And Mike would have already told her where to go and how best to get there.

"Abby! Mike told me about the rescue! Susie's already in the hov, and she's asking for you. I told her you'd be out in a minute. What do you need me to do?"

"Kiki, I honestly don't know. If you've got any ideas..."

"I do! I do have an idea, Abby! There's a NATech spy microsat in orbit just over the Florida islands. I think I can reprogram it to hit an area about one hundred meters in front of the last reported position of Kenneth and Wayne. I'll adjust the shields to prevent burnup until the last instant."

"Kiki, are you sure? It would help out a lot. But if you're even one millisecond off the reentry procedure, my next date is with St. Peter."

"I can do it, Abby! I've written some of my own trinary code and I just know I can do it! But you're the boss. You decide." She eagerly waited my decision, hands clasped together, eyes glowing bright pink with hope.

I wanted to think it over, but knew the time wasn't there. I had to go with my gut. Kiki was razor sharp. She wouldn't even suggest this unless she was sure. And though our "rollarounds" as Mike called them were nowhere near as intense, I knew her as intimately as I knew Mike. I made my decision the moment she asked me.

"Do it, Kiki. I trust you completely. Give me a thirty second warning before impact, or if you have to abort."

"Okay! Thanks! Please be careful, Abby!"

"I will, squirt. Mind your decimal places. 'Bye!'" And I logged off.

The hov was hot and shuddering when the interface collapsed. Susie was shooting us over the desert floor at a recklessly high speed. She didn't even look to see how I was doing. All her attention was on the swiftly passing terrain, which was fine with me. At this speed, the proximity alarm would work, but with only a one second warning before collision. A pilot had to be very good and totally focused. Susie was very good, and if I kept my yap shut, she'd stay totally focused. I remained in my terminal seat.

In the distance, through the view screen, I saw the White Tank mountains looming, their bulk a solid black against the lighter, star-studded sky. The city of Glendale resided in the lower foothills and spread out onto the plains east and south of the main ridge. Our friends were further up the northern face, in an open area. I looked up toward their projected position, and sure enough, there were the occasional thin lines that appeared, indicating laser fire. We were still ten kilometers away. Susie opened the hov to full power. The proximity alarm sounded a tone and shut off. We now had no electronic warning device. Susie was putting the hov into battle mode. I felt the thrill of combat rising in me as my beast awoke. I touched the arm's emergency restraint button and a field sprang up around me.

"Activate your ERF, Abby. One minute to full power stop."

"Activated, Susie. I'm ready!"

"Status report."

"Their names are Kenneth Ramsey and Wayne Bourne. They're both on leave from the Seventeenth Air Wing. One's a pilot, the other's his gunner. Ken's been combat active for eight years, Wayne 's a rookie. They're currently armed with slug guns. Maybe enough ammo for ten minutes or so. We need to keep our channel open to the puterverse. I have-"

"No. If they spot our connection, they'll have a sight on our position and can take us out with freak." Freaks were frequency hunter missiles. Small, tenacious, and deadly. But they needed a puterverse signal for their stupid guidance systems to follow.

"We have to risk it, Susie! Kiki and I have a counterattack planned, but I don't know exactly when we can pull it off, or even if. Kiki will give me thirty seconds warning either way. But I just have to keep the link open. I can shield it."

She paused, and I felt the same way Kiki did only minutes ago. Would she trust me on this? It was hard; I was so young. And in a decision like this, my youth counted against me. Susie knew I had the experience, but did I have the judgment? If I took the time to use it, sure. But I didn't always do so these days, and Susie had to determine if this was one of those times. She didn't suspect my ability, she suspected my capability to think things through, to not act out of emotion.

"All right, we'll risk it. I hope ... Hold on!"

Susie jerked back on the controls, and the hov jumped into the air. At almost the same instant, the craft lurched forward, its tail rising up and shuddering. Behind and below us we heard a muffled boom. A close one. The attacking squad must have locked a freak onto the proximity alarm just before it shut off. It narrowly missed us. Fortunately, there seemed to be no harm to the craft.

Instead of lowering the craft down toward the surface, Susie switched it over to flight mode and ascended. The style hov we had could sustain flight for a limited time, but it had a very low ceiling—maybe a hundred meters above the ground—and its broad bottom and heavy McDonald phase unit up front made it a target ground troops drooled over.

We had reached and passed the foothills in a moment and went quickly up the canyon that our friends were trapped in. The signal buoy they had set for us projected their position up on the viewer for Susie. They were about one kilometer ahead.

The hov shuddered again as small arms fire pelted the bottom and sides. Susie snapped on the proximity alarm, then viciously banked the hov to the starboard. She leveled it out for a moment, then angled the craft down sharply toward the steep slope where the fire was coming from. The alarm started screaming, but Susie ignored it. Instead of stars in the viewer, I saw nothing but black, black mountain, peppered with flashes of white laser fire. She was flying us straight into them!

I winced and closed my eyes. I suddenly felt my skin prickle and my throat get dry, and a glow came through my eyelids. I opened my eyes and saw rock and earth pass through us, briefly illuminated in the emergency lighting before flickering out of sight. Susie had activated the phaser! Even as I realized it, my stomach twisted and jerked as the craft, flying on program, veered up and port, heading toward the buoy which was still displayed on the screen. The marker lights were growing quickly, and soon took on the form of two men. They were crouched and firing weapons downhill.

Just when it seemed we were going to phase through them, the craft shuddered and slowed as it executed a full power stop. The images shifted off to the left as the hov selected a landing point immediately behind them. I could say I braced myself, but between the ERF and the glue of phasing, I was pretty well braced already. I wasn't worried about the outside, though. I was worried about my insides. I didn't feel right.

The viewport cleared up and my hands became solid. The hov had come free of the rock and stopped phasing. Simultaneously, it cut all power and thudded to the ground, an inert lump of metal. My field snapped off, and I was thrown to the deck.

Susie jumped out of her seat and raced to the back exit, her gun giving off the high pitch charging tone. In the dim emergency lighting, I saw a gleam in her eyes that betrayed her excitement.

There was no gleam in my eyes. There were tears of pain. I had already found out how hard prolonged phasing is on a person my age. After hours of phased travel, I was left weak, achy and drained of energy. My bones had felt soft and sore, and only a complete collapse of many hours in a bed restored me.

Full power stops were worse. Full power stops immediately after phasing were far worse. Maybe the fact that I had experienced extended phasing only last night compounded the feeling. I didn't know. And at that point, I didn't care.

I was sick. Violently, convulsively sick. My stomach was heaving and my throat and lungs felt like they had razor blades sliding up and down the linings. My hands, feet and ears were being stabbed by thousands of needles, and hot blood was oozing out the punctures. I thrashed on the deck, sobbing and dry retching. If it weren't for the searing pain, I would have passed out. I heard a dim tone in my ears. At first I thought it was another symptom, but it didn't hurt, so I knew I couldn't be. Then I had it; it was my link to the puterverse. That must be ... NO! I wasn't ready!

"Abby! This is Kiki! Thirty seconds! Make sure no-one's looking, or they'll be blinded. Gotta go, bye!" The signal went dead before I could call for an abort.

Thirty seconds. I had to get out and warn them. I rolled to my stomach and tried to raise myself up on my hands and knees. But my hands, though they weren't really bleeding, felt like they had no skin on them, that I was putting my weight on raw flesh. I yelled and fell to my side, having just enough presence of mind to roll toward the door. I made it about halfway from momentum, but everything went completely black for a moment. I snapped to, and realized it wasn't too late. The lip of the hatch was only a meter away. The microsat would hit in seconds.

I only had one choice. Using every ounce of concentration, I looked beyond the pain and stood up. My feet began melting, being burned away by hot coals. Dazed, I looked down in terror, but saw they were still fine. The phasing and abrupt shifting and extreme power down, coupled with my extended stay in the puterverse and the sudden collapse of the ERF must have combined together to have an effect on my already worn nerves. It probably wasn't permanent, but it was getting worse.

I staggered to the hatch and fell against it. My shoulder caught it high up, and I fell out onto the ground, crying out. I heard gunfire, both energy and slug. I felt consciousness fading away, for good this time. But that meant the pain was fading, too. This was my only chance.

I rose to my feet and stood there wobbling. A beam burned next to me, thwacking hard against the hov's hull. The spot glowed a dull red.

"Hey, kid! Get down, you fool!"

Somebody grabbed me by my waist and yanked me down. His body was sweaty and hot and burned me with his touch. I yelled out in agony as my nerve endings shot slivers of pain through me. I tried pushing

him away, but it was useless. He looked down at me, confused and a little impatient.

"Settle down! Just settle down! We'll get you out of this. Don't be scared, I-"

"Wait! She's not like that!" Susie's voice came in from the darkness. "She's been in more combat than you and I combined. Abby! What's wrong?"

Instead of answering her, I shook my head and reached out.

"Down," I croaked out, my throat cracking and grating. "Get down. Counter-"

"Your counterattack? When-"

"Down. Now," I repeated. My throat hurt so much, I started crying.

"What's she talking about? We've got to hold our line, or they'll close in-"

"No! Do as she says! Get down. NOW!"

The fire abruptly stopped on our end, and we waited. By not moving at all, the pain seemed to be more tolerable. I forced myself to stay awake.

The seconds passed. It must have been more than thirty seconds by now. Did Kiki make a mistake, or have to abort? Maybe the shields couldn't protect the microsat from burn up on reentry.

"What are we waiting for?" the man holding me said impatiently. "We're not going to last-What's that?"

We all heard it at the same time. It was a rumbling sound at first, but quickly turned into a deep scream. Suddenly, the sky turned brilliant white and the whole mountain shook as the microsat exploded on impact down in the canyon. There was a deafening roar, followed by a wave of hot air. I wanted to get to a sitting position, so I could see Kiki's handiwork, but the pain returned in force, and I heard a roaring in my ears.

The man holding me straightened and looked down the canyon. He stared for a moment, then shook his head slowly.

"I'll be-" He turned to Susie. "They're all dead! What did she do?"

"I-I don't know." Susie seemed almost as stunned. She looked down at me and I stared dully back. I saw her lips move, but I couldn't hear anything above the roar in my ears. The sound made me so sleepy.

Chapter Five

It was very dark when I opened my eyes. The first thing I noticed was that the pain was gone. Completely gone as though it had only been psychosomatic. Maybe it had been. I didn't care. It had felt real enough, and now it was gone. I could deal with life again.

Above my head I saw the dim glow of the combat lighting bar. I realized I was lying on the floor of the hov, my head in somebody's lap. From the size of the thighs and upper legs, I'd guess it was a somebody who was not Susie. I saw his vague profile against the red light and caught the pleasant scent of man smell. This, I decided, would be either Kenneth or Wayne. He was looking off toward the bow of the hov. I stirred a little to get his attention. He started and looked down at me.

"Hi," I said sleepily. "We haven't met formally, yet. My name's Abigail."

He chuckled. "Well, that's very proper of you. I'm Ken Ramsey. You can call me Kenny."

"All right, Kenny," I smiled up at him.

"You look a little different than on 'verse," he commented, then added quickly. "But a vast improvement, mind you."

"Sorry," I apologized. "I just figured you'd drag your feet if you saw the real me, and we just didn't have the time." I turned my head. "So where are we? What's going on?"

"Well, after you did whatever it was you did, we took out of there pretty quick. The hov's Mac was out, so we had to make it out through the mountains. Corporal Lendler brought us out into the foothills along the southern edge, into a remote neighborhood. From there we drifted slowly into Glendale itself. We've been here for two hours now."

"Have we been able to contact any of our people?"

"No, not yet. After the explosion, NATech slapped a full-strength jamming field with sniffer over the entire area. They're scouring the neighborhoods with at least four cohorts, looking for us. But Lendler's got us pretty well hid in an alley."

He looked down at me. "How about you, Abigail? How do you feel? You looked and sounded awful back up there in the rocks."

"I know. I'm sorry," I said, half-ashamed. "I wasn't much help in the fight. I don't know what happened."

"I do. Wayne and I are hoppers. We take it to the bad guys from the air. What happened to you was what we call 'juiced' On a flyer, the ERF slaps a pretty firm field around you, so in case =of abrupt stopping or turns, your blood stays in your head and you don't pass out. Hovs have the same kind of field, only to shield against injury.

"Every now and then, the ERF picks up a serious jolt of energy from weapons fire, and the field constricts or is knocked out of alignment. Not a lot, but enough to penetrate the skin. When it does, it plays hell with your nerve endings and you feel like someone just skinned you alive and salted you down.

"After we found out we couldn't phase, we checked the outside damage. Sure enough, one shot had blasted through the plating over the ERF generator, and a second had followed it in, overcharging the generator. Didn't knock it out, but you got juiced." He smiled sympathetically. "If it'll make you feel any better, I know just how you feel. I've been juiced two or three times, and it's not a good way to end a day. You'll be weak and your skin will be a little sensitive for a day or so, but you'll be okay."

"Thanks for the support," I said gratefully. I settled a little deeper in his lap. "In more ways than one. So now we wait?"

"Uh-huh. Maybe for a long time. You took out at least three cohorts, so they'll be looking for blood." He turned a speculative eye to me. "Say, how did you manage to do that? It was like a missile came in out of nowhere." Susie and Wayne had heard our quiet voices-not hard in such a confined place-and were listening in.

"I brought down a NAtch microsat that was in orbit. We had the shields altered to prevent burnup until the last moment. The heat we felt just prior to impact was the extreme temperatures of the shields. I figured even though it was so small..."

"Wait a minute," Wayne spoke up for the first time. He didn't sound too pleased. "You're saying you dropped an orbiting satellite down with that kind of precision? How could you do that? You're too young to-"

"Kindly shut your yap, Wayne ," Kenny cut in, saving his partner an embarrassing answer. Kenny knew I was a Cue. Even in the dim red light, I could see that knowledge in him as he looked at me. His gaze saw much deeper than his eyes could observe. But in the Resistance, you *never* asked if someone was a Cue, nor referred to anyone as being one. Even if a Cue volunteered the information, you politely ignored it. It was an unwritten rule, and as such immutable.

"He does ask a good question, though, Abigail. Nobody has that kind of precision. I don't even want to think what could have happened..."

"But it didn't, did it?" I interrupted. "And I didn't do it, not really. I had someone else bring it down. Someone in the puterverse. She's-"

"That's enough for now, Abby." It was Susie's turn to interrupt. "Just relax now. Try to get some sleep. Kenny? Could you and Wayne do a foot patrol? See if this is a good place to stay hidden come daylight? I'm not sure we'll be able to move again until tonight."

Kenny looked at her for a moment, then down at me. I'd rather he stayed, both for his lap and company, and for his protection when Susie started yelling at me, which she looked like she was going to do. Finally, his face set, he nodded and helped me to a sitting position. He rose to his feet and picked up a couple of headsets and hov guns, then he and Wayne went out on patrol. The hatch closed quietly behind them and Susie turned to me.

"Are you crazy, Abigail?" It shouldn't be possible to yell while keeping your voice just above a whisper, but Susie had discovered a way.

"Yep. Sure am, Susie!" I giggled, trying to lighten her up. "Did you have any area of crazy you wanted to be sore about?"

My attempt at levity failed miserably. She brought her hand up and smacked me straight across the mouth. It wasn't all that hard, but it felt like she peeled off the top two layers of skin. I cried out and fell to my side, holding my cheek. Tears came up.

"Don't you EVER be that flippant to me again, Private!" Her voice took on a biting quality. "You foolishly risked all our lives with that microsat stunt! Then you-"

"But it worked!" I protested meekly.

"Did it? Did it really? It worked up there in the canyon, but that fight's not over yet. You've really kicked over a bee's nest-"

"A hornet's nest."

"SHUT UP! Just SHUT UP!! NATEch is bringing every local resource to bear against us, and we're caught in the middle of a civilian population! We're further crippled in that our hov is disabled and sticks out in this town like a sore thumb and we may be forced to abandon it. Then how do we get home?"

"Worse than that stupid, dangerous attack, I'm even angrier that you didn't secure permission from me first."

"But you said-"

"Don't give me that crap! You know perfectly well I would have never sanctioned such a devastating attack! And I'm your superior in matters outside non-unit combat. I have no doubt you saved all our lives tonight. I can't think of any other way we could have gotten out of that hole once the phase unit was damaged.

"But in saving us, you also put thousands of civilian lives at stake-many of them Shards-and that is reckless and stupid. What if you had been off by a fraction of a second, by the smallest fraction of degree of latitude? Glendale would be gone. And our four lives are not worth their thousands. You would agree with me, if you used your head for a change.

"And to top it all off, you were going to start blabbing to those two men about your helpers, Mike and Kiki, in the puterverse."

I looked at her blankly, not understanding.

"Abby. Girl, you are so dense sometimes." Her voice took on a softer tone. "You've done some incredible things in the puterverse. Things no one else can do. We know some of it from what you've told us. I've seen some of it when I'm with you. No doubt there is a great deal more you haven't told us about, things I haven't seen. And you're very proud of it. *But you can't go around talking about it!* Don't you see? If word got out, you'd be hunted down, both as a possible Cue and as a definite NATech security risk. We've got to be quiet about this, even to other Resistance units. Your shooting off your mouth with such carelessness put all of that in jeopardy."

I looked at her, feeling very small. Her softer voice was only worse, for with the anger gone, it was all too easy to hear her disappointment in me. I felt my shoulders start to shake and then I was sobbing, and then I was crying. I hated myself for being so weak, so stupid. She didn't need a kid crying like this, but I couldn't stop. That only made me feel worse, which made me cry harder.

Susie understood. She always understood. She pulled me close against her and let me bawl. Her arms wrapped around me, and the hand that only moments ago had slapped my face now stroked my hair and patted my back. Why was it that I always seemed to end up like this, crying in Susie's arms? The answer was pretty easy, that was the kind of girl I was. Inclined to bursts of emotion, overconfident in my abilities and exercising poor or no judgment.

It was so clear now. I had only thought about the attack missing and striking us. That was an acceptable risk because we were already going to be in that deep. It never once occurred to me that the microsat may have deviated from its course even a fraction of a degree and thousands would have died. It was so clear. Now.

Having satisfied myself that we and the actual target were the only ones who could be hit, I assumed Susie's role of authority and made the decision. Yes, I had checked with Susie, but had been very careful in not giving her enough details to make the correct decision, the decision to not attack with the

microsat. I had so much wanted to show off that a lot of innocent people almost paid the price.

"Pull yourself together, Abby." The harsh words were strengthening with her tone. She propped me up to look in my eyes. "There's one more thing I wanted to say." She smiled at my sick look. "No, it's not to chew you out. It's to say how proud I am of you."

"Huh? But ... but you said..."

"I know what I said. And I meant it. What you did was stupid and dangerous. But it was also brave and selfless. You didn't give a single thought to the people of Glendale . And you didn't give a thought to your own safety or mine. All you were thinking about was the safety of Kenny and Wayne. That shows me, and them, that you're a dog. When your team's life is more important than yours, then you belong with us. And your solution was devastatingly accurate. Anyone else I'd have court-martialed for severe neglect and dereliction of duty. Not you. You're the only person I would trust such a stunt to. If you had asked me, I would have said no. But I would have thought about it first. You've a keen sense of now, Abby. You are able to live right on the edge of recklessness without stepping over. Don't lose that edge, Abigail. One day, such a stunt will be stupid and dangerous and absolutely necessary."

Talk about being in a whirlwind of emotions. I'd been out of my riping for two years and had become used to this roller coaster of constant mood changes. It had gotten even worse in the past year and a half. There were deep lows, sometimes three or four times a day, usually ... um ... once a month. But there were also times when I seemed to float in a perpetual cloud of euphoria. Susie's vote of confidence lifted me up close to one of those clouds. I even forgot about my still stinging cheek.

"I'll take the blame, Susie, but Kiki should really get the credit. It was her idea."

"Uh-huh. And who made Kiki?"

"I did. But she's become so much more on her own!" I was quickly warming to my favorite subject. "And when I give her the next package of code, like I gave Mike tonight, she'll be even more..."

A bright, painful light flashed in the forward portals, flooding the cabin. I was still shaken by my mood swings, but that's no excuse. We had gone over the drills until we could do them in our sleep. I missed it. Susie didn't. She threw herself prone on the floor, jerking me down beside her.

There was a terrific thud on the hull of the hov, and the entire craft shuddered and rocked. The blast was so great that the hov slued on its antigrav field, then settled back. We'd been found, and they'd brought in a big gun! We were in deep trouble. The odds of surviving a point blank assault by an antihov gun just didn't exist.

The control panels lit up and started screaming. Susie scrambled to her hands and knees and slid into the pilot's seat. She began calming the computer down with voice and panel commands. She was terribly

exposed-a favorite tactic of NATEch commando squads on wounded craft was to punch a micron-thick laser through the damaged shielding and hull at the pilot's seat. Damage to the craft was nominal, but the damage to the pilot was devastating, especially if the beam was traversing.

Finally getting with the program, I clambered into the navigator's seat. A useless action: a quick glance at the ruined control panel told me that the nav systems had taken the brunt of the gun's blast. I looked over at what Susie was doing and felt a chill going down my spine. She was preparing for Emergency Final Phase: the last desperate action of a hopeless situation. Such was our condition that it was the only option left us, dangerous as it was.

When a phase capable vehicle was used enough, it built up a residual phase field. This field was an aftereffect and kept the smallest fraction of the craft's mass in a permanently phased condition. Eventually, this field degraded the ship's structural integrity to the point that the entire craft had to be scrapped.

Our hov was a long way from being scrapped-from field effect anyway-but it had built up a significant residue. If it was enough, the field could be charged directly from the ion engine and forced to act as a phasing field for the entire craft. It was an incredibly dangerous maneuver. Not only did it degrade the structural integrity of the hull within minutes, it was wildly unstable and could shut off without warning. And since the only reason to be using the field was for Emergency Final Phase, there was a high chance that it would also turn into a fatal final phase.

I tried to resurrect the nav systems, but I was wasting my time. We needed some computer guidance, though, and the back up systems were also out. I would have to access the puterverse.

"Susie! Nav's out! I gotta talk to Mike!" I had to shout over the din of small arms fire popping against the fore, aft, and port hull. They had at least two or three cohorts out there. Only the starboard side remained unhit because it was nestled against a building wall.

Susie pursed her lips and curtly nodded, neither taking her eyes off the console nor changing the monotonic litany of manual control voice commands. I shot out of the nav seat and threw myself into the terminal chair behind Susie. Not even buckling in, I called for access.

There were no colors, exploding lights or quacking ducks with this trip. I didn't have the time, the puter didn't have the visual, and the hov didn't have the power.

"Mike! Get your butt over here! I'm in a tight spot!"

"Gotcha, Abby! Hey, how come I can't see-"

"Can it. NATEch has Susie and me pinned down in our hov, we're moments from an EFP, and the nav's out."

"Say no more. Hold." His voice became calm and computer like. "Scanning perimeter, scanning ... Computing ... hold ... Completed." Excitement crept back in his voice. "Okay, Abby, I've got an escape path! Hook me into the back up nav and I'll"

"It's out, too," I cut in.

"Not good. I'll-

Again, Mike was cut off. This time it was from the outside. A second blast ripped into us from the big gun. The forward portals glowed bright red from heat, then fractured as the craft shook. It dropped to the ground as we lost antigrav. *That tears it*, I thought despairingly. The only thing left to do was fight our way out. If we were lucky, Susie and I would both be killed. Many of the NATech cohorts in this Shard town were Suppression Squads, the scum of their military, and rape was nothing unusual. I remembered my gun that Susie had taken from me, but it was in the other hov. Maybe I could-the craft started humming as Susie brought the antigrav back on line and the craft regained its normal one-meter altitude. I'd given up too soon. Susie had called me good under combat conditions. And I was the best when I didn't let my emotions dictate my actions. But between the juicing and my wild emotion swings, I was very much not myself tonight.

Mike started chattering in my ears. "Abby! Abby! Where are you?" He sounded scared.

"Right here, Mike. Listen! I'm giving you to Susie. Stand by." I raised my voice. "Susie! Mike's worked a way out of this. Here he comes!" I switched him over then went back to the navigator's seat. For some reason, I thought of Kenny and Wayne at that moment. I hoped they were all right and had escaped.

I was just sliding in and hadn't even buckled when the hov groaned and lurched forward. I felt a sudden sickness in the pit of my stomach and was pressed back against the chair back and into my seat.

A high-pitched buzz emanated from every square centimeter of the hull as Susie rerouted the majority of our power directly into the hull's circuitry. I felt an uncomfortable tingling sensation over my skin as we began to pseudophase. Unlike actual phasing, movement was not restricted. Not that it mattered: I had no place to go.

Susie accelerated the craft straight ahead-directly into the heaviest concentration of fire. Lasers and particle beams laced through the hov, causing no damage.

Then suddenly a man's head appeared from the panel in front of me! I screamed at the unexpectedness of it, then sharply inhaled as he passed through my body. It was all shock, no damage. His comrades also flickered through as our ship split their ranks and went behind them.

The itching was getting worse, turning into a crawling sensation. Nowhere near as bad as the restraining

field mishap, it was still unpleasant. I fought down the urge to start swatting and scratching my arms, legs and face. Susie didn't need any distractions. She needed full concentration to fly our quickly failing hov.

And she was doing a masterful job. She yanked the craft hard to port after we cleared the front goon platoon and big gun. The craft continued to come around hard to port, canted sharply over on one side. As we leaned against the tilt, I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye and looked down. The deck was gone. Instead, there was solid ground sweeping by us at high speed as we phased through it. It didn't have the typical, half-seen, half see-through look of normal phased objects. It was *there* =Then came the dread realization, and terror seeped into my very soul. To maintain structural integrity, Susie had to divert more and more power from the engine. That drained propulsion and antigravity. We were sinking slowly into the ground!

Walls, machinery and massive stockpiles of objects were now shooting through the craft as Susie flew us through a series of adjacent buildings. Unlike Phoenix , Glendale was an old-fashioned town, with specified streets and corresponding rows of buildings. To escape detection, we were flying through those buildings. But in doing so, we were unable to make an ascent that would clear us from solid matter once the imminent structural collapse alarm sounded. And with navigational off line, we were committed to the flight plan supplied by Mike and being executed by Susie.

The walls and objects-we seemed to be in a warehousing district-continued leaping up and passing through us. It was very unsettling because the phasing objects-us-remained solid visually, as did the objects we were phasing through. Every object "crashed" into us-then passed without impact. Meanwhile, the ground continued to creep up. It was now up to my waist. There was no sensation other than the terrible itching-but the visual made me tighten up and alternately hold my breath and gasp for air.

Despite my hard won years of battle all those centuries ago, my abnormally detached coolness in the heat of combat, my admittedly high amount of self-confidence, I was coming apart at the seams. And not slowly, either. My grip on the chair arm rests threatened to shear them off. Sweat was beading on my forehead and soaking my partially buried blouse. My body was rigid and despite the hot, dry air-that at least remained a constant in phasing-I felt goose pimples of fear covering my arms, which felt like they were burning. The warehouse flooring we were zipping through was now up to my chest. I heard a cry over the wail of the tortured engine and recognized the cry as my own. A cry of horror. I badly needed some reassurance. As the relentlessly sinking craft brought the ground up to my neck, I looked over to Susie.

She was all I could have hoped for. The ground was at her chest, but her arm and shoulder movement showed clearly she was still working the controls she could no longer see. She had her headset on and was listening intently to Mike's on-the-fly instructions. Staring straight ahead, she was hoping for an area that would be clear enough to allow us to divert all propulsion power to the antigrav and raise us up one last time to stop this agonizing, deadly descent. But no such space appeared. Susie didn't look

worried-though she undoubtedly was-and despite the demanding flying, the deafening racket of overburdened systems and the crackling of metal as it fatigued at greatly accelerated rates, she somehow was aware of my fear. She turned her head over to me and smiled at me, winking her eye. She mouthed the words, "Hang on," then turned back to her flying. It was the briefest of looks, but it meant the world to me.

It was the last thing I saw. I turned my head forward and everything went black as we slipped beneath the floor. I involuntarily held my breath-something I never do during normal phasing. Everything remained black. Black but not silent. The cacophony of sound continued to crescendo. The ship was entering its death throes. The crackling of metal became sharp snaps as the stress began to physically pull and twist it apart. The structural integrity field could compensate, but only for a while, and only at a cost. Every moment of power it used sucked more life from the dying ion engine, which was now a banshee screeching in deepest despair.

And then came the final refrain of this unholy symphony: the toll of the imminent structural collapse klaxon. It would continue sounding until its horrible prophecy came true, but we wouldn't hear that final note, for we would be dead. The steady on-off blaring captured and riveted my attention, every fiber of my being. I willed it to sound three times, then three more times. I then forced it to sound two times, then twice...

My vision suddenly became clear. I could see the control panel! I jerked my head up and looked through the molten, scarred viewing port. I could make out the diffused light of illuminated clouds. We had cleared! Mike and Susie had taken us to the bottom of the foothills, and the ground had dropped away faster than we were sinking into it. All that remained was...

"ABBY! Your harness! Get-"

The klaxon cut off, and we slammed into the opposite bank of a dry riverbed. I was instantly hurled forward into the smooth surface of the forward bulkhead, twisting my back so it would accept the brunt of the impact. I'd forgotten to secure my harness when we began our desperate bid for freedom. Even as I slammed into the bulkhead, I remember half-hoping the impact would kill me. At least then Susie wouldn't be burdened down with a half-witted ditz and could make her escape.

I felt a hot, blanketing pain over my entire back, and everything went black.

Black and silent.

* * * *

There is nothing as soothing as a desert rainstorm at night. The heat is captured in the cool drops, then channeled away into the arroyos-dry riverbeds-to be quietly sucked up by the endless sands. The mesquite, as though waiting for the rains, flood the crisp air with their earthy, spicy scents until it is the

only thing you can smell and breathe. And the dust. The dust is the thing most changed by the falling rain. Dust is most often viewed as a symbol of death. But it isn't really death; it is life that has fallen asleep. And the nourishment of the cloudburst as it sweeps across the wide, sleeping desert rouses that slumbering life, and the dust is there to mix with it, feed it, and celebrate, if only for moments, the excitement of being.

It was to the smell of the dust and mesquite that I awoke. All my life I had thrilled to the promise of the dust. I had run outside and put my face to the onrushing storm clouds even when I was just a little girl. No, a little boy. For whatever reason, I could only picture myself as a little girl. I ran outside not to greet the rain, but to smell the promise of the dust. The promise of awakening life in the cool of the desert. A promise that now called to me to wake up.

"Come on, girl! We've got to go. Wake up, Abigail! Time to bug out!"

The call to return home made me open my eyes. My head was resting on the sand and I could see the branches of a palo verde tree spread over me. A dark shape leaned over me. Susie. I could only just make out her form in the backwash of Glendale 's lights off the still cloudy skies.

"How ... how long have-Ow!" I sharply inhaled as pain lanced through my spine. My whole back was one huge throb.

"Easy. Try not to move. At least, not for a few minutes yet. I gave you a quick-acting painkiller, but the bruising is pretty massive, so it will take a little time for you to feel the effects." She moved her head, and I had the impression she was looking off in the direction she expected the search parties-hostile search parties-to appear.

"You've been out for about ten minutes," she continued. "I managed to carry you about a half kilometer from the crash site."

"How is it?"

"The hov? Gone. We lost all power when we cleared the earth, and Mike shoved all remaining power to the antigrav to soften our impact and force the collapse. He knew somehow that there was a good chance I wouldn't be able to manually shut down the EFP and we would continue into the other bank. He's a smart little program. Too bad he's a jerk.

"You're also in better shape than you have any right to be. Between Mike's cushioning us, your twisting on impact, and the extra give in the sand, you avoided serious injury. You've pretty heavy bruising on your back, but there don't seem to be any other internal injuries."

"How are you?" I was keeping my talking to a minimum. It hurt too much to take a breath deep enough for more than a handful of words.

"I walked away from it. I was strapped in and had fair warning. Bruised a little, but not like you." She stood up, slapping her hands on her pants. "Well, your few minutes are up! No one's come upon us yet, but we can't expect it to remain that way. We have to put some distance between us and that wreck."

"Where to, Susie?" I struggled to sit up. By biting my lip until it tasted salty with blood, I was able to not cry out in pain. It was just as well I didn't have leave that often. A few more vacations like this would kill me.

"No choice, really. Back to town. The outskirts are less than half a kilometer to the west. Can you walk?"

"Yes," I said determinedly. I couldn't stand, however. I rolled to my hands and knees and was able to get to my feet that way. I brushed myself off slowly and smoothed down my skirt. When tonight had started about four months ago, I had only planned on sitting at a nice, quiet terminal for a few hours. Accordingly, I had only worn a skirt and blouse for comfort. Right now I'd trade comfort and a thousand credits for some practical pants. Susie led off toward the west and I fell in step, my back pain easing as the drug kicked in.

Thirty minutes later we were several blocks into Glendale . There was a considerable amount of action going on about one kilometer north of us, so we continued carefully west, toward the foothills. Behind us, the sky was turning pink with the coming dawn. That helped and hurt us. The extra light helped because Glendale had no night lighting, so the dawn made it easier for us to see. The downside was that it also made it easier for us to be seen.

No one saw us, but what we saw wasn't pretty. Glendale had long been a Shard refuge, and 2000 of its 5000 population were society's castoffs: sharded Cues, discovered Cues with no rights or privileges, and the mentally unstable. Another two thousand were NATech personnel, here for training, putting pressure on the Resistance-friendly Phoenix , and to root out active Resistance dogs who were here to integrate new Shards into the loose, wretched existence that was generously called a society. The final one thousand inhabitants were on both extremes of the Shard issue: those who cared for these slowly disintegrating people and those who preyed on their increasing helplessness. At risk of becoming a Shard myself, it was a sobering sight.

Susie and I walked up the quiet, decrepit streets, taking in the sorry conditions. The streets were more grass and crumbled concrete than streets. The buildings covered three hundred years of architectural changes, yet all looked similar in their dilapidated condition. Many were little more than gutted wrecks, unaware they were dead, standing with decayed pride, waiting for a proper burial. Even in the soft and forgiving blush of the pre-morning light, the stark truth could be easily read. We were in a dying town, sustained only by its dying people.

The people. Such terribly destroyed people. We saw the mentally unstable, lying in doorways, muttering

to themselves or to some unseen tormentor as they fitfully slept. Others, probably Shards, were fewer, yet carried the look of fear in their eyes. Fear that came with the knowledge that they were subject to the whim of anyone who took an interest in them. It was still very early, and NATech was still raising a ruckus, looking for us about a kilometer to the north, so I'm sure there were fewer people out than there would be later. But I noticed with a growing awareness and trepidation that they were all male. All of them. And I was afraid because I knew why. Like Cues, a Shard had no rights or privileges, nor protection from the law. And while male Shards were undoubtedly preyed upon, the female Shards would be the most sought after. And since NATech supported the oppression of the Shards, rape would be a prime tool used to crush them. I felt a shiver go through me that had nothing to do with the slight morning chill.

Susie squeezed my hand, and I turned to her. She smiled sadly and brushed my hair back, wiping a small tear from my cheek. How many times had she done that? Not as many as she would still.

"I'm sorry you had to see this now, Abby. It's not very nice, is it? Three hundred years ago, after the Terran/Martian wars refugees had left, Glendale continued as a refuge city. But it was wonderful then! The whole valley population gave their active support. Glendale became an open hospital and place of healing for the mentally unwell.

"What happened?" I whispered, already knowing the answer but wanting to hear it anyway to stoke my burning hatred.

"NATech, of course. That was the time they started taking over the world government, then abolishing it for a state of controlled anarchy. It was then that the Shards lost their rights-and later the Cues, as you know-and the Resistance began their activities. Glendale continued on, but they couldn't prevent NATech from setting up a major training facility nearby and putting constant pressure on everyone in the valley. More than the passage of time, the constant pressure of NATech's oppressive presence has destroyed Glendale , turning it from a refuge into a slum."

There was a sudden shout behind us, and we jumped away from each other. A thin beam of light shot between us, scorching the ground where we had been standing. I was walking on the inside, so I had the cover of the building, but Susie was caught in the middle of the street. She was an open target.

I had to do something, but my gun was far away, in the Kovins' hov. There was only one thing to do, and I did it without hesitation. I charged them, armed with only desperation and my want to protect Susie.

There were three of them, an advance scouting unit. More than likely they were recruits, men still learning to become soldiers. Well, they had just stumbled into advanced hand-to-hand combat.

None of them were expecting my foolish action. They had begun to take aim at Susie, supposing I would bolt for cover. My unexpected action threw them into confusion. They stared at me, then swung their guns on me. Having taken their measure, I screamed with terror and threw my arms up, ducking into a

small alley on my right.

Once there, I skidded to a stop and waited, going into an attack position. If they were the rookies I took them for, they would come around the corner close in, instead of from a distance where they could gun me down at their leisure. By now, Susie would have made cover on the other side of the street and would be charging her gun.

They were rookies. Two of the three came tearing around the corner, their guns lowered, hoping to catch me without harming me. After they caught me they would harm me. I had no illusions as to why I was safe from gunfire.

The first one appeared suddenly, and I killed him. There was no mercy in me, only rage. Rage that this was allowed-was encouraged-to happen. Rage that it was supposed to happen to me. And rage that after I had killed these two and was gone, it would continue to happen to others.

The quarters were tight enough that even their nominal training could overpower me because I had so little room to use my superior mobility and skill. I had to cut the odds immediately. I jammed my fist straight into the breastbone of the first man, snapping the sternum. Bringing my left hand around and turning, I smashed my three middle knuckles into his right temple, collapsing it. He dropped. I continued turning and brought up my right foot, viciously kicking the second man in the throat. He was going too fast for me to dodge, and his body crashed into me, falling on top of me.

Terror flooded me as I felt his weight on top of me. I went wild, trying to get him off, punching and scratching, and doing as much damage as I could.

It was damage that was unneeded. My kick had been more vicious than I thought. It had not only crushed his windpipe, it had snapped his neck. I crawled out from under his body and scrambled to my feet. I was rising up when my eyes caught movement. It was the third soldier, and he had kept his distance and was bringing his gun up.

I had no gun and I had no place to hide. I had only my mind and my body and maybe four seconds to ... my body. Forcing down a twinge of revulsion, I reached for my blouse and started lifting it up for him.

It worked. Instead of seeing me as the enemy, he saw me as a victim. He lowered the gun. Then he glanced down at his two dead comrades, and his eyes became hard. The gun came up. I let go of my blouse and waited for it.

For a second time, the gun went down. This time it lowered all the way down, then tumbled to the ground as it slid from his lifeless fingers. Neither side of the wound was bleeding; high energy weapons such as Susie's cauterized even as they cut. He slumped to his knees, then fell forward on his face.

I saw Susie and took a step toward her. But she wasn't looking at me. She was looking down the street

where the scouting unit had come. Pressing myself against the wall, I hitched an eye around the corner.

Another unit, very different from these three. There were eight of them, and they were seasoned warriors. There would be no chance with them. I looked across the street at Susie and waved. She caught my movement and looked at me. I held my hands out questioningly, wanting instructions. She circled her arm around, indicating we should continue in toward the mountain to the west. It was the best we could do. I nodded my head and waved again. She smiled, then ducked back down the alley she was in, disappearing from sight. I was alone.

I wouldn't be alone for long if I stayed there, though. Picking up one of the dropped guns, I turned up the alley and headed south. I noticed the gun was charging, so I turned it off to protect against energy sniffers. There was an empty doorway far down the dark narrow lane and on my right. I ran to it and through it and into the large building that made up one whole side of the alley and faced the far side of the block.

It was dark and empty inside. I couldn't waste any time, but I was forced to wait a few moments until my eyes adjusted to the gloom. I moved forward slowly, trying not to step on anything that would make any noise and looking for something I could put between myself and the line of sight to the doorway.

The building I was in had been a warehouse in some forgotten time. Now it was only a husk and lay completely open. There were large holes in the floor, and a pitch dark below, warning of a nasty fall into a basement. In contrast, there were also large patches of light coming from the scarred and partially caved-in roof. The entire place smelled of must and moss and urine. Picking my way gingerly, I managed to negotiate the length of the building fairly quickly. Behind me I heard small, distant noises. I felt an almost overwhelming urge to turn around, but knew it would only slow my progress. Instead, I started moving with abandon, jumping over the smaller gaps and running around the larger ones. At long last, nearly a hundred meters from where I entered, I came to a wall and ducked around it.

I didn't bother trying to hide. What I needed now was distance. Once I was away, I had a good chance to blend in with the population and wait until night. By now Thomas and Rachel would have found out about the situation in Glendale and Mike would probably tell them we were involved. I had a hunch if I could make it through the day, I'd have all the assistance I'd need tonight.

I exited the building at the far end and crossed the next street after making sure I was not being watched. There were several people who did see me, but they were not NATech. Three watched with unseeing eyes, buried in their own misery. I walked by another, but he was lying against a wall, staring out at nothing. He may have been dead. But I couldn't stop to see. I needed to put a few more streets between me and the searchers. By now they would have advanced enough to have discovered the two I'd killed, so they'd be hunting me with a vengeance.

I raced up another alley, this one formed by yet another empty husk of a warehouse on one side. But the other building was still in use. As I stepped by the open front door, I could smell food being cooked. It

smelled like barley soup. Yes, barley soup and fresh made bread...

.THAT HAD BEST BE TAKEN OUT IN FIVE MINUTES OR THE CRUST WOULD BE TOO ==HARD. AND THE BARLEY SOUP COULD USE A LITTLE SPICE. IT WAS FAR TOO FLAT TO BE ANY GOOD.

I NOTICED I WAS BREATHING HARD. I STOPPED AND LOOKED AROUND. THIS WASN'T FONTAINEBLEAU . WHERE WAS I? I TURNED AROUND AND LOOKED UP THE STREET I HAD JUST ... HAD JUST ... THAT WAS ODD. WHAT WAS I JUST DOING? I FELT A WEIGHT IN MY HAND AND LOOKED AT IT.

IT WAS A GUN! REACTING LIKE IT WAS A VIPER, I THREW IT AWAY. IT FLEW INTO A PILE OF WASTE THAT WAS LYING IN AN ALLEY I WAS STANDING NEAR. NOTHING LOOKED FAMILIAR.

"PROFESSOR LECLAIRE?" I CALLED OUT TENTATIVELY. BUT HE DIDN'T ANSWER.

No...

Abigail's Black Chapter

I was in a ghetto. The streets were very foreign and I could not smell the Seine 's sweet waters. It was also daylight and much warmer than it should be for December. Clearly, something was wrong. My back also hurt, as though it were bruised. Yet I could think of nothing that would have caused it.

Feeling very disoriented and in a fog, I wandered to the doorway where I had smelled the barley soup and bread. Perhaps I could get assistance from someone inside.

It was dim inside and I saw there was no power to the lights. But although the building was obviously a ruin, it was swept clean and had about it a kind of dignified poverty. As I looked around the empty floor, I heard a clatter in the back, followed by the husky laugh of a middle-aged woman.

"Hello?" I called out. "Pardon? May I have assistance?"

The noise stopped, but she did not come out. I called again.

"Madame? Could you please help me? I am afraid I have become quite lost."

The door to the back area opened slowly, and a face poked out from behind. It was indeed a middle-aged woman, probably no older than me. I smiled and she stepped out further.

"Good morning, Madame. Thank you for your kind attention. My name is Miss..."

"Whut's yer problem? Talk straight."

English? Why would she be speaking English and not French? I felt my discomfort maturing into fear.

"My pardon, Madame. I take it we are not in France ?" I asked in English.

" France ?" She chuckled. "Not too likely, girly. Glendale ain't much, but at least it's got level ground." She laughed again at her odd joke. I did not understand the humor, but that only served to frighten me more.

She saw the look on my face and stopped laughing. She came out, holding a large cleaver. It should have terrified me had her face not been so soft and concerned.

"Here now. You're new here, ain't you?"

"New? To what? To where?" I heard the whine of a machine outside and turned.

She clucked sympathetically. "Oh, dear, girly. We need to get into the back quickly." She took my hand and pulled me through the door. On the other side was a small room with a ramshackle bed and a single burner stove. There was also a chair, tiny table and a box, which the woman began to rummage through.

I stood there quietly, not knowing what to think or say or do. I smelled the bread again and noticed the small stove also had an oven. The bread was done, so I located a muff and pulled it out. I also stirred the soup, which had begun to settle. Tasting it, I felt it needed a pinch more pepper, so I added it.

"So you cook, hey?" My new friend asked. In her arms were some worn, faded clothing that had been carefully cleaned and folded.

"Oui, Madame. Pardon. I mean, yes. Yes, I do. And Professor LeClaire is most particular about the way..."

"That's nice girly, but we're going to have visitors shortly. Nasty ones. Here, put these on."

"May I ask why?"

"Because if these men see you dressed like that, they'll know you're a new Shard in a second. Now

change. And quickly!"

A Shard! Did she mean to say my ripe had sharded? Such an occurrence was extremely rare, but perhaps it had happened to me. Hurriedly I took off my clothing. At her urging, I took off my underthings as well, rather than risk a full body search. I paused a moment, but did as she asked. I could straighten this out later.

It was while I was putting on her clothing that I became aware that I had indeed sharded. My body was no longer my body. I was a young lady again, as young as the day dear Professor LeClaire had purchased me to be his housekeeper. Yet that day had been forty years ago! I would need to find the authorities quickly, or I would be branded an unregistered ripe and be unable to return to my position.

I finished slipping on the worn clothing and passed my other clothes to the woman. She hurriedly placed them back in her box, shoving them to the bottom. She began talking as she made to straighten up. Noting an apron, I put it on and started to look about the three cupboards, taking an inventory.

"Listen quick. My name is Ellen. And you are?"

"My name is Miss DeChant."

"No, no. Your first name!"

"I-I have no first name."

"What? Why ever not?"

"Since I am a ripe, made to be a housekeeper, I need no first name."

WHAT? SHE KNOWS SHE A RIPE?

She looked at me sharply. "That doesn't sound right. Okay, we'll call you Mona, and you're my property, got it?"

"No, no, Madame. I am grateful to you, surely, but I belong to..."

"Look! We're about to be searched and questioned. If you want to avoid gettin' raped, you say you belong to me. I know the guy in charge of this dump town, and he'll leave you alone, *if* he ain't got no cause to seize you. Got it?"

I do not know why she was so worried about rape. I was not some sex ripe, who only knew that kind of life. I was far more valuable otherwise. Still, to soothe her I nodded. "Oui, Madame."

We continued straightening up and cooking. I had taken down a pot from the shelf and filled it with water from a large can, when the door smashed open. I dropped the pot and stared.

There were two large brutes, dressed in armor and carrying guns similar to the one I had thrown away. They aimed them at me. Behind them stood another man, tall and distinguished looking. He had insignia on his shoulder that I did not recognize, yet marked him as an officer, as did the way he carried himself. I was badly frightened, yet retained enough courage to smile a little.

"Good day, officers. Might I offer you some tea?" I bent down and picked up the pot. Turning my back to them, I began refilling it from the can.

"Who's this, Ellen?" a deep voice said behind me.

"Leave 'er alone, Deiley. She just some kid the Resistance dropped off awhile back. I got dibs on 'er, an if you wanna keep gettin' yer info, you'll keep yer hands off her!" I stiffened slightly. Professor LeClaire had used his position at the Institute to retain numerous informants in order to further his own ambitions. I saw nothing wrong with that. Indeed, it was impossible for me to disapprove of anything Professor LeClaire did. But other than those who worked for him, I viewed all informants with distaste.

I could not let her know my feelings. Instead, I turned, placing the pot on the stove and turning on the heating element. Even the slight weight of the water caused a twinge in my injured back. The large officer watched me closely, but I knew he didn't see my reaction for I had none. I never bothered my owner with trivial pains. Wanting to show confidence, I opened the door and brought down the small tin of tea I had noticed earlier. He missed nothing, including, I hoped, that I moved with ease about the small kitchen.

"How long have you had her?"

"I dunno. Five weeks, maybe six. I sharded a month ago and lost a few days, I think." Ellen was a Shard as well? That a ripe would shard was nearly impossible. That there would be two of us in the same room—and an officer who did not seem surprised by that—indicated there was something very wrong. What had happened to me?

He didn't seem convinced, so I turned out the loaf of bread and began cutting it, using the knife hanging on a nail beside the stove. I placed it on a plate and offered it to him and his men, smiling.

"Would you care for a slice, officer? I have baked it only this morning. I can offer you some of my barley soup as well, and tea in a few moments."

The smell of fresh baked bread, and my claim to have baked it seemed to satisfy him. He took a piece and chewed it carefully, looking at me thoughtfully.

"What's your name, girl?"

"Mona, officer. Mona DeChant."

He glanced at Ellen. "You only have one bed. Where has she been sleeping?"

"With me, Deiley. This ain't no resort. One bed's all I got."

"Why not look around for another one? You've had over a month."

Ellen stepped up and wrapped an arm around my waist, pulling me to her.

"Look, do I gotta draw you holos, Deiley?" I smiled shyly and tried to look comfortable. Inside, I felt nothing.

"You're a sick woman, Ellen."

"Hey, you live here for five or six years, and you'd be sick too, Deiley. Watcha out here for anyway? You leave the local stuff to your SS jerks. You don't come out of yer hidey hole less it's big."

"We have a couple of dogs to hunt. One gunned down a man and the other killed two more with only his hands." He paused. "Or her hands."

"Uh-huh. And this little kid did all three? Or maybe just two and the other died of fright. Use your head! She couldn't kill a four-footed rat, let alone a two legged one."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. Let's find out." He stepped forward quickly, and struck me in the face. I cried out and went to my knees. Ellen gave an animal yell and leapt at him, but the two men restrained her. He grabbed my hair and pulled my head back, staring intently in my tear-filled eyes, as though looking for something. He released my hair and grabbed my throat, then began striking me repeatedly with his open hand, never taking his eyes off mine, nor betraying any emotion. I choked and pulled

NO, YOU IDIOT! PUNCH UP INTO HIS CROTCH, THEN JAM YOUR MIDDLE FINGERS INTO HIS EYES OR NOSTRILS WHEN HE BENDS OVER.

I FELT BOTH THE PAIN OF THE BEATING AND THE PAIN OF FRUSTRATION. IF I COULD ONLY GET CONTROL FOR A MOMENT...

at his hand, but with no effect. He just continued striking and choking me. There was a peculiar buzzing in my ears, and I began to lose my vision. My fingers went numb and my arms felt heavy, so I let them drop useless to my sides. He was still hitting me, but I did not feel the blows. I could taste my blood.

He tossed me against the bed, a look of distaste in his eyes. He motioned to his men and they released Ellen, who came to me, cradling me in her lap. She stared defiantly at the men, shaking with rage. I started coughing, but made no move that would allow them an excuse to hurt me further.

"Get out of here! Get out! Look what you've done to my girl! She's not some Resistance Dog! Get out!"

"No, she's not who we're looking for. Very well, Ellen, you can keep her for now." His voice sharpened slightly. "But don't ever use that tone with me again. I can find other informants." They strode out just as the pot began to whistle.

Ellen helped me onto the bed, then went up front to be sure they were truly gone. She came back shortly and pulled out a clean rag, wetting it. She then sat beside me and began dabbing my face. The rag came away bloody, so she rinsed it and continued. My vision cleared and feeling returned to my arms and legs.

"They're gone. I don't think they'll be back, either." She laughed and continued to clean my face, perhaps a bit roughly. "To think they were actually suspicious of you killing three of their men! You're such a tiny thing." She felt my arms and ran a hand up my leg. "Nicely muscled, though." Her hand lingered on my thigh.

I remained silent. I couldn't see how I could have done such a thing. But I recalled the gun in my hand. Could there be another ripe inside me that did have the ability to attack and kill?

YES! OH, PLEASE! CONTINUE THINKING THAT!

MAYBE I COULD ESTABLISH A TYPE OF RAPPORT WITH THIS WOMAN. SHE SEEMED FAR MORE INTELLIGENT AND REAL THAN THE OTHER WOMAN HAD. I KNEW HER THOUGHTS COMPLETELY AND RESPECTED BOTH HER AND HER INTELLIGENCE. HER ONLY LIMITATION SEEMED TO BE HER PROGRAMMED OBEDIENCE AND SUBMISSION.

PERHAPS...

It was something to consider. Perhaps...

Ellen was leaning over me and kissed me deeply. I started, then relaxed.

NO! RESIST! DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT SHE'S DOING TO ME? TO US?

Ellen had chosen to take advantage of me in my weakened state. It didn't matter. I would not have fought in any event, because to me it was unimportant.

She continued to kiss me deeply, not caring that I didn't react. Finally, she released me, smiling.

"I suppose I convinced more than Deiley with my speech. I'd forgotten how nice it was to be with someone else. Maybe I will keep you."

"You can't, Ellen. I'm Professor LeClaire's housemaid."

She said nothing, but kissed me again and began holding me close. She sensed my disinterest and pulled her lips back, looking at me with disappointment.

"Don't you feel anything, Mona?"

I shook my head. "No. I'm not riped that way, Ellen. I have never had, nor can have, sexual feelings for any man or woman. Professor LeClaire was very specific about that when he ordered me. And my name is not Mona. It's Miss DeChant. I am Professor LeClaire's housekeeper."

She laughed and struck me. She derived equal pleasure from that as from showing me tenderness. "What year do you think this is, Mona?"

I quietly wiped some blood from my lip. "Today is December the fourth, 2315."

"Well, that takes care of Professor LeClaire. He's dust now, Mona. Unless he can figure out a way to live 350 years."

"What do you mean..."

"What do you think I mean? It's April, 2679, pet. Or May. I ain't really sure. And this ain't France . It's Arizona . France is a great big, radioactive crater."

I was stunned. Surely not France ? The lights of Paris , the vineyards, the dairies, the glorious flowers, the Seine . Gone? I felt a deep loss in my heart. I knew that I was riped to believe I was from France- Professor LeClaire had told me everything about my past-but knowing I was a soulless human did not change my feelings. Such a wonderful country! My country. Ellen's words and superior tone hurt far more than the officer's blows.

"Oh, France !" I mourned out loud, slipping into my native French. "Such a loss for the world! To be forever denied the Bordeaux wines, the coolness of the Rhone , the..."

"Hey, knock off the gibberish! You speak English from now on, ya' hear?"

I looked at this woman who would have me. She had saved my life, but she had saved me for herself. I

was a thing to her. Worse, I was a thing with the wrong purpose. I needed a new owner, but for housekeeper duties, not the duties of the bed. I needed to leave. But I feared that this small body would not be able to overcome her. I shall have to trick her, I thought. But how? I could not fake love nor the act of making love. But I could serve as her housekeeper, perhaps allow her to think that I would submit to her other requirements of me. And when the moment was right, I would run for the protection of the authorities. The officer who had beaten me would make a good owner, if I could only locate him. Doing that, I

WHAT? HE MUST HAVE HIT YOU ONCE TOO OFTEN! HE ALMOST KILLS US AND YOU WANT TO GO BACK TO HIM? WHATEVER FOR? BETTER TO TAKE OUR CHANCES WITH THIS ELLEN WOMAN.

I FELT SICK TO MY STOMACH OVER HER MOLESTING ME, BUT IT WAS UNLIKELY SHE COULD HARM US PHYSICALLY. THEN WHEN THIS SHARD WORE OFF, I WOULD BE EASILY ABLE TO ESCAPE.

escape. I ... my train of thought was broken. What was I thinking? I shook my head, and pain throbbed throughout it. I hoped I had not been permanently injured. I looked up at Ellen who was still glaring at me, no doubt awaiting an answer to a question I had forgotten. I knew how to respond to this type of person, though. I hung my head submissively.

"Yes, Madame. I apologize."

She seemed placated, and sat down beside me. She took me by the shoulders and pulled me down on the bed beside her. I did not resist.

NO! NOT AGAIN! MISS DECHANT! PLEASE! YOU MUST FIGHT HER! YOU'RE STRONG ENOUGH! NO! FIGHT HER! THIS ISN'T RIGHT! PLEASE...

PLEASE...

PLEASE...

...

IT WAS VERY DARK. I SPUN AROUND. WHERE WAS I? WHY COULDN'T I SEE THROUGH MISS DECHANT'S EYES? WAS SHE UNCONSCIOUS? NO, SHE WASN'T. MY PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE WITH THE OTHER GIRL TOLD ME THAT MUCH. NO! WAS SHE DEAD? BUT SHE COULDN'T BE, OR I WOULD BE, TOO. AND THIS CERTAINLY WASN'T HEAVEN. THEN WHERE WAS I?

I STARTED WALKING. I COULD FEEL MY LEGS MOVE, BUT COULD NOT SEE THEM. ALL

WAS PITCH BLACK. I COULDN'T SEE ANYTHING, I COULDN'T HEAR ANYTHING, I COULDN'T SMELL ANYTH...

WAIT. YES I COULD SMELL SOMETHING. IT WAS A POTENT SMELL, WITH A SLIGHT BURNING SENSATION. IT SEEMED FAMILIAR, BUT I WAS UNABLE TO PLACE IT. I STOOD STILL AND CONCENTRATED ON THE SMELL, KNOWING THAT IN A MOMENT I WOULD...

Ellen was now fully on top of me, when she suddenly stiffened, biting my neck hard. I yelled and pushed her off, knowing I would be struck. She didn't strike me. She remained stiff and unmoving. Her gray-streaked black hair was covering much of my face, so I brushed it away with one hand.

"Ellen? Madame? Are ... are you all right?"

She did not respond. I pushed at her shoulder lightly, not wishing to anger her, but still she seemed unaware. Using my free hand and my flexible body, I half pushed and half squirmed out from underneath her.

WHAT ... WHAT HAS HAPPENED?

I COULD SEE ELLEN AS MISS DECHANT TURNED HER OVER. ELLEN SEEMED VERY RIGID. AND HER EYES. THEY WERE STARING, BUT NOT BLANK. SOMETHING WAS WRONG. WHAT IS WRONG WITH ELLEN, MISS DECHANT?

"Ellen appears to have sharded," I said to no one in particular. "I've seen this before, but only once, and not this intense. The poor woman

POOR WOMAN? DON'T YOU KNOW WHAT SHE INTENDED TO DO TO US?

must have been something very horrible at one time to be in such a state." I passed my hand in front of her eyes, but she was not seeing with them. Her mouth was frozen wide open and she was breathing with a harsh rasp. I did not know what to do, but I waited a few minutes to see if I might think of something, or to see if the condition might pass. Ellen was misusing me, nor did she have any concern for me, but she was a person who had laid claim to me, so I owed it to her to at least stay a small while.

After twenty minutes, though, she did not seem to be any better. Nor any worse. She was breathing, and her heartbeat continued, so the condition did not seem to be immediately fatal, which was unusual.

HUH?

I felt my obligation to her was finished, and decided it was time to leave. I considered changing back into my original clothes, then did not. Ellen seemed to think they would identify me as an outsider, and if the other girl who shared this body with me was the soulner, I needed to protect her while she was

helpless. Professor LeClaire had speculated that the time would come when the original persona could be revived in ripes. Three hundred and fifty years seemed a long enough time to accomplish that, so it was possible that I was not a shard of another ripe but a shard of my soulner. In time, if she was our soul, she would return to control us, and I would fade again. But until then, she was my responsibility. So I kept on the worn dress that Ellen had given me.

There seemed to be nothing more I could do for Ellen, so I straightened up her small living area, making sure the barley soup was covered and the bread carefully placed in a container. I then swept up and cleaned the dishes. Using her brush, I combed out my hair and put it up into a proper bun. Soft rich, dark hair! Mine had been nearly as nice in my day, but age had turned it gray and dry. I was overjoyed to have a chance to own such beautiful hair again. I found a small tray with numerous barrettes in them, and took several, counting them as payment against Ellen's unwanted advances.

Finished, I took off my apron. I was tempted to keep it but felt that would not be right. I smoothed it out and hung it back on its nail and departed. Ellen had not moved at all in this time, but lay on the bed, as rigid as a dead person, though she was not.

The sun was hot when I stepped clear of the building. It could not have been more than eight in the morning, yet the temperature was already becoming uncomfortable. I looked up and down the street, but saw only derelicts and vagabonds, none of whom would begin to know what to do with a maid. Nor would it be helpful to ask, for it was evident that the authorities here dealt with the population abruptly and harshly. I should have to find them myself.

Since any direction was as good as another, I went south. There was a small street available to me for my walk. I strolled down the lane, taking my time, trying to understand my new surroundings and taking no small pleasure in my newly acquired youth. The spring was back in my step, replacing the steadier pace of my past few years. I had no regrets being older, but I very much appreciated the comment, "youth is wasted on the young". I wondered what my soulner thought of that statement.

I THINK I WAS BEGINNING TO APPRECIATE IT, TOO. I ALSO BEGAN TO THINK THAT I VERY MUCH LIKED MISS DECHANT. SHE WAS A NO-NONSENSE WOMAN WHO REMINDED ME OF BETTY, THE WOMAN WHO HAD CONDUCTED MY IHAD TWO YEARS AGO. COMPETENT, INTELLIGENT, SHE KEPT A COOL HEAD UNDER DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES AND DEALT WITH ADVERSITY AS IT HAPPENED. I WAS NOT AT ALL PLEASED WITH HER EASY COMPLIANCE TO ABUSE-IT WAS AFTER ALL MY BODY-BUT FROM HER THOUGHTS I COULD EASILY UNDERSTAND WHY SHE DID WHAT SHE DID.

I had walked about a kilometer, crossing several streets, when I came upon a broad avenue going east and west. There seemed to be a faint sheen off to the east, but nothing else. To the west, however, I could see a large compound, fenced, with a guard on duty. It was nearly another kilometer away, but it was my best choice. More accurately, it was my only choice, for the street I was on also ended here, with the compound fence parallel the far side of the road and stretching all the way to where I was and

further. I crossed the road-after three centuries, they still used glass-and walked to the guard. There was no traffic.

He saw me approaching, but made no move to come to me. He did step into a small guardhouse for a few moments, then come back out, watching me. I kept my hands out in plain sight and smiled slightly when I came up to him. He took a position of aggression.

PLEASE, MISS DECHANT! PLEASE DON'T DO THIS! YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT THESE PEOPLE ARE LIKE!

I REALIZED MY PLEADING WAS USELESS. NOT ONLY COULD SHE NOT HEAR ME, SHE DID KNOW WHAT THESE PEOPLE WERE LIKE, AND WAS GIVING HERSELF OVER TO THEM ANYWAY.

"Who are you and what business do you have here?" he demanded. His rifle looked different from any I had seen and gave off a high pitched tone.

I carefully placed my hands to my dress and gave him a deep curtsy. Remembering to speak English, I replied, "I beg your pardon, officer, but I am looking for another officer by the name of Deiley. I am Professor Philip LeClaire's former house maid, and I wish to offer my labors to M'sieur Deiley." I kept my eyes properly lowered, allowing him the superior position.

He seemed calmed by my words and actions, for he spoke in a softer tone.

"Look ma'am. You seem like a nice young girl. Believe me, you'd be real smart if you'd just turn around and walk that pretty little butt of yours back into town. I called over a squad, just in case you were a hostile, and they're going to be here in a minute. I'm inclined to live and let live, but a couple of them ain't. You're not going to see Major Deiley anyway. He's too big for you to even get close to."

"But, sir!" I begged, becoming a little desperate. "You do not understand! He was with me only this morning! See?" I showed him my neck where he had choked me. He looked and seem to get a little pale.

"And you want to see him after he did that?" He shook his head in wonder. "I'll never understand Shards."

"And I hope you never do, m'sieur. It is not the best life. But I am not a shard, not in the way that it appears to have become common. I am a ripe, a woman whose mind has been imprinted with the need to serve and tend house. I cook, sew, clean, manage simple household finances, and can even entertain after a fashion. That is the way the Professor had me made, and that is all I want to be. But I have been told that was over three centuries ago, and that France no longer exists. So I turn to this Deiley as a new master. I know of no one else."

He looked almost distressed. "Look, miss ... miss..."

"Miss DeChant."

"Miss DeChant. You don't want to get caught up in here. Not with us. I'll tell you what-"

"Hey, Jordon, what's the big emergency?"

I started and turned. There was a vehicle floating on air directly behind me, with four large men in it. I had not heard it approach.

"Please, officers! I must see Major Deiley! Will you take me to him?"

"And why would you like to see him?" the first man spoke as he jumped out of the floating vehicle.

"My name is Miss DeChant," I started, trying to keep my voice steady. "And I am a housekeeper looking for a new..."

"A housekeeper?" He laughed. "Is that what they call it now?" He looked at me with suspicion in his eyes. "And who is your employer now?"

"I have no employer, m'sieur. He died over three hundred years-"

"No!" interrupted the man I had been speaking to, the one they called Jordon. "It's okay, guys. False alarm! She just got a little side tracked. I was about to call Ginny and have her hov the girl back to town. It's okay."

The man from the craft interrupted him, his eyes taking on a disquieting gleam.

"Three hundred years, eh? Then you would be a ripe, wouldn't you, Miss DeChant?"

"Oui, I-I mean, yes. That is correct."

"C'mon guys, leave her alone. She's new here, and a little lost..."

But they were not listening to him. Too late, I realized it was I who should have listened to him. Two men jumped out of the vehicle and grabbed me. I did not fight, of course, but I was scared. I had seen men watching me when I was young, and knew from the look in their eyes what they were thinking. These men had that same look.

My safety came from Philip then, for none would cross him, not in those early days. Only Philip was

dust, and these men had never heard of him. They pulled me into the vehicle roughly, ripping my dress at the shoulder. Giving shouts of victory, they started the vehicle toward the compound. I heard Jordon protesting loudly, but his voice grew fainter as we sped away.

The ride to the compound was brief and harrowing. Men began pawing me, touching me where I did not wish to be touched. One pulled my undergarment off from under my dress and threw it away.

"Please, sirs! This is not what I'm made to do! I'm a maid. A housekeeper! I don't know the first thing about this kind of service."

NO ... NO ... THIS IS NOT HAPPENING...

"Oh, don't worry, girl!" the leader said. "We'll teach you! We'll give you a crash course on 'this kind of service'." They all laughed mockingly at me. I struggled to sit up, but they held me down, gripping my arms painfully. I had made a terrible mistake.

We came to a stop in front of a building and someone struck me, knocking me from the craft. I fell on my side, and stayed on my hands and knees. Drops of blood dripped from my mouth. I needed to do something to stop this. Perhaps if I, if I...

I did not know what to do. I began to cry. But not for myself.

One man, their leader, grabbed my hair and yanked me to my feet. He then pulled me into the building. It was a barracks of some type.

The others were inside. The man who had me in his grip spun me around. Bending his head down, he kissed me forcefully on the lips. His arms came around me and I felt him tearing

NO ... NO! I CAN'T BREATHE! MY FACE IS BURNING! I FEEL FILTHY! STOP!

at my dress. It fell like a rag to my feet, leaving me naked save for my brassiere. The other men laughed and cheered as he pulled it off. He continued kissing me savagely, raking his filthy teeth over my lips. I could only stand there, numb with fear and shame that I had so failed my soulner. He stopped and looked at me for a moment, a wicked smile on his lips.

"So, kid, tell me you don't like that!"

"I do not care for myself, m'sieur. But I beg you, please, for the soul owner in my care, do not do this! Do not rape me! Surely there are many other girls who are better prepared to offer you love..."

"It ain't love I'm looking for, girl. Help me out here, boys." The other three came close to us. I felt their

hands touching, striking, violating. He roughly licked the blood off my lips and pulled me to him. *Oh, mademoiselle*, I cried out to my soulner, *Oh! I am so sorry! What have I done to you? Forgive me, please!*

He struck me with his fist, and I fell to the floor. He laughed at me and lowered his trousers. The others held me. He came down onto me and I screamed at the stab of agony as he raped me. Sorrow mixed with pain and failure washed over me. *Mademoi..*

NO!! NO!! PLEASE!! STOP!! NOOOO!!!

IT WAS ALL DARK AGAIN. I STRUGGLED OFF MY BACK AND STOOD UP. CRYING WITH ANGER AND DESPAIR AND TERROR, I STARTED RUNNING. SHAME AND HUMILIATION, WORSE THAN THE I HAD, FLOODED OVER ME. I COULD SMELL MY OWN, WELLING BLOOD AND IT TURNED MY STOMACH. I WAS DIRTY, DIRTY, DIRTY! I HEARD DERISIVE LAUGHTER FILLING MY EARS, PIERCING MY SOUL. TWISTING, FOREIGN PAIN FLOWED OUT FROM THE MIDDLE OF MY BODY, POLLUTING AND MAKING FILTHY ALL THAT IT TOUCHED. I RAN AND RAN AND RAN INTO THE DARKNESS. MY BREATH WAS COMING IN RAGGED GASPS, MY SCREAMING SO HOARSE AS TO BE RASPING. THE LAUGHTER HAD FADED AWAY, TURNING INTO A ROARING SOUND. THE TWISTING PAIN AT MY WAIST BECAME A STABBING PAIN, DRAINING THE ENERGY AND LIFE FROM MY BODY. I STUMBLED AND FELL. SOBBING, I CURLED UP TO PROTECT MYSELF, BUT NO MATTER HOW I COVERED MYSELF, HOW I TURNED AWAY, A VILE TOUCH WOULD DISCOVER A WEAKNESS AND ASSAIL ME. I BECAME TOO WEAK TO RESIST, AND SOMETHING PULLED MY ARMS AND LEGS OPEN, EXPOSING ME TO MY ATTACKERS. I MOANED AND BEGGED WEAKLY, BUT HAD ALREADY DESPAIRED AT THE FUTILITY OF IT. I COULD ONLY ESCAPE ONE WAY. I BURROWED DEEPER AND DEEPER INTO MY MIND, HIDING FROM THEM. IF I SHUT EVERYTHING OUT, THEY WOULD NOT FIND ME AND HURT ME MORE. SLOWLY, THE PAIN AND SHAME FADED. THEN ALL MY FEELINGS FADED. I DREW MYSELF UP AGAIN, FAR INSIDE MY MIND, AND WHIMPERED AS I SLIPPED INTO OBLIVION. SWEET, WARM, SAFE OBLIVION, WHERE NOTHING COULD HURT ME ANYMORE...

* * * *

Corporal Thadeus Jordon had few illusions left. He had been in NAtch Infantry for ten months, but had aged as many years in that time. He'd joined of his own free will, thinking he could make a difference, that he could protect society. It was only three days into boot camp when he began to feel the indoctrination eating at his principles, hopes, and at his illusions. Now, disillusioned and hardened, he knew the day was approaching when he would be one of the men racing off in the hov, intent only on savaging the helpless girl who struggled in their midst.

But that day wasn't today. What he saw made him sick, though not as sick as it once did. The girl said she had spoken to Major Deiley only hours ago. It seemed a reasonable assumption that he might still be

interested in her for reasons that were none of Jordon's business. And should Major Deiley find out about the raping, he might be displeased. He tapped into the simple terminal in the guard hut and asked Protocol Routing to connect him. If he was wrong, then he, Jordon, would spend the rest of his life patrolling the asteroid belt. He'd best have something more to please Major Deiley. While he waited for the Major to come on line, he initiated a search of a Professor Philip LeClaire who had lived in France three centuries ago.

* * * *

THE SMELL OF ... OF ... JET FUEL.

THROUGH MY COCOON OF APATHY AND WITHDRAWAL, I RECOGNIZED THE SMELL AS JET FUEL. I TRIED TO IGNORE IT, BUT THE BURNING SMELL PERSISTED. CURIOSITY, EVEN THROUGH THE LINGERING REMNANTS OF FEAR AND DISGUST AND LOATHING, SHARPENED MY MIND. WHY WOULD I BE SMELLING JET FUEL? ALL FOSSIL FUELS HAD BEEN BOTH EXHAUSTED AND DISCARDED CENTURIES AGO.

MY EMOTIONS BEGAN RELAXING THEIR GRIP ON MY MIND, ALLOWING IT TO REACH OUT TO LOCATE THE SOURCE OF THE ODOR. I UNWRAPPED MY ARMS CAREFULLY, READY TO CURL UP AND WITHDRAW AT THE FIRST FOUL TOUCH. MY TERROR HAD BEEN SO GREAT THAT HAD I BEEN VIOLATED AGAIN AT THAT MOMENT, I WOULD HAVE BEEN LOST. BUT NOTHING TOUCHED ME, NOTHING VIOLATED ME. THE VILE SENSATIONS WERE GONE. I WAS BEING LEFT ALONE. OR I HAD COMPLETELY REMOVED MYSELF FROM MY BODY. I DID NOT WISH TO FIND OUT, FEARING THE AWARENESS WOULD RETURN.

BUT I DID WANT TO FIND THE SOURCE OF THE SMELL. I STOOD UP, SWAYING AND NEARLY FALLING. STAGGERING AT FIRST, THEN GAINING ENOUGH STRENGTH TO STEADY MYSELF, I WALKED TOWARD THE ODOR.

I WALKED FOR MANY MINUTES INTO THE DARKNESS. THE SMELL BECAME STRONGER THOUGH NOT OVERPOWERING. THE ROARING SOUND ALSO INTENSIFIED. FINALLY, WHEN MY WEAKNESS BEGAN TO COVER ME AGAIN, I SAW A LIGHT UP AHEAD. A LIGHT THAT SEEMED TO BE PEEKING OUT OF THE SPACES LEFT BY TWO ILL-FITTING DOORS. I STUMBLED TO THEM, HOPING TO FIND SOMEONE WHO COULD EXPLAIN ALL THIS TO ME. APPROACHING THE DOORS ON A STAGGERING HALF RUN, I PLUNGED AGAINST THEM AND THEY BURST OPEN, CAUSING ME TO FALL ONTO THE FLOOR.

IT WAS VERY BRIGHT ON THE INSIDE AND I IMMEDIATELY UNDERSTOOD THE SOURCE THE FUEL SMELL, THOUGH THE ROARING ABRUPTLY STOPPED. I WAS IN AN OLD STYLE AIRPORT TERMINAL. IT WAS CIRCULAR AND HAD WINDOWS ALONG ALL THE SIDES EXCEPT AT THE TOP OF THE WAITING AREA, WHERE THERE WAS ANOTHER LARGE

DOOR WITH A SIGN ABOVE IT THAT SAID, "GATE" SITTING IN SEATS, AS THOUGH AWAITING THE ARRIVAL OF A FLIGHT, WERE TWO =WOMEN.

ONE WAS OLDER, WITH GRAYING HAIR. SHE WAS STARING OFF, AS THOUGH UNAWARE OF ME. THE OTHER WAS VERY YOUNG AND VOLUPTUOUS. SHE HAD A PILE OF LONG BLOND HAIR AND DEEP BLUE EYES THAT WERE WATCHING ME. BOTH OF THEM WERE NAKED. LOOKING AT MYSELF, I SAW THAT I WAS NAKED AS WELL, BUT FELT NO DISCOMFORT. I CAREFULLY STOOD UP AND APPROACHED THE WOMEN.

THE YOUNGER ONE STOOD UP AND SMILED, HOLDING HER HANDS BEHIND HER BACK. THE OLDER WOMAN CONTINUED TO IGNORE ME.

I OPENED MY MOUTH TO SAY SOMETHING AND HEARD A CLICKING SOUND BEHIND ME. I SPUN AROUND, FEELING THE FEAR RISE UP. BUT NO ONE WAS THERE TO ATTACK ME. INSTEAD, THE WINDOWS HAD DISAPPEARED AND THE SPACE WAS NOW OCCUPIED BY SEVERAL BANKS OF COMPUTERS. THERE SEEMED TO BE FIVE DISTINCT MODELS, AND ALTHOUGH I WAS NOT CERTAIN OF THEIR FUNCTION, THEY SEEMED TO HAVE DIFFERENT ONES. I FELT A TOUCH ON MY SHOULDER AND JUMPED.

IT WAS THE YOUNGER WOMAN. SHE WAS INCREDIBLY BEAUTIFUL. TALL, GRACEFUL, AND WELL-PROPORTIONED, SHE HAD A SOFT, LOVELY FACE AND SMOOTH SKIN. ONLY HER EYES SEEMED WRONG. DARK BLUE AND BRIGHT, THEIR SHINE SEEMED TO BETRAY A DEEP SADNESS. AND THEY WERE MISSING SOMETHING, A SPARK.

"ARE YOU MY SOULNER?" SHE ASKED TENTATIVELY.

"ME? I-I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHO YOU ARE, MISS." I STAMMERED OUT. "WHAT IS A SOULNER?"

"I DON'T KNOW. I'M SORRY, BUT I DON'T KNOW! I-I'M NOT VERY SMART. BUT I SAW YOU ONCE BEFORE, AND I WAS HOPING..." HER VOICE TRAILED OFF.

"YOU SAY YOU SAW ME ONCE BEFORE? WHEN?"

"WELL, I-I DON'T REMEMBER TOO WELL, BUT I WAS IN HERE FOR A LONG, LONG, TIME, AND THEN SUDDENLY, A LITTLE WHILE AGO, I WAS IN YOU." SHE POINTED AT MY BODY AND INDICATED SOME OF MY FEATURES. "I REMEMBER LOOKING LIKE THAT FOR AWHILE. AND I REMEMBER BEING TREATED NICE BY SOME PEOPLE, EVEN THOUGH THEY DIDN'T KNOW ME AND SEEMED SAD OF WHAT I AM. THEN THEY WENT AWAY AND I WAS BACK IN HERE. DID I DO SOMETHING WRONG?"

HER SPEECH WAS DIFFICULT TO FOLLOW, BUT HER MANNER TOLD ME EVERYTHING.

THIS HAD BEEN THE PROSTITUTE THAT I HAD SHARDED INTO LAST WEEK. OR HAD IT BEEN A YEAR? I DIDN'T HAVE A SENSE OF THE TIME PASSAGE. THAT I KNEW WHO SHE WAS DIDN'T HELP. IT ONLY CONFUSED THINGS FURTHER. WHAT WAS GOING ON? I POINTED TO THE OLDER WOMAN.

"WHO IS SHE?"

"THAT'S MISS DESHARD. SHE'S BEEN HERE EVEN LONGER THAN ME. SHE TALKS A LOT TO ME, BUT I DON'T LIKE LOTS OF WORDS. I LIKE TO PLAY, BUT SHE NEVER WANTS TO PLAY WITH ME, SHE WANTS TO TALK." SHE STARTED TO TELL ME HER IDEAS ABOUT PLAYING, BUT STOPPED WHEN I HELD UP A HAND, NOT WANTING TO HEAR. "SHE GOT QUIET A LITTLE WHILE AGO BECAUSE SHE STOPPED TALKING AT ALL. BUT MAYBE IT WAS A LONG TIME. I DON'T KNOW. DO YOU KNOW WHAT'S WRONG WITH HER?"

IGNORING THE QUESTION, I WALKED OVER TO MISS DECHANT AND SAT BESIDE HER. SHE WAS A HANDSOME WOMAN, PERHAPS FIFTY-FIVE OR SIXTY. IN GOOD HEALTH, SHE HAD A FIRM FRAME AND PLAIN FEATURES. HER EYES WERE DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHER GIRL'S IN THAT THEY WERE HAZEL AND VACANT. THEY WERE THE SAME IN THAT THEY ALSO SEEMED TO LACK A SPARK.

AN OLD QUOTE CAME TO ME. "THE EYES ARE THE WINDOWS OF THE SOUL." NOW WHY HAD I THOUGHT THAT? I TURNED TO THE GIRL.

"FORGIVE ME. MY NAME IS ABIGAIL. WHAT'S YOURS?"

SHE GIGGLED. "OH, I DON'T HAVE A NAME. I DON'T NEED ONE."

"WHY NOT?"

SHE SEEMED HAPPY TO TALK ABOUT SOMETHING SHE DID KNOW. "BECAUSE I MAKE MY MASTER HAPPY WITH MY BODY. IF MY MASTER WANTS TO GIVE ME A NAME, HE WILL. MY NEXT MASTER MIGHT GIVE ME ANOTHER ONE. OR HE MIGHT NOT GIVE ME A NAME. MOST OF MY MASTERS ARE LIKE THAT. DEKE WAS LIKE THAT. DEKE WAS MY FIRST OWNER AND I LOVED HIM. ONLY DEKE DIED AND I GOT ANOTHER OWNER."

I WANTED TO SHAKE HER AND KNOCK SOME SENSE INTO HER ... I SHOOK MY HEAD OF THE UNBIDDEN THOUGHTS. IT WOULD BE POINTLESS TO A CREATURE LIKE HER. INSTEAD, I POINTED AT THE VARIOUS COMPUTERS.

"DO YOU KNOW WHAT THOSE DO?"

SHE SHOOK HER HEAD. I WASN'T SURPRISED. I COULD REMEMBER HER THOUGHTS FROM

THE FEW DAYS THAT I SHARDED, AND NONE OF HER THOUGHTS WERE BEYOND A YOUNG CHILD'S, EXCEPT IN LOVE MAKING, WHERE SHE WAS AS OLD AS SIN ITSELF. I LOOKED AT HER, WITH HER STUNNINGLY MATURE PHYSIQUE AND HER PURPOSELY CRIPPLED MIND. I HAD SPENT A LIFE AS HER.

* * * *

Rawlins was enjoying himself thoroughly. The other three men had tired of the now unresponsive victim. Having spent themselves, they were talking loudly and playing cards on a nearby table, ignoring the two of them. He now had the unconscious girl for himself and he intended to take full advantage again.

He had been stationed in Glendale for six years now, and there was no sweeter detail available for a man of his tastes. In any other society, his uncontrollable lusts would have gotten him executed in very short order. But here, as a member of a NATech Suppression Squad, he was considered a valuable asset. He showed off his skill at suppression by striking the girl across the face, drawing blood, but no reaction. She was far beyond feeling, but Rawlins thrilled at his complete dominance over her, which was the whole point of rape. He would have to be careful not to kill this one, though. Killing them was a waste, ended his control over her, and could lead to an official reprimand and a few days in the brig. So it would be better to pace him-

A hardened boot smashed into his bare chest, breaking several ribs. The force of the kick ripped him off the limp form and sent him crashing into the wall. He started to rise, then slumped back down as a rib jammed into a lung.

"Corporal Rawlins, isn't it?" Even in the heat of the desert afternoon, Major Deiley's soft, calm voice could send a chill. The other three men were at rigid attention. Deiley ignored them, focusing on Rawlins instead.

"Yes. Yes, sir!" Rawlins wheezed out in agony.

"Why haven't you stood at attention, Corporal? This is insubordination, yes?"

Rawlins struggled to his feet, terror giving him sufficient incentive to ignore the broken ribs, even when one punctured his lung. He kept one arm wrapped around himself and saluted with the other.

"Sorry, sir. I was performing my duties as a member of the NATechSS group, and I-I—" He bent over slightly and coughed up blood. Major Deiley considered him carefully.

"You are mistaken, Corporal. You are not a member of NATechSS. You were transferred out of that group two hours ago, when word reached me that you were practicing submission routines on someone that I had spoken to just this morning." Rawlins shivered with fear as Deiley pulled out his pistol and

snapped on the charger. "Tell me, Corporal, why didn't you check to see if I may have had another use for this ripe? Perhaps report her presence to me, instead of leaving Jordon to do it?"

"Well, sir, I-I-I didn't think-"

"Ahhh! An admission! You're a brave man, Rawlins. I like a man who can clearly see the error of his ways. A man like that sets an excellent example for his comrades. But only once, I'm afraid. Attention!" Deiley raised his gun to eye level.

Rawlins knew what was coming. He had known this day would come, too, and had decided to face it when it did. He snapped to attention, able to force down the pain and to ignore the warm, sticky feeling that was filling his lungs.

"Yes, sir!" He came to attention and was able to remain at attention even when the beam punched through his right eye and out the back of his head. He stiffened, then fell at the feet of Deiley, beside the unconscious girl.

Deiley lightly kicked Rawlins' body to make certain he was dead. Deiley always made certain. Satisfied, he snapped his weapon off and holstered it. He was irritated with himself. Killing Rawlins was a pity, for the man had been good in the field. He would be difficult to replace. But better that than letting the men think Deiley was going to grant exceptions. He turned to the three men who were frozen in place.

"At ease, men. I do not hold you responsible. Rawlins was squad commander and you obeyed his orders. I have put each of you in for a unit commendation." They openly relaxed. Major Deiley did not play mind games. What he said, he meant.

"Two things, if you please. Place the girl in my hovercraft. Dress her in her clothes, if they're still serviceable. After that, see that Rawlins gets a proper burial. He was a good man." He turned to leave, then stopped. "Oh, and one final thing. Inform the Sonics Modification Group that I've promoted Private Jordon to NAtchSS. I'd like his treatment to be commence at once. He should make a good replacement for Rawlins. Good day, gentlemen."

Chapter Seven

HOW LONG HAVE I BEEN HERE?

IT SEEMS FOREVER, BUT IT COULDN'T BE MORE THAN A WEEK. OR COULD IT? WHEN I ADDED UP ALL THE TIME I'VE SPENT TALKING TO THE GIRL, WORKING WITH THE VARIOUS COMPUTERS, OR JUST EXPLORING OUR SURROUNDINGS, IT COULDN'T HAVE BEEN MORE

THAN TWO OR THREE DAYS. I HAD NOT SLEPT, BUT WASN'T TIRED, HADN'T EATEN BUT WASN'T HUNGRY, HADN'T DRUNK BUT WASN'T THIRSTY. NOTHING CHANGED, SO PASSAGE OF TIME WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO MARK. IT WAS POSSIBLE I HAD BEEN IN HERE FOR MOMENTS, MINUTES, OR MONTHS.

THE COMPUTERS WERE ALMOST HUMANLY STUBBORN. UPON FIRST INSPECTION, I WAS SURPRISED THAT I IMMEDIATELY RECOGNIZED THEM. THEY WERE COMPLETELY FAMILIAR IN THEIR LAYOUT, UTTERLY UNDERSTANDABLE IN THEIR FUNCTION AND OPERATION. FOR AN INSTANT-OR WAS IT A DAY OR TWO?-I FELT AN ELATION WASH OVER ME. HERE WAS MY CHANCE TO GET TO THE ROOT OF WHERE I WAS AND WHY.

A LONG TIME LATER, SOMEWHERE BETWEEN ONE HOUR AND ONE YEAR, I HAD ACHIEVED NOTHING BUT THE ASSASSINATION OF MY OPTIMISM. EVERYTHING I TRIED WORKED, EXCEPT IT DIDN'T. IN TURN, EVERY COMPUTER TOOK MY INPUT, PROCESSED MY QUERY, AND DISPLAYED THE INFORMATION. BUT I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND IT. I COULD READ IT, BUT I COULDN'T UNDERSTAND IT. EVEN FOCUSING ALL MY ATTENTION ON A SINGLE WORD WAS HOPELESS. THE SINGLE PIECE OF INFORMATION I GATHERED AND RETAINED WAS FROM A NET PRIMARY CONSOLE THAT DISPLAYED THE NUMBER THIRTY-SEVEN IN ITS HOLOGRAPHIC MIST. FRUSTRATED, I TURNED ELSEWHERE TO SATISFY MY NEED TO KNOW. I NEEDED TO ACCOMPLISH SOMETHING TO GAIN SOME MEASURE OF CONTROL OVER MY SITUATION.

BUT THE DOUBLE DOORS I HAD COME THROUGH GAVE ME NOTHING. THERE WAS A BLACKNESS BEYOND THAT I HAD SPENT HOURS OR WEEKS WANDERING THROUGH, YET ALL MY SEARCHING LED BACK TO THIS WAITING AREA. THE WINDOWS AND WHAT LAY BEYOND WERE A MYSTERY, TOO. I COULD LOOK OUTSIDE, SEE THE LANDSCAPE, AND IDENTIFY EVERYTHING I SAW. BUT I COULDN'T RETAIN THE MEMORY OF WHAT I SAW. EVEN AS I TURNED AWAY FROM THE WINDOW, MY MIND WAS WIPED CLEAN OF MY OBSERVATIONS, MY CONCLUSIONS, AND MY PLANS TO USE WHAT I DID SEE. IT WOULD HAVE BEEN AS FRUSTRATING AS THE COMPUTERS IF I COULD REMEMBER ANYTHING EXCEPT ACTUALLY LOOKING.

MISS DECHANT WAS UNCHANGED, STARING OFF INTO A VASTNESS THAT WAS BEYOND MY COMPREHENSION. I ALMOST ENVIED HER HER OBLIVION. YET IN THE SAME MOMENT, I HATED HER AND PITIED HER. I HATED HER BECAUSE SHE WAS GREATLY RESPONSIBLE FOR MY RAPE. BUT I HAD ALSO FELT HER HEART WRENCHING REMORSE AND SENSE OF FAILURE THAT HAD COVERED ME AS I ESCAPED INTO MY MIND FROM THE BUNKER. MISS DECHANT WAS ON THE OUTSIDE NOW, AND I WISHED HER WELL, FOR BOTH OUR SAKES. BUT AS FOR HELPING ME HERE, IN THIS PLACE, SHE WAS OF NO USE. WHICH LEFT ONLY THE GIRL.

THE GIRL. OTHER THAN FOR PLATONIC COMPANIONSHIP, SHE HAD LITTLE VALUE. SHE

WAS INCAPABLE OF GIVING ME ANY AID. SHE WAS CLUELESS AS TO THE FUNCTION OF THE COMPUTERS, HAD NO CURIOSITY IN WHAT LAY BEYOND THE GATE, NEVER WENT BEYOND THE TWO DOUBLE DOORS AND INDEED SEEMED INCAPABLE OF DOING SO. MY FIRST GUESS AS TO HER INTELLIGENCE WAS ACCURATE AND PERHAPS EVEN GENEROUS. HER MIND AND SPIRIT HAD BEEN WICKEDLY MUTILATED. STRIPPED OF NEARLY ALL INDEPENDENT THOUGHT, SHE HAD THE MIND OF AN ABUSED CHILD, A CHILD WHO HAD SEEN HORRIBLE THINGS, HAD DONE HORRIBLE THINGS. SHE WAS THE TERRIBLE PRODUCT OF HER EXPERIENCES AND HIDEOUS TRAINING. SHE UNDERSTOOD ONLY TWO THINGS: SEX AND VIOLENCE. SHE KNEW THEM VERY WELL AND SAW A FIRM CONNECTION BETWEEN THE TWO. IN HER MIND, THE TWO WERE BARBARICALLY INTERCHANGEABLE, AND SHE WAS THE SUBMISSIVE OBJECT TO BOTH. I ALMOST WISHED THAT IT HAD BEEN HER THAT I HAD ... NO, THAT WASN'T RIGHT. I COULD NOT BLAME HER FOR WHAT SHE WAS, AND WISHING MORE CRUELTY AND ABUSE ON HER ONLY BECAUSE SHE WAS MADE TO REVEL IN IT WAS WRONG. SHE REMINDED ME OF THE PLEASURE RIPES WE HAD RESCUED IN OUR LAST RAID, AND WAS UNDOUBTEDLY OF THE SAME MOLD AS THEY. WE RISKED OUR LIVES TO SAVE THEM. DIDN'T THAT PUT VALUE ON THEM? SHE WAS AS MUCH OF A PERSON AS MISS DECHANT. BUT HOW MUCH OF A PERSON WERE EITHER? HOW MUCH OF ME WAS TRAPPED IN THEM? WERE THEY ECHOES OF MY OWN SINFUL SOUL, OR JUST EMPTY VESSELS INTO WHICH MY SOUL WAS CONTORTED UNTIL IT FIT INSIDE?

I SHOOK MYSELF OUT OF MY MUSINGS AND RETURNED TO THE PROBLEM OF THE COMPUTERS.

* * * *

Recent events had made Major Deiley a man of mixed emotions and motives. Having a sharp mind and a detached ruthlessness that served him well, he had risen quickly through the NAtch ranks by not becoming personally involved with those under him. He saw his duty as a needed role to maintain the fabric of a strong society. He had always kept his focus on execution of duty and allowed his emotions to neither interfere nor participate. This single-mindedness had earned him fear and respect as a brutal but fair officer. His confidence in himself, his duty, and his method was not only high, it was unshakable. So this new problem, with its increasingly complex nuances, was both uncomfortable and exhilarating.

In the eleven days since he had taken Miss DeChant from the compound to his private quarters, she had been the perfect housemaid. True, she still carried the physical and emotional scarring of her squad rape. He was trying to ease that pain for her by allowing her extreme privacy in her own small room and bath, taking care to leave the house when she wanted to prepare for bed. He allowed her the dress she was used to, even though it was centuries outdated. Nothing was said when she disappeared whenever someone entered the base commander's small home. He did these things not out of kindness, but rather to make Miss DeChant become comfortable and further embed the shard's persona as he gained her trust. He had no interest in her as a woman and appreciated both her dress and discreteness. It helped greatly

in preventing rumors from spreading, rumors he would be forced to savagely crush.

In return, he could expect delicious meals, a clean home, and quiet, intelligent conversation. She quickly picked up on his habits and tastes, and he was being constantly surprised at her thoughtfulness in providing for the little things. She was almost too good to be true.

Which was the problem, and the reason for his uncertainty. As good a housekeeper as she was, this sharding episode would one day end, and Miss DeChant would be replaced by-what? From the reports of the fight on the night before he had first discovered the woman-despite her young age, her dress, carriage and manner forced him to think of her as a grown woman-she could very easily be one of the Resistance fighters that had obliterated his three best cohorts Perhaps even the instigator. If such were the case, she would be an =exceptionally dangerous enemy. He wasn't fooled by her youthful appearance. Having spent the latter part of his career dealing with Shards, Deiley had long ago learned to respect the potential of each one. His had been one life. Each of them had lived several, perhaps many, lives. This efficient maid, contentedly making his bed and placing his boots beside his favorite rocking chair, could in another persona have the ability to scorch and destroy a three hundred by one hundred meter piece of land without a single known weapon.

Which led to another feeling; curiosity. The investigating team had arrived at a theory, one which they couldn't believe but which did fit the facts. They speculated that the area had been destroyed by a plummeting microsat. They pointed to the pattern of the blast, the extensive heat markings and the size of the crater. It was the only solution, yet it made no sense. It was impossible to access a microsat, to modulate the shielding to prevent burnup on reentry, and then guide it to earth with such pinpoint accuracy that an attacking force less than fifty meters from the Resistance fighters would be wiped out, yet leave the other group untouched. The level of computer required to perform such calculations, security overrides, and judgment didn't exist.

Or did it? Wasn't a ripe a kind of computer? Pulling his terminal close to him, Deiley called for access. He pulled his robe tighter, and eased his left shoulder. He'd picked up a slug fourteen years prior and then spent a week on the marshes before being retrieved. It still hurt on occasion. Another benefit of Miss DeChant: she gave fabulous back rubs.

The access area poured down from the ceiling, and Miss DeChant immediately left the room, knowing he required complete privacy when he accessed. He absently thanked her as she departed, asking her for rice and pork for dinner. He would have been content to eat whatever she made, but he made a point of using every opportunity to reinforce this persona.

He was now in a large stone room. It contained only four walls covered with shelves of books. In the middle of the stone floor were a desk and a chair. There were no doors or windows. He cared nothing for the frivolities of the puterverse and did all his accessing from this room. He walked to the nearest wall and pulled out a book at random. He stated his desired reading material. The cover swirled momentarily, then formed a title, printed in gold: *Advances of Mental Collaboration Through Sonics* . The author's

name appeared below: Dr. Philip LeClaire. He walked back to the desk, absently wishing he had asked for a cup of Miss DeChant's herbal tea. Seating himself, he noticed a sweet smell and looked down. Miss DeChant had already prepared the tea and left it for him, having entered and left quietly while he was still setting up his access and before anything of a sensitive nature could be revealed. The woman was incredible.

Sipping his tea, Deiley spent an hour reading LeClaire's work. The man had a genius for the use of sonics on the brain, and was considered the leading pioneer in the field of mental suppression and manipulation. What interested Deiley most, however, was DeClaire's extensive research on noninvasive mental collaboration and the use of keyed memory encapsulation. He had used an unknowing subject for his final research project, a woman in her mid-fifties who was a ripe and was fully aware of the nature of her persona. Was Miss DeChant that subject? On first look, it seemed unlikely that LeClaire would take so large a risk as to keep a living, ongoing experiment in a position that had access to him when he was vulnerable. Yet it would allow for interactive and nearly constant observation of a subject known on such an intimate basis. And LeClaire had achieved his position and knowledge by taking risks. Perhaps...

There was something else. The Professor had acquired great respect and a considerable amount of power through the years. Yet it had all come crashing down in a single night, for reasons unknown. Unknown, but there were indicators. What few details there were pointed to Miss DeChant. Again.

Through his reading, Deiley had the distinct impression that someone had given the ripe to the Professor. Not the false persona, LeClaire had clearly chosen Miss DeChant's makeup, but the original personality, what shards called their soulner. Someone of great influence appeared to have chosen this specific soulner to be given to LeClaire. Why? What did it matter who the original personality was? Once it was ripped, it was unrecoverable. Certainly in that era. Even today it was a very volatile and risky endeavor, as evidenced by the thousands of shards he watched over.

So why this one? What was unique about this original persona, and what could be gained by using it in such a way? And if the Professor didn't choose, who did? As Deiley continued his reading, he became convinced that the main piece in this 300-year-old puzzle was not the gifted professor but the riped woman who gratefully and efficiently went about her mundane domestic duties.

Another emotion touched him: indecisiveness. This Shard tending his home and fixing his dinner had led at least two very interesting lives and had great value to him in either persona. And both personas seemed to point to a soulner that someone of significant power had considered important enough to monitor over a period of time. Did that value persist in the twenty-seventh century? Could Deiley use that to his advantage? Which persona was the most valuable, and how long could he keep her?

He felt a final emotion: excitement tinged with fear. He knew this feeling very well and enjoyed it immensely. He had stumbled upon a very high-risk game, centuries old, and was now a part of it. Whether the game was over and he was only piecing it together, or whether it continued on, he had no

idea. But he very much liked the old feeling of having his life on the table for the chance to play.

He sipped his tea, but it had cooled. He closed his book with a firm snap, signaling the access to end. As the walls faded from virtual to real, Deiley stood and stretched, flexing and rubbing his shoulder. The room smelled of succulent spiced pork and steamed rice. Dinner was waiting for him, with Miss DeChant standing humbly by to obediently serve him. Her selection of wine would, of course, be perfect.

* * * *

There was a sickening crack of bone as the man slammed against the stone wall. He choked out a cry, but had no breath to scream louder. His arm was useless, shattered in three places. He struggled to his feet and looked through the blood that smeared his vision. He assumed a wounded defensive position, using the wall as both a brace and safety point.

A dark, smallish figure closed on him before he finished setting. Utterly silent, the creature stopped in front of him and looked at him. It didn't touch him, didn't even make a movement he could detect, yet suddenly his leg gave out and again he heard the dull snapping of a bone. He fell to the ground, sobbing.

"Stop! Oh, God, please stop!"

The thing that was killing him did stop, or seemed to. It was such a dark night, and his vision was so blurry, though, that he couldn't be sure. It leaned close and he flinched, openly crying from pain and fear, as he waited for another blow and another broken bone.

"Why should I stop? Do you have a reason?"

"Yes! Yes. I-I-don't know what you want, but—" He screamed as a blade sank deep into his shoulder. The knife withdrew, and he felt warm blood soaking his shirt. It was metal, not a holoknife, so at least it didn't sever his arm. His attacker said nothing because both knew the question.

"All-all right. I know what you want. You're looking for a girl who disappeared around here about—"

"Quit stalling."

"Okay!" he yelled, bracing for another stab. Nothing happened, and he calmed down a little. He was more terrified than he had ever been in his life, and he was going to tell what he knew. But a small part of him felt anger and shame above the pain and fear, and he thought briefly of the four-shot energy gun in his boot.

"Okay," he continued, gaining a little strength. "I haven't seen the girl ... I haven't!" He almost shouted to convince the creature. "All I know is that one of the SS corporals hasn't been seen for a couple weeks,

and he was known to really ... to really enjoy ... you know..." He was hesitant to go into detail for fear of reprisal.

"I know what you mean. He's a big man with a mean, perverted soul that liked to destroy women. So why do I want to hear this?"

"I dunno. Maybe because he's been real regular for years, and now he's gone."

"What else?"

"Well, there's talk about the base commander having someone at his house all the time now. Only no one knows who. And the same time that Rawlins disappeared, the commander, guy named Deiley, was in the town, looking real hard for someone. And he never comes to town. Maybe Major Deiley got upset at Rawlins for raping this girl you were looking for because he was looking for her, too. The guy is like that. Listen, that's all I know. I swear." He slumped down, both in pain and to get his hand closer to the gun. He moaned. "Please. Let me get some mediaid. I'm busted up bad."

His assailant said nothing, but turned away, ignoring him. Now was the time. He reached a hand into his boot and charged the unit. Had he left it in his boot for the full three-second charge time, the sound might have gone unheard. But he was anxious and brought it out immediately. He pulled the gun up level and pointed it at ... At what? His attacker was gone, completely disapp-

The knife cut deep into his throat, slicing it open. He felt warm and dizzy and sleepy. All his pain went away, and the alley became even darker than it had been. He couldn't hear the gun charging anymore, but it didn't seem all that important now...

Susie pulled the gun out of the dead man's hand and turned it off. This was the best lead she'd had yet, and she had been willing to let him live. Oh, well. Probably better this way. Stooping, she wiped her knife off on the man's pants, then sheathed it. The gun she tossed into a nearby pile of rubble. She'd tell someone back at base about it; it would be retrieved once it had been checked for internal trackers.

She paused for a moment, thinking, then headed west, toward the base. It would be difficult to verify what the man had told her, but she didn't need verification. In their sixteen days of searching, it was very obvious that Abigail was not roaming around in Glendale . Even if she had sharded, which seemed certain now, she would have been spotted by one of the many units that the Resistance maintained here to care for and protect the Shards. There had been a brief hope two days ago, when the search teams had come upon a Shard named Ellen. She had been uncooperative, but she had admitted to having seen Abigail and had her clothing. Though she denied it, other Shards had said they saw NATech go into her home the same morning Susie and Abigail had separated. This information, coupled with what Susie had just learned, placed Abigail in the NATech primary compound, and probably in Major Deiley's house. Susie shuddered and hoped Abby had not sharded as that pleasure ripe. She had no idea what kind of person Major Deiley was, but there was little point in hoping for the best when it concerned NATech.

She picked up her pace.

An hour later, Susie passed through the final checkpoint and entered the primary Resistance base in Glendale . It was a makeshift location, frequently moved and poorly equipped. Since there was little that wasn't under NAtch influence, it was the best that could be done. Sometimes, it was enough. This time it wasn't.

Alan looked up from his flat display terminal as Susie entered the room. He saw the blood on her pants and shirt, but made no comment. He'd known Susie for over ten years, since she had first joined as an idealistic teenager right after her parents had emigrated. Susie had become involved with Research, but she could as easily have become an Enforcement noncom. Tonight, seeing the intensity in her eyes, Alan was glad she had chosen the path she did. Susie would have been consumed by combat, and a wonderful person would have been lost.

"What news, Susan?" he called out at she walked over to him.

"Finally got a break, Alan! I've verified Abigail's whereabouts, and we were right, she's in Primary. Worse, she's with the base commander."

"Maybe not worse," Alan said slowly, calling up a report. "The base commander is a major by the name of Benjamin Deiley. He's been in command of the Glendale barracks for twelve years. He's ruthless, cold-blooded, and no nonsense. On the up side, he's ruthless, cold-blooded, and no nonsense."

"So he wouldn't like you," Susie said acidly. "Why would those things be good?"

"Because he treats Shards with the same efficiency as his men, and is as hard on his men as the Shards. He makes use of the NAtchSS rape squads, but keeps them under a tight reign. Relatively speaking," He added quickly at Susie's hard look. She wasn't as numb to this as he was. "He doesn't tolerate Shard abuse unless it's to the benefit of his command, both military and civilian. Unless he saw a point in beating or raping Abigail, it's very unlikely that he did. So the question would seem to be: did he?" He looked at Susie inquiringly. She didn't react, but looked at him impassively.

He paused, knowing from his years in Research he was treading on shaky ground. "Could you tell me if Abigail had a riping that would make her useful to Deiley?"

Susie said nothing for a moment. The details of a Cue's riping were known only by her researcher, and they were not shared with anyone. Was this the exception to the rule? Susie had worked with Alan in Research years ago, so she knew how difficult it was for Alan to ask. And with Abigail in just about the worst possible position-sharded, cut off and deep inside NAtch's influence-Susie couldn't see how telling Alan could hurt more. She nodded assent, and Alan motioned to the few people in the room for privacy. They left quietly. Susie pulled up an old chair and sat close to Alan.

"There are two human personas and one machine ripe in Abby's past that Deiley would find immensely useful, only in very different ways.

"The first human one was the one I'd already told you about; the pleasure girl. Abby had a sharding episode about three weeks ago as that creature, which is what precipitated our leave to Phoenix .

"The second human was also female, but somewhat different. She was a maid by the name of Miss DeChant. She was owned by one of the more respected sonics theorists at the Paris Institute during the twenty-fourth century. There didn't seem to be anything special about this ripe other than her closeness to a man of relatively high position and possibly on NATech's credrolls. We're not sure. NATech hadn't gone public at the time. The man, Philip LeClaire, disappeared one night and was never seen again. Likewise Miss DeChant.

"The machine ripe-

"Wait a moment," Alan interrupted. "You said Miss DeChant disappeared? But that's Abigail."

"I know that. But as you should know, Alan, even though we can piece together a Cue's ripes, there are almost always gaps. In Abby's case, she has a gap of 117 years from the time she was Miss DeChant until we located her again as this pleasure girl. It was these two personas that led us to assume she had originally been female."

"You mean..." Alan's voice trailed off and his eyes widened.

"I'm sorry. You don't know. Yes, Abigail was originally a man by the name of John Wyeth. She's the only Cue that's been mis-sexed, to code a phrase. She's made the adjustment extremely well in the last two years, and probably doesn't give it another thought. In fact, I know she doesn't except on rare occasions, and even then it's more of a looking back than reliving.

"Anyway, back to the subject. The most likely machine she may have sharded into would be a Netter. She was a Netter from 2051 until 2251. Although a lot of those records were destroyed in the EM fallout after the Rock, there were enough brain traces left to estimate those years."

Alan nodded. "She'd be very useful then, if for nothing other than an historical source. I know Deiley does have an interest in history. I've read a couple of his submissions, and he's quite good. But I don't know if he would keep her just because she's a database. Is that it?"

Susie nodded. "There are other personas, of course, though they were all machine. But nothing of interest to Deiley."

"Okay. So what do we do?"

"What likelihood is there that she's sharded as a pleasure ripe?"

"Probably not much. Most base commanders keep a pleasure ripe at their home. Some keep two or three. It's considered a compensation that comes with the office." Susie made a face. "Sorry, Susan, but that's reality. The NATech female commanders do the same." He looked at his terminal thoughtfully.

"But not Deiley. There's never been a mark against him in that area. And there have been three times when he instantly and harshly responded to unfounded rumors that even hinted that he kept a pleasure ripe. In two of the instances, he personally executed the instigator. So it's unlikely that Abigail is ripped as a pleasure girl. Deiley would either kill or release her as quickly as he could.

"So that leaves Miss DeChant, the Netter, and her original persona. All three have possibilities."

"Surely not the last one, Alan. If Abigail were herself, trust me, she'd have contacted us by now."

"Listen, Susan, you don't know Deiley the way..."

"No, you listen, Alan. Who do you think got us out of the jam that started this whole mess? It was Abigail. One of her programs, rather."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"That's because you've never had to. Abby's written a program that is almost a living thing. She calls him Mike. It was Mike that brought that microsat down and wiped out the NATech squads."

Alan shook his head. "That's not possible. Your saying Abigail wrote a program that in turn wrote its own program to bring down a microsat with such precision that it could be used as weapon? It can't be done. The microsat would have to be commandeered, the shields remodulated, and the guidance system completely rewritten. And all in, what? Five minutes? To do that, the guidance system would require picosecond response times, and without true judgment, it.. would..."

Alan's voice died off as realization came over him. Susie continued to look at him impassively, waiting for full understanding to dawn on him. Then she nodded.

"That's right, Alan. From what we've been able to determine, Abigail understands and can program in unbound trinary code. How much, we don't know. But enough to be able to turn her programs into pseudo lifeforms. That's why we *must* get her back. If NATech were to discover..."

"Geez! At the best, they'd kill her and lose the secrets. But at worst, NATech would learn unbound trinary code and they'd seize an unbreakable grip in the puterverse!" He looked at her sharply. "So what does this have to do with Abigail's current ripe?"

"Don't you see? Abigail's fully capable of escaping a NATech compound, or if not that, then getting a message to her cyberfriend, Mike. But Mike's found no trace of her in the past sixteen days."

"You've *talked* to this Mike?"

"Three or four times a day. He's a rude, immature jerk, and difficult to get to cooperate, but he cares for Abby deeply, and has been incredibly helpful in keeping watch for her to access. She hasn't put in an access at *any* level. That almost certainly means that she's accessing as a Shard, if at all."

Alan looked like he'd been hit with a board. "Wait. This is too much. Mike can access *everything* ? Surely not the private access areas of NATech's base commanders. Why the security codes alone, along with the worms and-

"Just little toys for Mike to break, Alan. You have to see this guy to believe him. Abby, too. In the puterverse, she's a completely different person. She's still Abby, but she strikes you as mature woman, with a great deal of power."

"I have got to meet this Mike." Alan had a thought. "So if Mike can constantly scan for Abigail, why haven't we asked him to also scan for this Miss DeChant or the Netter?"

Susie stared at him, then gave a short derisive laugh. "Because I'm an idiot, Alan, that's why. Of course he can do it. All I need to do is tell him where to find the profiles and imprints of the other two ripes."

Alan stood up and offered his terminal to Susie. She sat down and took a deep breath. Dealing with Mike was not a favorite pastime. She waited a moment longer, then asked for access.

The room faded to black. A vast prairie opened up, with mounds and valleys. Every mound was dotted with green access passages and every valley had silver blue data streams, shot with gold, flowing through it. In the furthest distance, a low black shape clouded the horizon.

"Incredible!" Alan was standing behind Susie and seemed slightly dazed. "I've never seen such wide open areas! Susie, how did you get this kind of access? It must be at least level ten!"

"It's level twelve limited eighteen. Abby gave it to me. She had me at up to level fourteen, but I couldn't handle it. It's the wildest thing I've ever seen, except when I'm with Abby. She says she uses level thirty-one."

Alan was still staring around in disbelief and barely heard the question. "I can't get over this! And she's at thirty-one? Or don't you believe her?"

"I don't. I think she's higher than that and doesn't want to hurt my feelings. Personally, I don't think she

has a level."

"Wow. I have to admit I'm beginning to see your interest in Abigail."

"That's not it at all, Alan!" Susie said sharply.

"I know. I'm sorry. That didn't sound the way I meant it. So, how do we find Mike?"

"That's one good thing about him. He finds you." Susie turned toward the open plain and cupped her hands around her mouth. "Hey! Mike!"

"It's about time you showed, flesh." An impudent voice spoke up behind them. Susie was used to Mike's tactics and would have been surprised if he hadn't appeared behind her. Alan, however, was jolted, and spun around. Mike looked at him through narrowed green slits.

"So who's this turkey, flesh? Another little joyrider, come to see the great Mike?"

Alan recovered quickly. He was used to programs being subservient and polite, but at least Susie had warned him.

"No, I'm not a wild bird, Mike. My name is..."

"I couldn't care less what your name is, turkey. Beat it. You're not wanted."

"Shut your yap, Mike, and pay attention." Susie stepped between the two. "His name is Alan Lockwood. He's a lieutenant for the Twelfth Regiment and he-"

"The Twelfth?" His tone changed considerably. "That's different. What can I do for you, Lieutenant?" Mike bowed slightly. It was Susie's turn to narrow her eyes. Alan, unfortunately, took the bait.

"That's better. We're trying to find ... AAAAHHHH!" The scene abruptly changed to a lake of fire. Alan could feel the heat on his legs and the fire in his lungs. All about him, tiny winged creatures made of bones and tar were shooting and stabbing at him. Afraid that the base had been hit, he started to call for shut off, but Susie jumped in.

"No! That's what he wants, Alan! He's just toying with us because to him we're just unimportant flesh." Susie had to shout over the flames. She was coughing continuously. "The only one he really cares about is Abigail! This is his way of lashing out. Understand? Other than her, we're all the same!"

Alan nodded and tried to look past the pain. He knew it was psychosomatic, which helped ease the effects. But the pain still continued. He shouted above the roar. A tar devil flew into his mouth and

started stabbing his tongue, but he ignored it.

"Mike! Listen! We've got a way to find Abby! But you've got to help!" He broke off in a fit of coughing, spitting out the tar devil.

"Yeah, right! Pull the other one, turkey!" His voice was a deafening roar. Alan's ears vibrated and bled from the sound. Yet it was a sound that had soul wrenching anguish and burning hatred in it. "You flesh have messed with her before! Abby! Oh, Abby!" it wailed, "where are you?"

"We know where she is, Mike! We've found her!" Susie was up to her knees in tar, and her clothes were smoking. "Do you hear, Mike? We ... have ... found ... OH!"

The lake was gone. The imps were gone. Alan and Susie were back in the open field, Susie on her hands and knees. Alan was feeling very disoriented, but knew this was the moment. He heard a step and saw Mike coming up to him.

"Is it true? You found her? Oh, please! You found her? Is she all right?" he sobbed quietly. Alan stared, his emotions reeling. What kind of creature was this?

"Yes, Mike, we've found her. She's sharded again, and seems to be on the Primary compound of NATEch's Glendale base. We're not sure exactly where..."

"YOU SAID YOU FOUND HER! YOU'RE A LIAR!" Mike started to glow a brilliant yellow. Black flickered deep inside his body. "YOU SAID..."

"We did find her! But we need you to pinpoint her whereabouts. We know that she's sharded, Mike. That's the only way you could have missed her, isn't it?" Mike flinched, and Alan had a sudden conviction. He pressed the point. "That's it, isn't it, Mike? You're blaming yourself. You think it's your fault, don't you?"

"Turkey ! It *is* my fault! If I could have just kept her in the puterverse, she wouldn't be some piece of stupid flesh now." He was openly sobbing now, all pretense gone. Susie looked at him and pitied him. He'd been such an impudent program before, but Alan had swept that all away. She looked at Alan in wonder, not knowing how he had accomplished this.

"My name is Alan, Mike. Not turkey. And it's not your fault. Not entirely. We're to blame, too. But now isn't the time to find guilt. Let's find Abigail. Will you help?"

Mike sniffed. An energy tear splashed off his form and onto the ground, causing the violet grass to shimmer and grow several centimeters. He nodded. "All right, Alan. But how can I help? I've searched as hard as I could. And I've been watching all 1.63473 billion interfaces on Earth and on the moon. I've even tapped into several of the hyperidors and accessed their nets, hoping I might catch it if they took

her off planet. But I ... CAN'T ... FIND ... HER!"

He was getting hysterical again. Alan had to calm him down quickly. "That's because she's sharded, Mike! Abigail is not Abigail! Not right now. But we've got it narrowed down to one of two possibilities. And you don't have to search every access, just a few thousand." Quickly, he gave Mike the details as he had them. Susie provided what she knew, along with several of her assumptions.

The change that came over Mike was rapid and extreme. He became almost wild with happiness. He jumped into the air. Razor-sharp emerald wings, tipped with blazes of white, sprang from his back. He shouted and screamed and laughed And then he disappeared, leaving Alan and Susie staring up into the starless pitch-black sky of the puterverse.

"So that was Mike," Alan said conversationally.

"I think that was," Susie stammered. "However did you get him to cooperate? I've been talking to him for more than a year, and he never calls me by my name. I'm just 'flesh' to him, except when I'm with Abby. Then he doesn't call me anything."

"You helped me out, Susie. If Abigail was just using pseudo trinary, then Mike would have been a program with subroutines for emotions. He'd be a lot easier to handle, because everything is just lines of code to him.

"But if Abigail's been using real, unbound trinary, then Mike is feeling his grief and guilt, because they're not subroutines, they're actual emotions. Once you led me into seeing that Mike's a creature of unbound trinary, I took the cue from that and treated him the way I'd treat any headstrong, unpredictable teenage boy. And believe me, since many of the Shards we get in Glendale are just that, I've learned how to deal with them." He avoided Susie's admiring look and pointed up. "And here he comes, now. That was quick!"

Mike shot out of the sky, going into a near vertical stoop, aiming right at Alan. Alan stood his ground, shaking his arms with encouragement, goading Mike on. He plummeted, straight down now, then exploded into a multi-hued flash only meters above their heads. There was a peal of thunder, and then Mike was standing in front of Alan, his eyes burning bright, bright green.

"You were right, Alan! I've found her!" His eager tone and willingness to please was a physical blow to Susie. "She's sharded as Miss DeChant, no first name, and is Major Deiley's housekeeper." His eyes went black and pinpoints of hate ignited deep inside. "If he's done anything to her, I'll kill him the next time he accesses."

"Let's not, Mike. I think Deiley's probably the best of that lot. Let's leave him alone for now and concentrate on getting Abby out of there. What can we do? More importantly, Mike, what can we do together?"

Mike thought about it, folding his hands in front of his mouth and steepling his forefingers and pinkies, exactly the way Abigail did. There were a lot of things about him that reminded Susie of Abigail. Watching him, she suddenly understood that was why they had never gotten along. Mike and Abigail were very similar, and Susie had held it against Mike. Could Susie have been the cause for all the friction? That might be overstating it, but perhaps she was contributing. And now that she was looking at Mike as a real person, it was easier to see that her approach had been wrong. He *was* a real person. Of unfathomable abilities and composed of pure energy, but with fragile emotions and undying loyalty to his creator. Susie's eyes opened wide in revelation. Mike actually loved Abby.

Mike put his hands down and looked at Alan thoughtfully. "What do you think we should do, Alan?"

"Good question. I think our first priority is to end Abby's sharding episode and get her back in control."

"Yeah, I agree. I can maintain a constant watch on the place. Deiley's got some tricky security, but it's not a problem. I can even get it to work for me."

"That'll help a lot, Mike," Alan said gratefully. "But we need more. Deiley's not a fool. If he spots the change in Abigail, he's going to act quickly. In the meantime, he's going to do things to further embed the persona of Miss DeChant. Can you do anything to help us shake that persona loose, then alert us the instant it happens?"

"Alerting you is easy. Getting Abby's shard to end ... that's tough. I've never even thought about trying something like that. I'm not sure I could."

"Really? For some reason, I'm sure that you can. I don't know Abigail personally, but Susie's her best flesh friend, and she has complete faith in Abigail's abilities." Susie saw Mike straighten proudly, both from the compliment and from the fact that Alan had qualified her friendship to Abby as a flesh friend. That kept Susie and Mike from competing for Abby's affections. "Give it some thought. If you find anything, or have some ideas, give me a call and we'll talk them over."

"You bet, Alan! You can count on me. We'll get Abby out of there real soon!" Mike looked over at Susie. Staring at the ground, he actually looked awkward.

"Hey, I'm sorry I've been rude. I guess I've been a little jealous. Abby loves you, and I didn't like that she loved you and not me."

"Idiot," Susie said with a smile and soft, trembling voice. "You don't think that Abby's special enough that she can't love both of us, Mike?"

He looked at her for a moment and nodded. "You're right. She is that special. I'm sorry. Susie." He jumped up, and his sprouting wings shot him into the sky. "We'll be talking soon!" he shouted down to

them. And then he was gone.

The field faded away and Alan's walls returned. Alan felt completely drained. He'd never been to twelve before and could see that it took considerable endurance to do it. He marveled that Susie did this on a regular basis.

Not that she looked that impressive now. Like him, she was covered with sweat and winded. She smiled at his look and stretched some, groaning a bit.

"You might want to get a full night's sleep, Alan. You're really going to really ache in the morning. But you've earned it. You did more with Mike in one meeting than I did in a year." She still seemed unbelieving.

"It was easier for me. I know how to deal with boys his age. And," he paused to emphasize, "I wasn't competing for Abigail's love. I said I wanted to meet Mike. Now that I have, I very much want to meet Abigail. She must be someone very wonderful to evoke such emotion from two very different kinds of friends."

Susie looked down to the floor. She pictured Abigail in Deiley's quarters, tending his home, cooking his meals, obeying his wishes. She remembered the dull eyes that looked back at her whenever Abigail sharded, and knew those same eyes were dull once more. Her own eyes misted, and she looked back at Alan.

"She is wonderful, Alan. Very wonderful."

"And what about what Mike said about Deiley? 'If he's done anything to her, I'll kill him the next time he accesses.' That's impossible. A puterverse creation can't kill."

"Do you believe that, Alan? That Mike couldn't kill if driven to it?"

Alan thought about the lake of fire and the burning in his lungs. He thought about the wail of anguish and the pinpoint of hate in Mike's eyes. And he thought about Mike's threat, and how maybe it wasn't impossible after all.

Chapter Eight

I closed the door to my room and turned the lights low. Placing my tea on the tiny nightstand, I prepared for bed. Major Deiley had been very gracious in allowing me this corner of his home. It had a private bath and bedroom set off from the rest of the household. I could retreat here whenever my duties

allowed me, yet be ready to serve him at the sound of his firm, comforting voice.

Making sure the door was locked and a chair placed against it, I darkened the window glass and closed the curtains tight. I then slipped into the bathroom, careful not to turn on a light until I had closed and locked the bathroom door as well. Once I was certain no one could see me, I undressed and showered, my stomach jumping at any sound other than what I expected. All my showers were like this now, and I fear that I shall be like this for a long time to come. It had been over three weeks now since my ordeal, and although the physical wounds had healed, the spiritual ones were still raw. I would bear it all gladly, though, if I knew that it would never touch my soulner. For Professor LeClaire had been right: it was now possible to restore the soulner's persona, and such had been the case with me.

Feeling the warm water splashing over my shoulders and body was always soothing, and it slowly washed my nervousness and fear down the drain. The pulsing water also tended to make me reflective. As I rubbed my soapy hands over myself, I became very sad at how poorly I had taken care of my soulner's body. I didn't know the circumstances of my sharding, but that did not lessen my responsibility to my true mistress. Though Major Deiley owned my body, I was the one who needed to take care of it for its rightful owner. And I had not.

I turned off the water and dried myself. Seeing myself in the mirror, I was ashamed, and turned away. It had been like that since those creatures that only looked like men had forced themselves upon me. Each had taken his turn, raping and hurting me. Then, when they wearied of their sport, my horror became even worse as their leader claimed me. Thankfully, I had lost consciousness after his beatings and repeated rapes had become too much. And I was also thankful that he was now dead, killed by my master. The price would continue to be exacted, however, and my mirror would remain untouched by this beautiful yet now spoiled body that was not mine. I dressed in my underclothes and nightgown, then turned the bathroom light off.

My bath was attached to my bedroom, so no one could see me. I sat at the little stool to comb my hair out. It was only here that I could look in the mirror. With my nightgown closed up to the neck and by concentrating on my long hair, I could bear seeing my reflection. But it was difficult. Sipping my tea, then setting the cup down, I picked up my brush and began. Tonight, I would try for two hundred strokes.

Twenty. I would need to pick up a softer white wine for the chicken with peas I was serving Friday. I planned how to prepare it and the best time to begin. Forty. The flooring in the Major's room had gathered some additional wax about the floorboards and I would need to scrape it clear and shine the wood again. Sixty. My apron had been torn when I caught it on a corner this afternoon, so I shall have to sew it up tomorrow morning. Major Deiley told me to order a new one, but there was no need to discard what I could repair so well that no one would notice.

Eighty. The menu for Major Deiley's minor reception tomorrow evening had been fully planned, except for one detail. Captain Miller had a particular fondness for roast beef, but I needed to work out a way to

prepare it without it flavoring the trout I would be steaming for Captain Dimille. One hundred. How could I have been so blind as to what would happen to me once I had entered the base? Why couldn't I have simply turned around and ... No! One hundred. I would need to access the puter to learn better techniques for rubbing Major Deiley's shoulder. With the arrival of the higher humidity these past two days, it was giving him more discomfort. He tried to hide it, but I could see he was in pain. It was my duty to work that pain away.

One hundred and twenty. Perhaps it was time to consider getting a new dress. What I wore was very comfortable, and safe, but it was very old-fashioned ... and had I been wearing it that day, I might not have tempted those ... very ... old ... fashioned, and I'm sure Major Deiley would like to see me more properly attired.

One hundred and forty. Could I really just brush away this guilt? Or should I just accept it as part of my life forever? How could ... how could she ever forgive ... forgive...

I wept, laying my head on my table, dropping the brush. Such a burden! This small, lively body, ruined by my stupidity! By my thoughtless and arrogant assuredness that nothing would happen once I told them I was not a sexual plaything. Ruined! I was as guilty as the men who raped me. Who raped my soulner.

Each night was the same. I struggled with my grief, and was able to weakly fight it off one more night. I wiped my eyes and straightened. I had failed her, but would not do so again! I looked into the mirror and stared into my own accusing eyes. *Miss DeChant, you will bear this burden! You will do what you can to prepare for her return, whether it be in ten seconds or ten years. What has happened is your fault, but it is past.* I set my mouth and repeated it in my head. *It. Is. Past. Rebuild the ruins, and offer it as best you can, to her when the moment arrived.* I picked up the brush and placed it on the table. One hundred and forty strokes. Perhaps two hundred tomorrow night.

I drank the remainder of my tea and climbed into the bed, pulling the sheets up high. I turned off the general lighting and turned on a reading light. Picking up my book, I read for nearly half an hour. I needed to become accomplished in the Terran/Martian Wars period. I found it detesting and frightening, but Major Deiley had commented several times on it, and it seemed a favorite topic of his, so I struggled through it. Fortunately, the wars had occurred only a few decades past my own life, so there was little extra history to prepare before studying the wars.

By the time I had reached the discussion of the Third Meeting's abrupt ending with the assassination of the Martian Vicar and the dissolution of the Pisces Congress, I was quite exhausted. Although the political ramifications were very fascinating for a French woman such as myself, it had been a long day. I marked the book carefully and turned off the light. I prepared myself and offered my prayers to my Lord, wondering if He were really *my* Lord. Could a person without a soul have a God? I didn't know, but I was charged with the safe keeping of my true mistress's soul, so I would take proper care of it. I finished my prayers and relaxed myself for sleep.

Lemon. My eyes opened and I looked at the ceiling. Captain Dimille always preferred lemon on her trout. I felt that fresh fish was ruined with anything more than a pinch of salt, but Captain Dimille insisted. And I had no lemon.

I rose quietly and returned to my table. Mounted on the wall was a terminal. It was nothing like Major Deiley's, but it served my purposes.

"Access. Miss DeChant, sublevel three minus."

"Access allowed. Good evening, Miss DeChant."

"Good evening, m'sieur computer."

"May I ask why you are accessing so late? This is far later than your normal access times."

"Oui, m'sieur computer. But I have a special order. I have forgotten to order lemon from the commissary, and I need some for Captain Dimille's steamed trout tomorrow evening."

"That is a very reasonable request and within normal behavioral parameters for you, Miss DeChant. I will be happy to forward your ... ABBY!"

WHAT?

WHO SAID THAT?

I BANGED MY HEAD ON THE UNDERSIDE OF THE COMPUTER CONSOLE, THEN SLITHERED OUT FROM UNDER IT SO FAST, I BURNED MY BARE BACKSIDE ON THE CARPET. STANDING UP, RUBBING MY SORE BOTTOM, I LISTENED. I KNEW SOMEONE HAD CALLED MY NAME. I LOOKED AT THE GIRL, BUT SHE WAS STARING OUT THE WINDOW, KEEPING HERSELF OCCUPIED. MISS DECHANT WAS NO DIFFERENT THAN SHE HAD BEEN SINCE I ARRIVED HERE TWENTY MINUTES AGO. OR WAS IT YEARS? I CONSTANTLY CONFUSED THE TWO.

"Pardon, m'sieur computer? What did you say?" His voice had changed from a kind man to that of a youthful boy.

"I said, 'ABIGAIL!' Eyes front and center!"

I SPUN AROUND AT THE SOUND OF THE SHARP VOICE. COULD IT BE ... WAS IT...

"MIKE? IS THAT YOU?"

"Mike, is that you?" I heard myself speaking out.

"Miss DeChant?" the computer said. Then, switching to wonderful, flawless, beautiful French, he continued. "Mademoiselle, do you know who I am?"

"I do not, m'sieur computer," I replied, my soul lifting as the sweet language again rolled off my tongue. "I do not know why I spoke that name."

"Please listen carefully then, Mademoiselle. I am trying to contact Abigail Wyeth. She is your soulner."

"No! This is true? That is fantastic! But how would you know this, m'sieur computer?"

"Please, call me Mike. I know because she is my dearest friend, and I have tried very hard to discover a way to return her. Do you wish to do this, Miss DeChant?"

"Oh! Oui, M'sieur, oui!" I felt like singing and shouting. Then I realized the danger. Softening my voice to a whisper, I said, "But, please, Mike, we must be careful. Major Deiley will be out until late tonight. And he has given me my privacy in these quarters. But your illegal access may cause difficulties."

"It's unlikely, Miss DeChant. I have spoken to the Major's security system, using very short words, and explained the situation. It will allow us to continue talking for as long as we wish, then forget this happened."

"That is wonderful, m'sieur! How do you do this?" I exclaimed.

"That is very technical, Mademoiselle, and painfully boring. Let us work together on contacting Abigail, shall we?"

"Certainly." My joy was crushed at once though as the memory returned. "But I fear I have not performed my duties adequately. I have-"

"Please, Mademoiselle. Although I can spend as much time as I wish, you may not have that time. I need you to relax and stare into the patterns I will make for you."

His voice was most insistent, so I agreed and stared into the brilliant colors that swirled in front of me, and listened to the soft sounds that filled my ears.

I WAS LOOKING RIGHT AT THE DOUBLE DOORS, THEN I SAW THE FLASH OF LIGHT. I HAD NEVER BEFORE SEEN ANYTHING BEYOND THOSE DOORS, BUT I KNEW INSTANTLY WHAT IT MEANT. IT WAS TIME TO GO. I STEPPED TOWARD THE DOORS, THEN WALKED OVER TO THE GIRL, WHO WAS STILL STARING OUT OF THE WINDOW.

PULLING HER HANDS AWAY FROM HERSELF, I TURNED HER AROUND AND LOOKED IN HER EYES. SHE APPEARED STRICKEN WITH SADNESS, AS THOUGH SHE HAD LEARNED SOMETHING FROM THE LANDSCAPE BEYOND OUR LITTLE PURGATORY.

"I MUST LEAVE NOW. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

"YES. YOU ARE LEAVING ME ALONE. THAT'S ALL RIGHT. I'VE BEEN LEFT ALONE LOTS OF TIMES. IT'S NOT SO BAD, AFTER AWHILE."

HER SIMPLE STATEMENT STABBED AT MY HEART. BUT IT WOULDN'T STOP ME.

"NO, I AM NOT LEAVING YOU ALONE. MISS DECHANT WILL BE HERE SHORTLY AFTER I LEAVE. PLEASE, CAN YOU TELL HER SOMETHING FOR ME?"

"I-I'LL TRY. I'M NOT VERY GOOD AT REMEMBERING WORDS."

"THAT'S OKAY, I UNDERSTAND. I WANT YOU TO TELL MISS DECHANT THAT I FORGIVE HER. CAN YOU REMEMBER? IT'S VERY IMPORTANT. TELL MISS DECHANT THAT I FORGIVE HER."

"TELL MISS DECHANT THAT YOU FORGIVE HER." SHE THOUGHT ABOUT IT FOR A MOMENT, THEN NODDED. "YES, I CAN REMEMBER THAT." SHE SEEMED HAPPY TO BE ABLE TO HELP. I SMILED AT HER SIMPLE HAPPINESS AND HUGGED HER, HOPING SHE WOULD NOT TAKE IT WRONG.

SHE DIDN'T. SHE HUGGED ME BACK, AND I HAD AGAIN THE IMAGE OF A YOUNG GIRL. A YOUNG GIRL BEFORE THE NIGHTMARES. KISSING HER CHEEK, I TURNED AND WALKED TO THE DOORS. TAKING A DEEP BREATH, I PUSHED THROUGH THEM.

IT WAS STILL BLACK: A TOTAL LACK OF LIGHT THAT RENDERED SENSE OF DIRECTION USELESS. I TURNED BACK TOWARD THE DOORS, BUT THEY WERE GONE. SO. NOWHERE TO GO NOW BUT OUT. I STARTED WALKING. I KNEW SOMEHOW THAT WHERE DIDN'T MATTER AS MUCH AS THAT I JUST DID. "I DON'T KNOW WHERE I'M GOING, BUT I'M MAKING GREAT TIME!" MADE A LOT OF SENSE TO ME.

I HAD WALKED FOR ABOUT FIVE MINUTES WHEN I FELT TINGLING SENSATIONS INSIDE MY BODY. THEY FELT STRANGE AT FIRST, BUT QUICKLY BECAME UNCOMFORTABLE, THEN PAINFUL. THEY REMINDED ME OF ... OF...

NO.

THEY REMINDED ME OF MY RAPE.

REALIZATION TOOK THE STRENGTH FROM MY LEGS, AND I COLLAPSED. AGAIN I FELT THE TOUCHING, THE HURTING, THE VIOLATING. I DIDN'T WANT TO GO ON ANY FURTHER. I WASN'T GOING TO GO ANY FURTHER.

"Oh!" I felt a twinge deep inside me, a tugging I had never before experienced.

"What is it, Mademoiselle?" Mike asked, his voice lifting gently over the soft sounds in which I was now swimming.

"It is Abigail. I fear she has decided not to come."

"Are you sure? How do you know?"

"I'm not sure, and I do not know. I feel it. She is reliving my ... our ordeal."

"I feared this. I'm sorry, but she must work through it. It is a part of her real life, and she must experience it to reclaim that life. Can you tell her that?"

"I-I do not know, m'sieur Mike. But I shall try."

THEIR HANDS! THEY WERE EVERYWHERE. MY HAIR WAS BEING PULLED AND TORN. I FELT A HEAVY BLOW ACROSS MY MOUTH AND TASTED SALTY BLOOD. I SCREAMED FOR MERCY, GAGGING ON MY BLOOD, BUT HEARD ONLY DERISIVE LAUGHTER. AND WORST OF ALL, I FELT THE TEARING, GOUGING SENSATIONS OF THE MOST CRUEL OF VIOLATIONS. I WANT TO GO BACK! I TRIED TO RETREAT AGAIN, WHERE NO ONE COULD EVER TOUCH ME. WHERE I NEED NEVER FEEL ANYTHING EVER.

"BUT YOU DO NOT WISH TO DO THAT, MADEMOISELLE!" I HEARD A WOMAN SPEAKING TO ME IN FRENCH. "YOU WISH TO LIVE!" HER VOICE DROVE THE PAIN AND TOUCHING AWAY. THEY RETURNED ALMOST IMMEDIATELY, BUT NOT AS FIERCELY.

"WHO IS THAT?" I CRIED OUT WEAKLY, ALSO IN FRENCH. "IS THAT YOU, MISS DECHANT?"

I HEARD HER SOBBING, BUT SHE SPOKE, "OUI, ABIGAIL. PLEASE! IT IS TIME FOR YOU TO LEAVE. M'SIEUR MIKE IS LOOKING FOR YOU AND HE VERY MUCH WANTS TO FIND YOU." HER VOICE BROKE OFF WITH A SCREAM AND I FELT THE SENSATIONS OF MY RAPE FADING. I CRAWLED TO HER VOICE.

"WHAT'S HAPPENING TO US?" I SHOUTED INTO THE DARKNESS.

"DO NOT THINK ABOUT IT, ABIGAIL. IT IS MY BURDEN. MY FAULT. PLEASE, GO TO MIKE!"

"YOU'RE ALLOWING YOURSELF TO BE RAPED IN MY PLACE, AREN'T YOU?" SHE ANSWERED, BUT NOT WITH WORDS. HER CRIES AND CRYING SPOKE CLEARER THAN ANYTHING ELSE. I STAGGERED TO MY FEET AND STUMBLED AWAY FROM THE TERRIBLE SOUNDS. AHEAD, I COULD SEE A LIGHT, AND HEAR MIKE'S DISTANT BECKONINGS. MY LEGS WERE WEARY, BUT I HAD JUST ENOUGH STRENGTH TO...

NO.

THIS WAS NOT RIGHT. I LOOKED LONGINGLY AT THE LIGHT, THEN TURNED AWAY AND RAN BACK TOWARD MISS DECHANT AND HER ATTACKERS. FEAR STARTED BURNING INSIDE ME; THE PAIN RETURNED, AND WITH IT THE HUMILIATION. BUT I HAD MADE MY DECISION, AND CONTINUED ON. MISS DECHANT'S SOBS WERE VERY CLOSE. STAGGERING THE LAST FEW STEPS, I FELT MY FOOT TOUCH HER SIDE, AND I FELL ON HER. I WRAPPED MY ARMS, LEGS AND BODY AROUND HER AND PUT MY FACE CLOSE TO HERS. WE WOULD SHARE OUR MISERY AND OUR STRENGTH.

INSTANTLY, THE FEELINGS FLOODED BACK. FILTHY, ANIMAL HANDS PAWED AT ME, TOUCHING WHERE THEY WISHED, POLLUTING MY BODY.

"NO! ABIGAIL! YOU MUST GO! PLEASE!"

"NO!" I SAID, THEN SCREAMED AS MY HEAD WAS SAVAGELY JERKED TO ONE SIDE AND I FELT A WET, VILE SENSATION ON ONE OF MY NIPPLES. MISS DECHANT'S MOAN OF ANGUISH MEANT SHE WAS FEELING THE SAME THING.

SEPARATELY, EITHER OF US WOULD HAVE BEEN DESTROYED. TOGETHER, WE WOULD BE FOREVER MARKED. BUT WE WOULD LIVE. A LONG, LONG, TIME IT WAS THAT WE SHARED EACH OTHER'S AGONY AND HORROR. I CRIED AS I FELT OUR INTIMACY BEING RUTHLESSLY RIPPED FROM US, OUR SENSE OF WORTH BEING TWISTED AND DISCARDED. WE CLUNG TO EACH OTHER AND ENDURED. IT WAS A LONG, LONG, TIME.

BUT IT PASSED.

I SAT UP AND FELT FOR MISS DECHANT. SHE WAS GONE. OUR ATTACKERS HAD NEVER BEEN WITH US, ONLY THEIR HATE AND THEIR DEEDS. BUT THEIR SHADOWS WERE GONE NOW, TOO, HAVING FAILED TO RUIN ME. TO RUIN US. I WAS IN HER DEBT, AS SHE WAS IN MINE. I HAD BEGUN A RELATIONSHIP WITH ONE OF MY OWN RIPES.

I STOOD UP AND BEGAN WALKING IN THE DIRECTION OF MY ESCAPE. THE PAIN NO LONGER ATTACKED ME BECAUSE IT WAS A PART OF ME NOW. I CONTINUED WALKING STEADILY, FEELING MY TEARS FLOWING DOWN MY FACE AND MY STOMACH CHURNING WITH GRIEF OF MEMORY AND ANTICIPATION OF FREEDOM. BY NOW, MISS DECHANT WOULD BE AWAKENING IN THE WAITING ROOM. SHE WOULD HAVE LITTLE EMOTION, FOR THE PLACE WAS UNREAL AND OUTSIDE TIME. I HOPED THE GIRL REMEMBERED THE MESSAGE. THEY WOULD BE WELCOME WORDS FOR MISS DECHANT. THE LIGHT WAS VERY CLOSE NOW, AND I COULD HEAR MUSIC. IT WAS FINALLY, FINALLY, TIME. TAKING A DEEP BREATH, I CLOSED MY EYES

then opened them again. I was facing a simple terminal that had lights and sounds emanating from it. The feeling of success warmed me.

"Mike?" I whispered.

"Oui, Mademoiselle?" I understood that much, but then he went on to say something else in French that I couldn't understand.

"Steady on, Mike. I hope worry hasn't driven you around the bend."

"ABIGAIL! YES!" he screamed. I looked around quickly. A small room with bath. I hope it had sound shielding on. Lots and lots of it. "OH! YES! YES! YES!"

"Whoa! Can it, kid! I've got a lot of catching up to do. You wouldn't believe what I've been through." The memory of everything came flooding back, and the churning in my stomach became uncontrollable. Lurching up from the stool I was on, I ducked into the bathroom and only just made it to the shower in time to be violently ill. I started sobbing. I turned on the shower full blast and tore at my clothes. The quickly soaked cloth was difficult to take off, but I frantically pulled at it until it came free, covering the drain in a sodden lump. I twisted and turned in the shower for a long time, washing my dirty body over and over, crying the whole time. When my arms were too tired to continue, I sank down and huddled against the shower wall and let the water pour down on me. I was consumed by sadness and hate and a repulsiveness of being. The water puddled and pooled around me.

"Abigail?" Mike's soft voice came from the wall beside me. I saw the image start to come in, and I panicked.

"Don't look at me!" I cried hysterically. "Do you hear me? Don't look at me!"

"I won't. Please talk to me, Abby. I-I love you and want to help."

Crying and sobbing, I told him what had happened. As I spoke, I noticed the lights growing dim, and the

conditioning unit shuddered several times. I began feeling better, knowing that Mike was a best friend, an intimate one, and I could trust him. I grabbed onto that trust and had enough strength to continue talking.

He was very quiet while I spoke and after I finished. So quiet I thought I had lost him.

"Mike?"

"Forgive me, Abby. I-I didn't think." His voice was very restrained, very calm. I'd never heard him speak like this before. "Take as much time as you need to wash that filth away. Tell me as soon as you're ready. We have to get you out of here, before Deiley comes back. Alan says he'll spot you the second he sees you, and I believe him."

I nodded. "All right. I feel a little better now. Just let me have a few more minutes, please?"

"Yes. You don't have to ask, Abigail. I'll keep you safe. I'm contacting Susie and the Twelfth now. We've been waiting for this moment, and they're ready to start the diversion within five minutes of my telling them you're back. I'll put them on alert."

"Wait." Being given this information seemed to do wonders for me. It shifted my attention from my inside problems to my outside ones. Ones I could deal with. "A diversion? Why? Am I still on the base where they took me?" I almost said, 'Where Miss DeChant took me,' but knew it was totally unfair.

"Yes." He paused, as if weighing the wisdom of telling me more. No, it wasn't "as if"; that's exactly what he was thinking.

"Knock it off, Mike. It hurts. It hurts more than you can know. But I'm still Abigail. Give it to me straight."

"You got it!" He sounded relieved, having the decision taken from him. "You, or Miss DeChant rather, have been the base commander's private housekeeper for twenty-two days. The good news is that he has treated you properly." He paused for a fraction of a second. "Reviewing his duty logs, I see he even killed the corporal whose squad ... whose squad..."

"Raped me. Go on."

"The bad news is, he's no fool and has been keeping a close eye on you. Every system in his house is monitoring you for any change outside Miss DeChant's normal behavior patterns. They are to lock down and notify him at once should anything unusual happen. I've got most of these systems tagged into an 'all safe' loop, including all the ones in your quarters. He really has given you privacy here. But he's got a half dozen completely independent systems that I can't access. Step out of this room and the flag goes up."

"Whee. Anything else?"

"Yeah. His house is in the middle of the primary NATech compound, the largest in this region. It's two kilometers to the nearest safe egress."

"And the purpose of this diversion?"

"What else?" He shrugged with his voice. "They want to draw as many personnel away from you as they can, then come in on the other side."

"No phase hovs?"

"Mine fields."

"And they really think it will work? It probably will. On everybody except the one person they want most to fool."

"Major Deiley," Mike answered. "I think you're right. I've studied him in the last week, and there's an eighty-six percent chance he'll identify the diversion for what it is and come directly here to the real fight. You're right Abby, that's what he'll do. But what else can we do?"

"Give me a minute." I rose from the shower floor and shut off the water. I didn't need it anymore. My sense of self-worth was returning, and with it my drive to escape. I would be dealing with this for a long time, maybe the rest of my life. But it would not control my life.

I dried off, carefully not looking into the mirror, then went through Miss DeChant's belongings to find suitable clothing.

There wasn't any. All she owned were three very modest dresses, the nightgown I had ruined, and some odds and ends of underthings. Selecting the plainest dress and the only pair of shoes that she owned, I readied myself. At least the clothes were made for my body. I found a couple of ribbons and ponytailed my hair to keep it out of the way. By the time I had finished, I had worked out a possible plan. I sat down at the terminal.

"Access. Abi..." I began.

"No!" Mike shouted back. "You can't do that, Abby! That'll blow it for sure! I can worm through to you, but Deiley's got enough security on this system that you absolutely can't access other than as Miss DeChant."

This was not good. "All right then, Mike. What was Miss DeChant's access level?" Maybe I could work something out from there.

"It's sublevel three minus."

And maybe I couldn't work out something from there. Newborns were given sublevel three minus. Even four years olds were up to sublevel one minus. Major Deiley was not a trusting soul.

"All right, then. That's closed off. Okay, let me think." I folded my hands in front of my mouth and steepled my forefingers and pinkies. I was restricted to this room and my bathroom. The doors and windows were tripwires for the independent security systems, and I had no access to the puterverse. But Mike did.

"Mike, is there any way to cloak me to fool the systems into thinking I'm Miss DeChant? Once I got outside, I could..."

"Nope. They're too sensitive to be fooled by a holocloak, Abby. Granted, I wouldn't have to cloak too much, just a few minor motions that might be out of keeping for Miss DeChant. But they would pick up the field. Even if I could fool them, they'd know that Miss DeChant is never up this late except to serve Deiley."

"What if you put through a call as Deiley, granting me access to the house? Maybe we could say he needs me to go where ever he is right now."

"Again, nope. At least, I doubt it. My first thought was to fake Deiley, then shut down the systems. But the same indies that we're trying to get around are the same ones he codes to. And without his codes, I wouldn't be able to mimic him well enough to fool them. They're not as smart as me, but they're not morons, either.

"And what puts the real nail in that idea is that from what we've gathered, Miss DeChant has never left the house." He swore quietly. "Now I know why. She's terrified of being caught out in the open among men."

That I could understand perfectly. There was a pleasant coziness and quiet femininity that cloaked this room, a kind of haven from all that lay outside. And with Major Deiley protecting the house so well, I could see how Miss DeChant may have reasoned that this was the safest place ... of course! The safest place, provided Major Deiley was here. Here to protect Miss DeChant.

"Mike, I've got the answer. We want out, right?"

"Well, duh."

"Smart ass. But we don't want Deiley finding out. Does Deiley keep an energy weapon, and is it charging right now?"

"Checking. Uhhh ... no. He's got a couple of energy weapons, but he keeps them fully charged."

"That's not surprising. Okay, how about the access channel and power feed couplings? Are they running on gig one or gig three lines?"

"Gig three. Why? You want me to overload them? What would that do?"

I pulled the ribbons out of my hair and told him what it would do.

* * * *

"Major?"

Major Deiley looked up at the nervous private that stood rigid beside the card table. He sighed at the young man's obvious fear. Deiley demanded respect, but fear when it was unwarranted irritated him.

"Yes?" Major Deiley said harshly. "What is it, private?"

"Sorry to disturb you, sir, but there's a Miss DeChant on terminal, asking for you. She's pretty upset."

Frowning, Deiley folded his cards and placed them in a neat pile. This was unusual, Miss DeChant calling so late; she was normally in bed by this time. He looked at his two companions, one the base commander of the compound he was visiting.

"I'll bid up to thirty-seven, gentlemen, and call diamonds trump. If either of you can outbid that, please do, and we'll play the hand when I return."

He went into the privacy of the next room and called up the terminal. Miss DeChant's face appeared. Her hair was down and somewhat tousled. She was upset. He heard a whine in the background and knew what the problem was immediately.

"Major? I-I woke up a few minutes ago, and heard this loud whistle. It has gotten worse only now. I'm sorry about interrupting you, but I thought..." her voice trailed off uncertainly.

"That's quite all right, Miss DeChant. What you're hearing is a gig wire overload. Listen carefully. I want you to quickly exit the house and get at least 100 meters clear. I will shut down the alarm and restriction fields from here."

"Oui, I-I mean, yes, Major. I thought you might ask that. I took the liberty of dressing first."

"Very good. Now, please..." The terminal suddenly went blank. The wire must have overloaded completely and cut their circuit. The emergency bypass would return power in a moment, but he hoped the home's power reservoir hadn't exploded. He felt a sudden twinge of worry. He'd grown to appreciate Miss DeChant, and had also come to care for her. The screen flickered on, very much dimmer than earlier, and Major Deiley's fears were confirmed. The reservoir had exploded.

"Miss DeChant?" He could no longer see her. There was a considerable amount of dust her room, and the lights were flickering. "Miss DeChant!"

Her small hands appeared, grasping the table edge, and she pulled herself up, coughing. The small trickle of blood from her temple made his heart jump. He didn't want to lose a shard as potentially valuable as Miss DeChant. It was her persona value that was important, not the person. That's what he told himself.

She appeared very scared now and started talking to him in her native French.

"Calm down, Miss DeChant! Please! I can't understand you, you're speaking French! Calm down."

"Major! I'm frightened!" She had gathered her wits, but was still shaken. "There was an explosion, and the house is burning!"

"Get out of there, now! I'm sending some men..."

"NO! Please!" Her voice became a wail. "I beg you, Major! Don't send any men! They will.. they will.." She averted her eyes and began crying. He cursed himself for his insensitivity and felt contrition and pity, rare emotions indeed for him.

"I beg your pardon, Mademoiselle," he said, bowing in apology. "I was a fool. You don't want to be with anyone, and I understand. But I want to have someone there to guard you. I'll send just one soldier, with explicit orders not to lay a hand on you. That's the way I want it, Miss DeChant." He stressed his preference, to end the issue. Her downcast eyes told him he had made his point.

"Yes, Major," she acquiesced meekly. "I shall wait outside."

"Good. Stand well clear. There will be some feedback surges, so be careful. I'm at Secondary Base now, in Wickenburg. I will be there in twenty minutes. Good-bye!" He cut off the terminal and called for the private.

* * * *

I watched the terminal go black, and I smiled slowly. My head stung from the knock it had gotten, and I'd scraped my hands when the explosion threw me to the floor, but otherwise I was in business.

"Are you all right, Abby?" Mike spoke from the only serviceable terminal in the house. "I was able to regulate the surge to control the explosion, but it's not the easiest thing to do."

"You did fine, Mike. I wasn't expecting you to keep me completely protected. You have to accept risk when warranted. Are our little watchdogs out?"

"That they are. I made a point of giving them the full jolt. They'd make pretty good toasters right now, but not much more."

"Good. And Susie?"

"She and the others are closing in now on our rendezvous point. They'll make the final push after you acquire the hov." He paused, then spoke with awe in his voice. "That was slick, not only getting out of here, but even suckering Deiley into giving you transportation."

I wiped the blood off and started crawling over the rubble. Knowing Mike could hear me for some distance, I continued talking. "Well, I figured we didn't want Deiley knowing I wanted to get out. But he'd be only too happy to get Miss DeChant out. I hope I didn't offend the real Miss DeChant with my accent."

"I probably shouldn't tell you this, but you sounded exactly like her. And when you yelled in French, just after the explosion, I was afraid that you had really sharded back to Miss DeChant. I didn't even know you spoke French."

I didn't say anything, but worked my way free of the last pile of rubble. My room, the one furthest removed from the explosion, was the only section of the house that still had a semblance of once being a shelter. The rest of the small home was in ruins. There was still dust in the air, but I could also now smell the sweet, sweet desert. Overhead, there were more stars than space it seemed. A wonderful night to be alive.

In the distance, I saw a single set of hov lights racing toward me. It was too far away to tell, but I was certain from Deiley's manner that there would be only one man in it. I wouldn't kill him, but I couldn't promise that he'd live after Deiley found out his little toy had escaped. Though from what I'd heard of my former owner, it was unlikely Deiley would kill the man once it was clear that I had ended my persona as Miss DeChant.

While I waited for my ride to show up, I smoothed out my dirty dress and retied my hair back. I did both slowly and carefully, relishing the freedom of movement that was mine again. That was twice in one month that I had sharded now. And the second shard had been for at least twenty-two days, perhaps

more. By far the longest episode I'd had to date. I felt the circumstances-being savaged and then living in the possession of a man who tried to keep my riped persona fixed-certainly contributed to the length of the shard. But there was one other thing that really scared me, and that I could not attribute to outside stimuli.

I did not speak French.

Chapter Nine

"So, since I was with him when he died, I felt it was my responsibility to contact you. Colleen, I'm so sorry. Your brother died fighting for what he believed in." I almost choked over the last words, but not from sadness. More like sickness.

"Thank you, Gail." The woman on the other side of our connection was keeping herself in control, but only just. She looked at me with deep sadness. "Barry and I had talked about emigrating, before he enlisted. I suppose now ... I suppose now I..." she started to sob quietly. I didn't want to interrupt her grief, but I couldn't keep the line open for too long. Snooper programs were pretty quick at figuring things out, and if we were under a routine monitor, it would figure out what we were talking about fairly quickly and this call would be traced.

"Colleen? Look, I can't stay on the line. Will you be all right? Is there anything I can do for you? Do you need some credits or something?"

She sniffed and wiped her eyes. "Thank you. That's so wonderful of you to ask. I know you're a friend of Barry's, but you've already done more than I expected. I couldn't ask you for anything. I'll get by without his paycreds."

I had a sudden thought. "I'm sure you will, Colleen, once they send you his death benefit. It won't replace him, but..."

"Death benefit? What benefit? He never said anything about that."

"It was probably because he didn't want to worry you." I prayed Mike was keeping us on an untraceable line. "Our survivors get generous benefits in the event of our being killed. Barry's came to..." I thought a moment, making a number up, "about half a million, if I remember. Maybe more."

She looked stunned.

"I-I don't know what to say. Thank you! Oh, thank you!" Yep. Definitely more than half a million.

"Don't thank me," here I almost gagged again, "thank NAtch. And Colleen? Maybe you should continue you and your brother's dream. Why don't you emigrate? Start fresh. Barry would want it, and his benefit will be more than enough to get you started."

She considered, then nodded. "I believe I will. Yes, I'll do that." She looked back at me. "Thank you again, Gail. I won't forget you. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Colleen. I'll keep you in my prayers." I shut the public terminal off, and the small booth went dark.

"Are we okay, Mike? No snoopers?"

The terminal came on of its own volition, and Mike's face appeared.

"That's right! Run down my self-esteem with insults. Of course no one tapped in! What? You're afraid your programming is shoddy?"

"Now look who's insulting whom. Listen, why don't you post six hundred and fifty thousand credits to Colleen Webster's account. Make it a NAtch death benefit and-

"There's no such thing as a NAtch death benefit, Abby. You're lucky if NAtch takes the time to bury you, let alone pay for anything."

"You mean there wasn't such a thing as a NAtch death benefit. I want you to make one and make it retroactive about three to five years. I'll leave the details to you. Be creative. Have fun. Money's no object," I said expansively.

"Oh, yeah! This is gonna be fun! I'll talk to you later, Abby. When are you going to access again?"

Let's see ... we'll be leaving Anchorage tomorrow. Then it's a few days each in Tokyo , Delhi , Old Jerusalem and then home. Call it ten days, so next Thursday. We're arriving in Japan tomorrow afternoon and I want to sightsee, so I'll call you tomorrow night or the next day."

"Ten days to travel? Taking the scenic route, are we?"

"Sorta. Susie and I have got to get some R&R in. And staring into rock for hours at a time isn't the way to do it. We're going to stay surface most of the way."

"Sounds like fun! Ciao!" The screen flicked off.

"So, how did she take it?" Susie asked when I stepped clear of the booth. She was munching on a fruit kabob and handed me one.

"About as well as could be expected. She perked up when she found out that NATech's sending her a six-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-credit death benefit."

Susie laughed and spilled a piece of pineapple down her top. She fished it out and popped it in her mouth. We dogs didn't stand too much on formality.

"A death benefit? Only you, Abby!" She took on a more serious tone. "Did you tell her that you killed him?"

I shrugged. "Why? She didn't need to hear this from her brother's enemy. And there's no way she'd swallow this death benefit story if she thought I wasn't from NATech. So I made out to be her brother's comrade."

"You didn't do it to hide some guilty feelings?"

"What guilty feelings?"

"For killing her brother."

"I didn't kill her brother. I killed a NATech soldier who had injured a comrade, a real comrade, and was trying to kill me. I'd do it again the same way. Not that it matters, because it's over. I don't analyze my actions or motives in combat, Susie. I do what needs to be done, then move on. Because I killed him, others get to keep on living. That's my duty, and I will always carry out that duty whenever possible."

We started walking along the pier looking out over the sound. The warming shield over this touristy section of Anchorage kept it comfortable on this summer night. It was past eleven o'clock, but the setting sun was still up. Although it was very pleasant, we had the place to ourselves. When the population of the whole planet is under 800 million, there's a lot of open space.

"It's very cliché, but I'm glad I'm on your side." She considered a moment. "I've been thinking..."

"That explains the smoke."

She smashed the fruit kabob in my face. "Insensitive brat. I was thinking, since we're on leave, and have some time so kill, maybe I should read up on your mission logs from the Ethiopian campaign. You know, that's not too far from our base. We could-"

"No."

"Why not? The chance to see part of your early life would be very educational for me, Abby."

"I'm surprised you're even bringing it up, Susie. Aren't you supposed to keep that kind of information and memories in the past? Or even buried somewhere?"

"That's true for ripes, Abby. It's not necessarily true for your original persona. To be entirely honest, I've always had a curiosity about your first life. We pulled the ... honer? Moaner? No, boner. We pulled the boner of the century, reintegrating you as a girl, and I've-

"I don't think so! I love who I am now!"

"That's nice of you to say that, Abby. And I think there's truth in it, but it would have been easier for you if you'd been brought back as a boy."

"Nuts to that!" I realized my gross joke and laughed, as did Susie, who had picked up some of my ancient expressions. This R&R was really helping us unwind.

"But I mean it, Susie," I continued, "It's impossible to even think of myself as a guy. When we first got the emergency call from Kenny and Wayne, I took on a puterverse image of a male, so they wouldn't hesitate about asking for help from a teenage girl." I shuddered slightly at the memory. "It felt so ... so wrong! Being John way back then was great. But now? No, thanks! This is who I am and who I want to be."

I walked a few more steps before I realized Susie had stopped. I turned around and she was looking at me, very still.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Say that again."

"I said, what's wrong?" I repeated.

"No. Before that."

"Oh. I said, 'This is who I am and who I want to be.' Why?"

"Even after what's happened to you, Abigail?"

So that's what this was about. While everyone was looking for me during those two long, long weeks, Susie had been consumed with worry. Alan told me she had slept very little and fitfully. Although no one went into details, I gathered she had killed several lowlifes in trying to dig up whatever information

she could about me, and had in fact found the pieces needed to locate me. She had led the group that broke into the NAtch compound and yanked me out as I raced my hov toward them, two cohorts hot on my tail. Through it all, she had kept a hard shell around her, letting nothing out and no one in. Only after she had seen me safely to the Kovins' home had she finally eased up enough to show emotion, tinged with fatigue.

That had been two weeks ago. We spent three days lying low, then blended with the traffic up to Carson City, where we killed a few more days to cool the trail. After that, it was a slow drift up through Idatana and then an easy lope to the coast and up the sound to Anchorage, another Resistance-friendly town, where'd we been for five days.

Susie had slowly returned to normal. On the outside. I saw now what she needed. During the search, she'd not only been consumed with worry, she'd been torn by guilt. Guilt that it was somehow her fault that I'd been ... been raped. It wasn't information Susie was looking for. It was forgiveness.

I stepped up to her and took her hands, determined I was not going to blubber this time. I looked straight into her eyes, and she flinched, as though struck across the face. She stared down at her hands, held by mine, then lifted her gaze back up to mine, smiling slightly. I spoke slowly and carefully.

"Yes. Susie, the answer is yes, despite what's happened to me, I'm very happy to be who I am. I have you to thank for all the good, and I don't blame you for any of the bad." I stepped back and opened my arms. "See, Susie? It's still me, Abigail."

I touched my tummy. "What happened on the base-no, I'm not going to sugarcoat it: When I was raped at the base, what happened wasn't my fault. It wasn't Miss DeChant's fault, and it certainly wasn't your fault. It was *their* fault. They abused my body, and they violated my soul. But they didn't take anything away from me, because I won't let them. It's still my body and it's still my soul. And it's you that I thank for pulling me out of my ripes and giving me my body and giving me back my soul.

"Please believe me, Susie. The only ones who need forgiveness are the soldiers who raped me, and I am forgiving them slowly. It's hard. Forgiving you is impossible. Impossible because there's nothing to forgive."

She continued to stare into my eyes, hoping to find the solace of truth in them. She must have found it, because she came into my arms and wept silently. I stood straight and comforted her, able to finally return in small measure everything she had done for me. Because all that I'd said was true. I was overjoyed at the life I had now. Grief and pain and loss and sorrow would always be a part of my life, as it was for every life this side of eternity. But I would also know joy and happiness and comfort and fulfillment. These are the things we should focus on, thanking our Maker when He blesses us with them, and thanking Him even more for the strength He gives when hardships befall.

I felt a chill across my shoulders and looked out over the sea. The sun was setting, and with it the shield

was being eased to allow in additional cold. It would be uncomfortable soon, so I put an arm around my still crying friend and started walking us back to our room.

* * * *

I notice, looking over my account, that I skipped one thing that most of you are probably wondering about. What if I had become pregnant from my rape?

I didn't really talk about it because it normally isn't an issue. And not because I was on any kind of birth control. Although there's nothing wrong with practicing birth control, I was going to wait until after I was married before having sex, so I wasn't using anything. I see now from being in combat against an enemy that used such tactics against women that my decision was a foolish one. If you asked me to explain my reasons now, I couldn't do it. Just like you can't explain the foolish things you did as a teen. But for me at the time, it was a non-issue-gross pun intended-for another reason.

Virtually all members on the NATechSS squads are sterilized at the time of their induction into that branch of "service". The dominance and fear of rape is generated by the very act and its brutality. It's not sex, it's pure violence. While NATech might see the advantage of adding the fear of possible pregnancy during their raping suppressions, the advantage was negated by the added difficulties of caring for the pregnant mother and eventually the newborn child. And in this area, NATech was often forced to abide by a moral code.

You see, the balance of NATech's power over the globe was very delicate, with neither side really wishing to force the other to extreme action. And Glendale was a microcosm of the planet. An overreaction by the Resistance would force NATech to escalate the violence and control, thus reducing our ability to help the Shards and other sick people in Glendale .

But an overreaction by NATech would bring to light some of their uglier moles. And while NATech held the planet in a firm grip of control, there was little point in them doing anything to weaken that hold. Forcing combat with the Resistance in Glendale , or killing the newborns and their mothers, greatly increased the risk. So the soldiers on the suppression squads, both men and women, were sterilized to prevent pregnancy.

In any event, because of these reasons, and because I was too much of a basket case to think coherently once I reached the safety of my friends, I was not too worried. It wasn't completely certain. One in every hundred SS men is left fertile, just to add the extra fear. So I had to get checked out by the doctor at the Glendale base to be certain. That one in one hundred, multiplied out by normal odds, seems pretty small, doesn't it? It sure didn't as I waited for the results.

And what if I had been pregnant? An easy answer: I'd have the baby. It wasn't the child's fault how it came to be. It had a soul and a God and a life. And I can think of no greater victory than to raise a child of such a circumstance and teach her or him to love and care and respect others in a way the unknown

father never could.

But even though I'd been prepared to have the baby if I was pregnant, when the doctor determined I was not pregnant, a huge weight slid off my shoulders. In my mind, I still considered myself a virgin, and somehow knew that my future husband, whoever he might be, would think the same. I was a virgin because I hadn't had sex-I'd been attacked. The memory of my rape still gives me shivers even after all these years. But I have always kept it in the past, where it belongs.

* * * *

I wouldn't go so far as to say the rest of our trip was uneventful. For instance, if anyone ever tries to convince you that I had something to do with the Tokyo Brawl of 2679, well, don't call them a liar. It wasn't all my fault, but listen close: that rice wine sneaks up on a person fast, and it's even faster on a young lady who shouldn't be imbibing anyway, even if the legal drinking age in Japan is sixteen.

And I had nothing to do with the purple cow in India ! Not really, anyway. OK, nobody had even heard the poem before I started reciting it. You know, the one that goes: "I've never seen a purple cow, I never hope to see one. But I can tell you this right now, I'd rather see than be one." If you think about it, it is kinda funny. It was even funnier at the time. Despite the gunfire.

But it wasn't as funny as our unscheduled side trip to Istantanople. (They finally settled on a name. By committee.) Now Istantanople is a fun town, even when you are being chased through the streets at two a.m. by an overwrought, overweight mayor who really, really wants you dead. That wasn't my fault, either. How was I supposed to know the word "movie" had changed meanings a dozen times, each one successfully worse? Politicians! No sense of humor.

Don't get me wrong. It wasn't as though we were two wild ladies out to paint the town red. Nothing of the kind. I'll admit, to my shame, that I got drunk in Tokyo . Never again. Everything else sort of just ... happened. Most of the trip was spent in lounging around, seeing the sights, soaking up some sun. But we were two dogs who really needed some vacation time. We'd been robbed of it the first time around, so maybe, *maybe* , we overdid it a tad.

Anyway, the only relevance any of this has was that instead of pulling into base on Thursday night, we crawled in on Saturday evening. We had leave until Monday morning, so we had the time. In fact, we nearly decided to stop in Alexandria for a day, and head back Sunday night. But we were pretty tired, and anyway somebody had blabbed about the eels incident in Old Jerusalem, so we just skipped Alexandria and went home.

It's so hard to believe that a pivotal point in a person's life could revolve around a satchel full of eels.

* * * *

"AARON!"

He was in front of the crowd that waited for us in the hanger. Seven weeks ago, I needed to be shoved into his arms by Susie. Not this time. I'd seen too much and understood now how precious our moments were. I ran down the ramp and jumped into his arms.

"Abby?" He seemed a little stunned and a lot embarrassed, but he held me pretty tight anyway. "It's great to see you ag ... mmmph!"

I wrapped my arms around his neck and half lifted, half pulled our lips together. His mouth was far too good looking to waste on words, so I kissed him instead. The crowd let out a whoop and a cheer. I didn't care. I was home and in the arms of the man I loved. You heard me. I loved him.

He pulled his lips away and looked into my eyes, searching for something as Susie had back in Anchorage . I let him look, knowing he'd find what he hoped for. He did, and then those huge arms engulfed me and I felt my feet go off the floor as he kissed me. The cheering grew to the point of being deafening, but it couldn't drown out the pounding in my heart and the roaring in my ears.

"You look a little busy, Abby," Susie said from behind me. "I'll put our gear and gewgaws away. You and Aaron find a quiet place to talk."

That was more than fine with me, but Aaron set me down and shook his head at Susie.

"Thank you very much, Corporal, but I'm still on duty." He turned his drop dead gorgeous eyes to me. "You go ahead and unpack and catch up, Abby. I'll be off at twenty-one hundred hours, and come by your quarters, if that's all right with you."

All right with me? I'd practically undressed him in front of the entire Third Regiment, and now he was making sure I wanted to see him.

But between our kisses and the way his arms sucked the strength out of me, all I could do was nod. He laughed and kissed me again. Squeezing my hands, he walked confidently off to his combat drills. He wasn't quite as confident as he let on, though. His walk had just a little more stagger than swagger.

"Come on, woman." Susie tugged me toward our quarters. "We've got to get you into a cold shower, before you EFP right here in the hanger." As least, I think that's what she said. I wasn't really listening.

* * * *

"Hiya, Dusty!"

Dusty looked up from his workbench where he all but lived. He had a large slug gun in about twenty parts and a seeming jumble. He smiled when he saw me.

"Abigail! Nice to have you back, girl! Hang on a second. Thawell wants this thing ready to go in a half hour." He turned his attention back to the heavy rifle. I didn't mind waiting. It was always a treat to watch him work. I stepped into his workshop to see up close. His thin, bony hands moved with grace, as an artist's do, as he slid the rifle together. A couple of clicks of metal on metal, several flicks of his wrists, and from the pile of pieces a fully operational gun magically appeared.

"Agnes!" he hollered. There was the tone of lock-up as the sound shielding dropped over the door and service window. A range appeared on the other side of the room and a holo target disk a half-meter in diameter glimmered at one hundred meters.

I looked back just as Dusty deftly slid a quarter-kilo shell into the chamber and slammed the bolt home. The rifle came up, he paused for a split instant, and the room echoed with a boom as he pulled the trigger.

There was a flash at the far end of the range as the shell exploded. Shielding in the range tunnel prevented the rubble and debris from exiting and possibly hitting us. I expected the target to be obliterated, but through the dust I could see it shimmer.

"You better check the sighting, Dusty. You missed."

"I always miss, Abby. Truth to tell, I can't hit the barn side of a broad." I almost swallowed my tongue, but I didn't laugh. Like Susie, Dusty got a kick using my ancient expressions. Unlike Susie, he didn't have the knack. "But I let the owners worry about the sights. Everyone's different in how they use 'em, so I don't bother. I just want it firing." He looked at the rifle in his hands with pride. "And this one fires sweet." He smiled at me. "Now let's take care of you."

He stood up and walked over to a locker. Using his voice code, he released the seal and opened it up, withdrawing my pistol, which I'd left with him oh so long ago. He brought it to me with all the love and tenderness of a father carrying his newborn child.

"I'm glad you came back, young lady. Now this," he displayed the gun, "is art. I followed your specifications and added a couple myself. I hope you don't mind."

"Mind?" I said incredulously. "I'm grateful. So, was I right? It is possible to modify the sound sight to act as a primitive sonic inducer? With a useable range?"

"You called it, Abby. I had to reroute the energy conduits from the sighting to provide sufficient power. And I needed to improve the casing on the upper portion by about forty percent. But by using a lighter alloy for the entire gun, overall weight is unchanged. Your gun now has a sonic inducer with a practical

range of three meters. The effects are still noticeable at up to ten meters, but with diminishing returns."

"What kind of disabling are we talking about, Dusty?" I took the gun from him and tested the weight and balance. It seemed unchanged, although the gun now had a dull white finish.

"Results will vary, but at up to three meters, they're all nasty. Reactions will cover the spectrum from stunned concussion to unconsciousness to seizures to even death. From three to ten meters, the reactions are similar, but greatly reduced. I'm not sure. Needless to say, I didn't get too many volunteers to let me try it on them. But my guess is that even at ten meters the target will feel some disorientation and lose their combat edge.

"I've also increased the scatter, so it can affect several people at once. You can adjust it here with a simple twist. Blue is tight, with the effects slightly increased. Red is open and all bets off. Be careful about any buddies standing in front of it when you fire."

"Thank you," I said dryly. "I think I figured that out by myself. What's the price in power?"

"Not too bad. About the equivalent of three shots. Your gun holds about sixty charges, so it won't be a worry except in a prolonged fire fight."

I was anxious to test it out, but since there was no one standing around wearing NAtch insignia, I would have to wait. I thanked Dusty and headed off to report to Lt. Sanchez.

* * * *

"Yes?" Lt. Sanchez looked up from his desk at my polite knock. "Ah, Private Wyeth. Please, come in. At ease."

I released my salute and stood at ease. He finished whatever he was doing on the terminal and logged off. He then leaned back in his chair and contemplated me. His wasn't an intrusive stare, but I knew he was taking in more about me than I could guess. His kind were rare. He had the ability to both command and inspire loyalty, maintaining a high level of discipline behind a cloak of familiarity. Everyone in the Third who had served elsewhere-myself included, counting my service in the Ethiopian campaigns-swore there was none better. Without hesitation those under him would confidently follow him to their deaths, knowing if there was a way to complete the mission, Lt. Sanchez could find it. And if that meant dying, he'd be the first to die, for the mission and for his command. Which is what made his kind so rare.

Sanchez stood up and called for privacy. He then stepped around the desk and sat on the edge. I was expecting a debriefing session, since I'd been in the Glendale Primary NAtch base for over three weeks. So I was surprised with what he said next.

"Abigail, I am terribly sorry. Your assault is a sad but expected consequence of serving against NAtch.

All our personnel are trained to withstand and deal with such an attack, though it has always been a primary attack against women.” He paused and set his jaw. He was making a visible effort to control himself.

"All that means nothing when it happens. I cannot offer you the understanding you deserve, because I could never understand what you went through. Still, I-

"Pardon me, sir. You can understand,” I said in a small voice.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you can understand what I went through. The right man can understand exactly what it is like. You were as powerless to prevent my rape as I was, and you are my commanding officer. You hold yourself responsible for what happens to me while I serve. All good officers do. And you are the best officer I've ever served under. Believe me, sir, I think what we're each feeling is very much the same."

He stood up and turned his back to me abruptly. He walked to the other side of his small office and stood staring at the wall. He remained motionless for a long moment, then shook his head sharply, bringing a hand to his face. He waited another few seconds, then took a deep breath and turned back to me. His eyes were moist. As moist as my cheeks.

"Thank you, Abigail. I-I didn't realize I needed that. I was hoping to offer my comfort to you..."

"You did, sir. Thank you."

His heavy mustache twitched as he smiled. He clapped his hands on my shoulders.

"Perhaps we can build up each other over the next little while.” He motioned me to a chair, then sat on the desk after I had seated myself. “Now, let's talk about that leave of yours, shall we? I very much want to hear how you managed to use a microsat as a weapon."

* * * *

It was twenty one thirty hours when I finally finished with Lt. Sanchez Since I was late, I went to pick up Aaron. I ran over to the hanger, =but they told me the Company A combat drills had finished an hour earlier. The computer told me Aaron was in the men's barracks, so I went there. Along the way, I bumped into Sarah, my other wingman.

She, more than anyone, did exactly the right thing to show me her feelings. She smiled and pulled me close, giving me a crusher bear hug. I felt like a little girl with bloody knees being comforted by my older sister. She had absolute confidence in me as her comrade, and thought me her equal in battle. But in moments like these, she was in her own way as protective of me as Susie was.

She released me and gave me one of her big grins. She never said a word then or afterwards, but her message was the clearest.

"Missed you at drills! Thawell did, too, but he'd never say so. He keeps whining about how soft you're going to be when you get back, and says he's going to put you in Company C with the rookies."

I felt a tug upon hearing that, but it passed. After two years, I'd gotten a much better hold on my sudden surges of fear, but they did surface on occasion. My face must have shown my momentary shock, because Sarah laughed.

"You are so easy to get, Abigail, it almost isn't fun!" She laughed again and brought her hand playfully over my head, mussing my hair. My general good shape and flexibility kept my head mounted on my shoulders, if somewhat askew. Sarah never did things by half.

"So where you off to now?"

"The men's barracks. Aaron just..."

"Geez! Like I didn't know! He was just about useless after he saw you. I was tempted to shoot him just to put him out of my misery. Lena 's been working with us the past month, filling in for you, and she wanted to belt him one."

"Well, Lena 's a good friend and a great fighter, but she can get back to her own triteam. I'm aching to go."

"You bet! The best team in the Regiment." She grinned slyly at me. "Say, since we're a team, do you need any help with Aaron?"

"To be honest, Sarah," I said in a low, inviting tone, "I do need help with him. Do we take turns, or shall we both go at him together?"

YES! It was two years coming, but payback was sweet! She looked like she just swallowed a trout, tail first, scales and all. Her face turned beet red, and she was so stunned by my invitation I could have pushed her over with a finger. Well, it actually took both hands. Then she got it and smiled weakly. I laughed and helped her to her feet. We parted ways and I headed off to the men's barracks, still laughing.

* * * *

The heat of the desert had faded to a half-felt ghost. The pitch black of a moonless night was relieved by the glowing of millions of stars overhead. The desert here in Africa smelled and felt different than

Arizona , but I was still very fond of it. To my joy, Aaron loved it, too. We were walking hand in hand toward a small area of desert growth. It wasn't an oasis really-there was no permanent water source-but it did offer some privacy in an otherwise open area. We all took turns in reserving it. I don't know what it cost Aaron to get it for this prime time, and I didn't ask. He was the one taking me on a date, and it would be improper. My heart and soul were too busy taking in all the feelings and sensations of being with him. I was on my first date in many centuries and my first ever as a woman.

We reached the small cove of trees and brush. I spread out the blanket and sat down on it, carefully brushing my skirt down. Smiling, I held out my hands, inviting him to join me. He lay down beside me on his back, and put his hands behind his head, staring up at the stars. He hadn't said a word since we left, but it was a pleasant kind of silence. I moved up close to him and looked down at his strong face, which I could dimly make out in the brilliant starlight. His chest rose and fell slowly and felt hard and warm under my hand. In my own chest I felt a tightness and warmth I had never felt before.

I loved Aaron. Watching him contemplating the stars, I hoped he was thinking about us. Us. The word had the most wonderful sound in the world. I laid my head down on his chest and put my body along his. He wrapped one of his powerful arms around me, and I marveled at how gentle and proper he was in holding me.

"I'm so glad you're back, Abby."

"I'm glad I'm back with you, Aaron."

He hugged me. "I can't believe how awkward we were. We've known each other and fought beside each other for eighteen months, and this is our first time together as, as..." He took a breath. "As a man and a woman."

My head was buzzing. "I know. We should have done this a long time ago."

"Really? You would have walked out with me before now?" He seemed surprised and excited.

"I think so. Yes. Yes, I would have. But it would have been a little more embarrassing. I was still having difficulties reconciling my feeling toward you with my life in the twenty-first century."

"Oh. When you were a man." He paused, considering. "You know, I've never really thought about it. You've always been and acted a lady. It's impossible for me to see you as anybody except Abigail Wyeth, an intelligent, wonderful and very beautiful woman."

"That's exactly what Susie told me you would say. I didn't believe her at first. Now I do. I was so silly, letting something like that keep us apart."

"It didn't really, Abigail. Maybe a little bit for you. But I was so certain you'd say no that I never asked. I

was afraid it would ruin our friendship."

We laughed at our own ineptitude at the simplest of things, talking.

"Ow!" he said suddenly in mid-laugh, holding his left shoulder.

"Laughing so hard it hurts?"

"No. Sarah got ticked off at me during drills and clipped me a good one with her rifle butt. I think she was aiming for my head." He rubbed his shoulder. "She's got a brutal punch."

"From what she told me, you deserved it. She also blamed me. Here, let me work on it." He sat up obediently and I got on my knees behind him. Pressing my body close to his back, I started massaging his injured shoulder.

"Oh, yes! That feels great!" he moaned loudly. I blushed at his unabashed pleasure and slugged him playfully. "Ow. Now what?"

"Not so loud! You make it sound like we're doing a lot more than rubbing your shoulder!" I rubbed him a little more, feeling his strength, and shifted to both his shoulders. "Mmmmm ... make that shoulders."

"Ha! Now look who's sounding horny." He laughed again and twisted, bringing his arm around my waist. He fell back on the blanket, pulling me onto him. I gladly went, bringing my lips to his. He held me close and we kissed.

Some time later, we were still kissing, me lying down now and him beside me. My head was spinning and spinning and I felt a warm glow all through my body.

He pulled his lips away and brought his mouth close beside my ear. Brushing my hair, he whispered softly, "I love you, Abigail."

"I love you, Aaron," I barely spoke. He lifted his head and we stared into each other's eyes for an eternity. He pulled me back close to him, again lying down and staring up at the stars. I cradled close, my head on his chest, feeling his love and his strength and his soul. With my hand I caressed his strong, handsome face.

"Have you every thought about emigrating, Abby?" he asked softly.

"I don't know. Before I talked to Colleen, the sister of a NAtch soldier I killed on the New Denver raid, I hadn't thought about it at all. Why?"

"Well, I've been thinking about it. This war's been going on for over two centuries, and I don't think it's ever going to end. When my time here is up, I'm tempted to chase the ball and leave this mess behind."

My heart, so full of happiness, ripped in two, and the blood gushed into my stomach, turning into a ball of ice.

"Leaving?" I said, barely able to form the word.

"Uh-huh. I don't know if NAtch is out there," he waved his free hand across the sky, "but even if they are, they can't have as much a grip on the other planets as they do here."

"Oh."

He propped himself up and looked at me.

"Hey, Abby, why the tears?"

I sat up and wiped them away.

"I-I don't know. Oh, yes I do! I just thought maybe you and I could start becoming closer, and now you want to leave! It's not fair! Aaron, do you really have to go?"

He took me by my shoulders and pulled me to him. I grabbed onto him, wanting to hold him and hit him at the same time, I was so much in love with him and was so angry at the same time.

"Abigail," he said softly. He lightly kissed my forehead. "We're both so new at this, aren't we? It isn't fair, that dogs like us should have to be so unused to just being two people in love. Our chance to have a normal life is denied us because we want others to have that chance. So now, when a normal event in life does come, we are unable to handle it." His grip on my shoulders increased slightly, as though he feared someone would take me away. "I would never leave without you, Abby. I'm asking you to come with me."

Dazed, I looked at him.

"What?"

"I was wrong when I said earlier that I'd never thought of you as anybody but Abigail Wyeth. For months, I've also been thinking of you as Abigail Ma.." He took a shaky breath. "As Abigail Marks."

There was a loud roaring in my ears and the stars were all blurry. I felt my body go numb and my strength evaporate.

"Abigail, will you marry me?"

So here it was. The greatest commitment a woman could make, and it lay before me now. To forever bind myself to a man. To love him all my life, bear and raise our children, to place myself under his care and authority, to be his faithful and loving wife. Wherever he went, I would follow. We would be partners all our lives, seen as one by God. I would no longer be only Abigail, just as he would no longer be only Aaron. We would be husband and wife, eventually parents, and perhaps one day even grandparents. From the day of our wedding until the day when one would grieve the death of the other, we would be promised to each other. I had wanted marriage since I was a child. As John Wyeth, the ghost of a faded era, I somehow knew it would never be mine. Now, as Abigail Wyeth, it had come.

Was it too soon? I'd known him for two years. But I was only sixteen and this was just our first date. How much sense did it make for this to happen so fast? Shouldn't there be a longer time? A time to learn about each other, to learn to love each other?

The answer was clear. It wasn't too soon. We'd been comrades in war. He had held my life in his hands countless times, as I had held his. The years were short, but we had lived a lifetime. As Oliver Wendell Holmes said: "In our youths, our hearts were touched with fire." And the fire of war had tested our bonds more than anything else could.

I gazed into Aaron's eyes. An efficient and ruthless soldier in combat, Aaron was a loving and tender person who quietly grieved the violence he wrought. Though we had never expressed our love to each other, it had been there, lying under that cloak of camaraderie. I wasn't sure if I recognized it then. Maybe. But I recognized it now.

"Yes!" I wept with happiness. "Aaron, yes! I will marry you!"

We stayed together for a long time that night, talking, making plans, and dreaming dreams that we now suddenly and wonderfully shared. And while we would save ourselves for the blessing of marriage, what we said and what we did in those glorious hours are quite frankly none of your business.

* * * *

"FULL ALERT! FULL ALERT! This base is at emergency full alert! Combat conditions now exist inside the parameter, and unconditional lethal response is ordered! FULL ALERT! FULL ALERT! This base is at emergency full alert!..."

The message continued to repeat. I pulled on my battle jacket and buckled my holster and additional charge packs around my hips. Susie was already dressed and waiting for me. She listened in on her combat headset.

"What's happened, Susie?"

She held up a hand, motioning me to silence. Outside our door, even through the still active sound shield, heavy booms could be heard. The compound had been breached. I sheathed my boot knife and checked my gel pack armor. I felt the tingle of the moment spread through my body, as I called my beast.

As it had done countless times in Ethiopia and more recently in Company A, it roused itself from the depths of my being. It was more than a creature I kept inside myself. It was a part of me, and I was not ashamed of it. With the beast, those under my command would live, and our enemies would die. When it awoke, it sharpened my senses, used my skills to the fullest, and focused my mind on one thing only: successful completion of my mission. It did not control me, nor I it, but we blended together in such completeness that even my friends have said they fear me.

I heard Susie acknowledge the instructions, and I turned toward her. In my eyes she was now a battle asset, having excellent skills at immediate and short-range killing yet lacking effectiveness at greater distances.

"Give me the situation, Corporal. Now."

Susie's eyes widened at my tone, but she complied at once. Despite her greater rank, I was the anchor member of the best team in Company A. In combat, Susie would follow my orders without hesitation, just as I would send her to her death without hesitation if the situation warranted it. I was almost, but not quite, as expendable.

"The compound has been breached by at least eight cohorts of NAtch's elite Xeno forces and elements of their Fifteenth Armored." That made this a do or die fight. The Fifteenth Armored didn't believe in prisoners. "The breach occurred four minutes ago and is in both the hanger and in the primary mess. Main power is off line, but the backup is under full shielding. Casualties are minor, but there has been no cohesive response as yet. We are to work our way to the armory and join up there if possible."

I nodded and made for the door. The sounds were louder now, and I could make out individual shots from slug guns. The secondary power plant might have been operational, but ghost doors would have extremely low priority. It was failing. I motioned to Susie to aim to the left. I raised my voice, knowing the shielding would nullify my voice at least a few moments longer.

"MIKE! Susie and I need to get into the hallway. I need an unhindered explosion of Corporal's Fantis' and Sergeant Thawell's ghost doors in eight seconds! Notify them and any personnel in the corridor if needed!"

"Notification not needed, Abby! Fantis is dead, Thawell has vacated his quarters, and the hallway is occupied by a split NAtch squad twelve meters on your right, facing you. Three seconds."

I called for dark and crouched down. There was a large boom from both sides of the hall. In the same moment, I cut power to our ghost door. I ran into the hall, then rolled to the opposite wall of the corridor, firing as I did.

There were six of them standing, and an unknown number down. I traversed my prolonged beam across the front two. They screamed and fell. Although I moved the beam too quickly for it to be fatal, they would be incapacitated until I could kill them properly.

They were all stunned from the nearby door overload, so I seized the moment. My gun would be recharged in three seconds, so I lunged to my feet and charged them. One of them brought up a gun, then jerked back as Susie's shot drilled through his jacket. Two others were reacting now, but it was far too late because the three seconds had passed and I was among them.

One of the two had a slug gun, so I disabled her first. Slug guns could be fired without recharging, so they were the most dangerous in hand-to-hand. I jerked my gun up hard under her chin, tearing into the jaw muscle and driving the barrel into her mouth. I savagely ripped it free and brought the bloodied weapon around on the second one. I slammed the butt into his temple, then lowered the gun and fired through his throat. He died immediately and I ignored him.

The woman was fighting her pain and had grabbed onto me. That meant she had dropped her gun. More than three seconds had now passed since I had gone hand-to-hand, and I still had one more functional enemy. I counted on Susie to take care of him and focused on my wounded enemy. A brief thought flickered through my mind that I could find out more about the situation from her, but the thought died immediately. She was NAtch Xen, and the look in her eyes told me she had earned her insignia. I slammed the heels of my hands into her ears, collapsing the sides of her skull, and she died with the thought.

From the smell of seared flesh, I knew Susie had taken care of the last one. I killed the two I'd wounded, then made sure the ones knocked down from the blast were dead. Two of the three were, and a few moments later, so was the third. I wiped and sheathed my knife, then picked up two slug guns, tossing one to Susie. I would use this in the corridor.

Susie came up to me. She had the eye of the dog. Bright and ready, and odds didn't exist. I was satisfied. I pointed down the hall toward the hanger. The sounds of a heavy battle echoed up to us.

"Each wall, slug guns and no mercy. Go get 'em, Sayonara Susie." She grinned at her recently acquired nickname and faded to the left wall, her dark skin making her a nearly impossible target in the blackness of the corridor.

We had apparently been either overlooked or were to be taken care of by the split squad. The latter was most likely. Since NAtch had located us, they could probably guess our personnel make-up and base

layout, since it was pretty standard throughout Resistance units. Susie had said eight cohorts of NATech Xenos. There were twelve to a cohort, which made ninety-six plus the Fifteenth. What they hadn't counted on was a Company A dog being quartered with a Research corporal who knew combat and thrived in it. Their mistake, our luck, and now nine dead NATech.

We worked down the corridor quickly, stopping only long enough to inspect each of the quarters as we went. Thawell's was empty, as was Corporal Hansen's. It was beginning to look like we may have had a proper response.

The Abdihs' quarters were not empty. Tomah was gone, but his wife Ella lay sprawled on the stone just inside the doorway. She had taken a fearful shot across her abdomen and spine. She had died quickly. We pushed on. The corridor emptied into the hanger only thirty meters further along, with only the men's barracks on our left as the last room to search. A tiny voice buried deep inside my screamed Aaron's name, but now was not the time. My beast savagely told it to stop, and it did. I motioned to Susie on my left to get ready to cover me. She nodded and hefted both the slug gun and her own laser.

I moved closer to the door, pulling a magpuck from a pouch and setting it to proximity fuse. A shot came from the room and burned the stone behind me. Knowing surprise was the most basic and efficient of weapons, I ran three steps and dove through the doorway, leaping as high as I could. I cleared the doorway, seeing two beams lacing underneath me. They might have been NATech elite, but they weren't too bright. This was a darkened barracks. Why would I go in low? And with energy?

I saw a couple of dim images and fired the slug gun once. I plummeted down from my high jump, landing squarely on the bunk I knew was in front of me, and twisted off, pulling the trigger three times in rapid succession while rolling over and over I snapped the magpuck at them and threw an arm over my eyes, still firing.

The magpuck sensed it was within one meter of a living target and exploded. I heard one scream and fired at it. The scream changed pitch, then choked off. I leapt to my feet to close in for the kill.

Unneeded. The magpuck had hit one squarely in the face. The soldier may or may not have been a woman. It was difficult to tell from the damage and the dim emergency lighting.

"Mike! I need a status report!"

No reply. That meant the backup plant was gone and only battery remained. That also meant the hanger shielding was down and the Fifteenth could begin the heavy assault. It did not mean, however, that Mike couldn't hear me.

"Mike! Tell Kiki we need the Fifteenth taken out as soon as possible. She'll know what I mean. You help. Kill men's barracks lighting as an affirmative."

The room plunged into complete darkness, and I made for the doorway. In the moment before I called for dark, I looked at Aaron's bunk. The covers were yanked off and his gear was gone. Good. He was a good fighter.

I joined Susie in the hallway. She was out of my league and knew it, so she watched my back while I cleaned house. Together we made our way to the hanger.

We approached the mouth and all but walked into a full fire-fight. We held the edges, with NAtch holding the hanger's entrance and center. They were using our hobs as cover and were trying to close. I ducked behind a mound of supplies, praying they contained nothing volatile. I heard a crackling in my headset. It was Thawell.

"Gimme positions!"

They reported in two or three at a time. I felt a tinge of pride at the response. At least eighty percent of us were still effective. We might get out of this yet. There was a brief silence, and I spoke.

"Wyeth and Lendler. Personnel corridor hanger entrance."

"Wyeth! Careful! They've got a squad of goons in there, watch your-"

"The corridor is secured, Sergeant," I said tonelessly.

"Marks, Grominsky, Williams and Garvey. Armory. The Lieutenant is here, too, but he's hit bad. We're taking the offensive in two minutes, Sergeant."

My heart fluttered at the sound of Aaron's voice. But again, now wasn't the time.

"Good. Abdih. Halteman. Merge your companies to the armory. One minute. Wyeth. Lendler. Lay down covering fire, then make for the armory. Two minutes."

Lay down a covering fire with four pistols? I looked around for additional fire.

Ten meters to my right, Lena was down, flames slowly rising from her back. Beside her was her plasma rifle, the charged light blinking ready. Good, but not enough. I needed to distract the men behind the hobs. The hulls were too thickly armored to punch through, and I wasn't sure I wanted to. We would need those craft to bug out. If I could only shoot through them, I could ... I had it.

"Susie! Get ready to fire at the hobs! I'm going to go for Lena 's rifle!" She nodded and I spoke again into the headset.

"Mike! You still there?"

"Yep! I secured a channel, beaming through NATech's comlink. Kiki said ten minutes is the best she can do. We're trying..."

"All right. Tell her to do it. I want you to activate the hovs and slip them into phase mode. Do a cold start and shock the MacDonald's twenty seconds after that."

"Will do. Fifty seconds, stand by."

A shot buried itself into the container in front of me, but I ignored it. Susie, crouched beside me, ducked, but then slithered to the edge of our cover and fired around the side. I pulled out my three remaining magpucks and crawled to the other side. I relayed our plan of action back to Thawell. I then holstered my gun and passed the extra slug gun to Susie, who had come back next to me.

There was a rain of popping sounds from the seven hovercraft as Mike kicked in the ion engines simultaneously. I started a slow count. There was a burst of light from the armory, and I saw lasers tracing their way across the hanger. Eight seconds. I heard Abdih's spine-tingling screech as his men poured from the mess area, splitting into two groups, one to the hovs, one to the armory. Twelve seconds. Halteman followed, focusing his group of twenty or so on the hovs where the bulk of NATech's squads were. Eighteen. I slapped Susie on her ass and smiled quick. She laughed above the booming gunfire and rose to her knees, firing her weapons. Twenty. I jumped to my feet and ran for the rifle.

I was halfway there when I heard the screams of NATech as they were cut to shreds. Mike would only hold the hovs in phase mode for ten seconds, but that would be more than enough for our people to...

There was a brilliant flash and concussion. One of the big guns was firing directly into the hanger! They probably thought their troops were still protected by the hovs, but they were still phasing. NATech was doing more damage to their own cohorts than they were to anyone else.

Anyone else but me. I was thrown off my feet and slammed against the hanger wall, face first. The side of my face smashed against smooth rock and a warm liquid poured down onto my neck. The back of my jacket popped and thudded as the gel armor absorbed the gunshots. I fell to the ground, using Lena's corpse as the barest of cover. Her rifle lay just within my reach. I stretched out my hand and pulled it close, looking toward the hanger entrance.

It was filled with NATech shock squads, at least ten. They were charging in, knowing the only way to take out the Third was with full assault. The armory flanked them, though, and the cross fire was vicious.

The fire had shifted away from me, so I made ready to run back to Susie, who was still firing her energy gun. We might still get out of this.

For the second time in as many minutes, I jumped to my feet. And for the second time, my luck was lousy. The hair on the nape of my neck tingled and stood on end, and the room exploded with a flash. The concussion caught me full on, and I smashed into the wall again, this time with my back. I was stunned from the hit and fell. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw NATech troops racing down the corridor towards us and I knew I would never be Abigail Marks.

* * * *

I woke up in the bottom of a speeding hovercraft. A primal fear urged me awake. I was outside on the desert and I was surrounded by NATech commandos. In a moment of holographic clarity, I remembered thinking that they had different insignia than the NATech Xeno cohorts. They already had my combat jacket and blouse off and were working on my holster. I looked up at the one trying to unbuckle me.

"No, m'sieur! I am not meant to be used this way! I'm a housekeeper!"

"NO!" I SCREAMED. "MISS DECHANT! NO!"

"NO!" I screamed, and wrenched a hand free. I stabbed my rigid fingers into his eyes. He screamed and released me, blood gushing from the ruined organs.

I have no memory of the next few minutes except that I went wild. There was no possible way that I could defeat five highly trained NATech commandos in unarmed combat while being held down by three of them. But welling up inside me was the terror of losing control, losing myself to them. My beast roared free, and for the first time in my life, I gave myself completely over to it.

My next memory was hearing the NATech comlink crackling for a status report. I looked around through hot eyes, my chest heaving from the exertion I couldn't remember. The hov craft stood motionless on the desert floor. I was standing topless in the middle of the open ship, five dead commandos on the deck. I was covered with blood, but most of it was theirs, not mine. The only wound I had was a knife gash on my right side that ran from the ribs under my arm and crossed under my right breast to the middle of my chest. It was bleeding fairly heavily, but seemed superficial. A gentle breeze blew a tendril of hair in my eyes and I moved a hand to brush it back, feeling the cut above my cheekbone from the hanger explosion. That movement woke me up.

After making sure the four men and one woman were dead, I swung the craft around and headed back to our base. I didn't know how much time had passed, but it didn't matter. I was a dog and would die that way, proud to share my grave with my comrades and the man who was almost my husband.

I set the pilot and went to search for my top among the bodies. It wasn't around, probably discarded as we raced along, and although the female commando no longer had any need for her blouse, I would never wear NATech insignia. Fortunately, my sleeveless combat jacket was there and still serviceable. I

put it on, more for protection than for modesty's sake. I felt a stinging on the inside of my right arm and inspected it. The commando that sliced me also hit my arm. Probably a double-edged blade. I cut free a piece of NATech uniform and wrapped it quickly. I didn't have time for my torso wound. I returned to the controls.

The ion engine was redlined, and it howled in protest, the antigravs spraying massive clouds of sand in their wake. Ten kilometers ahead, I could make out the flashes of sunlight as the heavy guns changed position, probably to begin evacuation. I wondered dimly what I was doing so far from base, and a tiny piece of my brain tickled the notion that it had something to do with the different insignia, which was neither Xenon nor Armored. But I was too hurt and too worried about getting back to take the thought further. Eight kilometers.

I had no idea what I was going to do, but that wouldn't stop me. Going back, I searched the bodies and salvaged three slug guns, my pistol and knife, and a plasma rifle. I holstered my pistol and checked the load on the rifle, hoping it was fully charged. It was. It was now about four kilometers to the base. The firing had stopped, and I noticed two troop transports pulling away. The fight was over.

There was a searing heat above me, accompanied by a banshee scream. The entire area glowed with a red haze. The predawn desert sky shone like midday. There was a massive flash at the base, and I was blinded. Kiki! She had brought down a microsat! I groped for the controls and shut the engines down. I dropped to the deck of the hov just as the shock wave hit. There was a deafening roar and the hov canted to its starboard side as the antigravs struggled to compensate.

A screaming sound, louder than the booming concussion, ripped overhead. Through spotted vision I made out a red haze. Again there was a flash as a second microsat struck. Seconds later, the craft was hit with another shock wave. This time, however, the already damaged hov couldn't adjust. It was flung through the air and capsized on its antigrav field. The deck disappeared from beneath me and I was flying through the desert air. I landed hard and felt a white hot pain searing across my chest. The knife cut had been torn open. Blood started ebbing freely from the entire wound, soaking my jacket.

Behind me, the craft creaked and groaned as the fluctuating grav fields crumpled the fatigued metal. The craft lurched once, then smashed into the sand like I had done only moments before. All around it, like offerings sacrificed to the gods of technology and war, lay the dead bodies of NATech soldiers.

I rose up on trembling arms to my hands and knees. Blood dribbled from the slash on my chest onto the sand. I stared at it, trying to calculate how long it would take me to bleed to death. I estimated about twenty minutes. Maybe thirty.

"I should probably take care of that," I muttered, then sagged down to the warm desert sand.

End of Book Two