

Chapter-1

Theo

The room was small. Five feet by five feet, with a bench along the back wall where the tiger was seated. The only way Theo could stretch out was if he lied down on the floor, at the diagonal, and only in one of them, since the toilet and sink in one corner took out just enough room there to prevent him from stretching out completely.

He'd been there three days. He doubted they were allowed to hold him one such a small cell of this long, but considering the crimes he was accused of committing, and the number of people who had to have suffered, if not outright died while the Rogue AI had taken over the city, he doubted anyone cared about his rights.

Sounds came from the other side of the door. Metal sliding against metal. They were undoing the bolt. It was a monstrous affair that had been put together at the last moment. The welds had still been warm when they'd put Theo in the room. It had no electronic components. Just one large metal bar with clamps. Independents might be anti-technology, but the Anarchist had shown a willingness to use technology far beyond what they were known to have. As their so call leader, Theo was being held in a box only brute force could take him out of.

The door opened and a woman, a pangolin, in the gray SolGov uniform with an insignia marking her as a security officer stood in the doorway. She looked him over, not bothering hiding her disdain. "Get up."

Theo stood. His job for now wasn't to make himself a troublesome prisoner. He needed to play his role as leader of the Anarchist, make himself important enough that they would have to send him to Luna.

"Hands front." Theo placed his hands before him, next to one another and she moved aside.

A guard, in heavy armor, his helmet made it impossible to guess the species, entered the room and placed small bands on each wrist. He stepped out and the woman was visible again.

"You so much as breath wrong and I'm going to send enough current through you to stop your heart a few times over, do you understand?"

Theo nodded and lowered his arms. His twitched fingers on his right hand, sending a code to Cass so he would start paying attention.

"The bands have an active broadcasting system," the voice only he could hear said. "If she tries to use it, I might be able to decrypt the signal, but if I try to do anything ahead of time, she will notice the interference. I'd recommend not doing anything that will cause her to use them. Also, I'm still cut from the net."

That would be because of the headband Theo was wearing. A

broadcast jammer to keep him from using his implant to communicate with anyone on the outside. He didn't have an implant, but Cass played that role, and communicated with the network on the same frequencies.

"Step outside."

She wrinkled her nose as he stepped closer. Three days wouldn't normally be enough for him to be all that rank, but he'd ran hard before that, then had to fight for his life, a few times. Oh and he'd made out with a hot kisser of a tiger. All that combined without a chance to shower helped made his sent memorable.

Three guards stood around him, dangerous looking rifles held across their chest. These guys weren't kidding around.

"Follow me." She walked and Theo didn't wait to be pushed to follow her. She set a quick pace through a corridor with doors on each side. More cells, although those had standard electronic locks.

The door at the end of the hall opened to another corridor, but the doors in this one were further apart. Larger rooms. Cass brought up the plan of the floor. Interrogation rooms. The third door on the left opened and she motioned for him to go in.

This room was a dozen feet deep and wide with a table in the middle. A woman sat on the other side of it from him. She was a dalmatian and dressed in a better gray uniform. She didn't have any insignia, which told Theo she outranked anyone here.

Her gaze regained its focus. She'd been reading something or accessing the net through her implant. She looked at him, motioned for the chair. "Thank you sergeant, you can wait outside, I'll let you know when I'm done with him."

"Yes Ma'am." The door closed and Theo was alone with the dalmatian.

He hadn't expected to be questioned here. As the leader of the Anarchists, he'd expected to be shipped to Luna on the next ship with a cell on it for deep questioning. They couldn't have sent her here, even on the fastest ship it was still a week from Luna to Mars. So she was local.

Nothing in his briefing on Mars had indicated SolGov had Special Security Agents here. He'd have to get the information to Anderson when he had the chance.

"Please, take a seat."

Theo sat.

"You failed, you know." He remained silent. "Whatever you were trying to do, we stopped it."

Theo didn't react to the lie. They hadn't stopped anything. He had. He'd been the one to chase the Anarchist through the city, fight them, find the kill program and get to the communication center to feed it to the Rogue. Of course he still wasn't entirely certain how the Rogue had been destroyed. He had to have ingested the program, but Cass had informed him the program had just vanished. Still the Rogue was gone, so it had

worked.

Her gaze flicked to the left, she wanted him to think a message had appeared there, but he'd studied the behavior of people using implants, so he could imitate them.

"And I've just received confirmation that the last of your associates has been captured. Some we've questions have already given you up."

He wondered how much of that was the lie. He doubted any of them knew his name, so they couldn't give them that. All they'd had was his picture, as well as that of Roland and Patricia. For all he knew they hadn't captured any of them.

"Why don't you just make it easier on you and tell me how you got here?"

"I don't recognize the authority of the Corporations to prosecute me." She tilted an ear. "The Corporations are nothing more than slaves to the machines, and machines don't have any rights to judge a living person."

"Right, you and your anti-technology beliefs." He tail was tapping against a chair leg in annoyance. The tapping stopped. "Although, I'm curious as to why an independent like you has an artificial arm, let alone an implant."

Theo closed his right hand. That and his forearm were mechanical. Usually his tools were stored there, but they had been taken out when he'd been captured. Cass' drive was also there, but it was shielded, undetectable.

"Some of us have seen the light."

Another tilt of the ear. "Some Anarchists have begun embracing technology?"

"No." Theo out a low growl of anger in his voice. "Some of us have realized what our, your, masters are and broken our shackles. I don't care how what you think of me, we will save you from them."

"Right, heroes, the lot of you. That's why you almost destroyed this city, to save us."

"A message needed to be sent, an example made."

An image of a mongoose appeared before him and it took more effort than he wanted to keep himself from reacting.

"Why don't you tell me about the role this man plays in your organization?"

"Him?" Theo laughed, all the while cursing Marcus. What had he said? Why hadn't he played the victim like Theo had instructed him to? "You think I'd let a slave in my organization? I used him to infiltrate your government center and discarded him."

She quirked a smile. "You're trying too hard. We have Mister Bowfinger in custody. He admitted to working for you, even gave us interesting details on how you got corrupted the city's infrastructure. I bet you didn't know he'd listened in on that."

His smile wasn't an act. "You're the one trying too hard."

Marcus might have admitted to being in love with Theo, he'd done too good a job there, and maybe even helping him get into the storage building where he'd been found, but he knew nothing about the rest. "I'd abandoned him long before any talks of how we'd proceed ever came up."

Another image appeared, the inside of a storage compartment, with bodies among crates and archaic tech on a table. "What about this? As far as we can tell, the dead are Independents. You were there. Mister Bowfinger claims you killed them."

Theo snorted. "They thought they knew better than me how to proceed."

"Mister Bowfinger claims there was a woman with you. Who is she?"

"I thought you'd caught all my associate? Didn't he identify her?" He relaxed a little, it sounded like they were treating Marcus more as a witness than an accomplice.

She sighed. "Look, you claim you're trying to help us, well I am trying to help you. Do you have any idea what's going to happen to you? If you don't help yourself by talking to me, you're looking at a very short stay in a cell before you are executed. You give me the name of who you report to, and I can see to it that you get hard labor instead. It won't be great, but you'll be alive, and who knows, maybe you'll even live out the term and get to see a blue sky again."

"You can't accuse me of anything. Slaves can't lay accusations, only your masters can do that." Theo looked up. "Do you hear me? If you're so afraid of us, why don't you come here yourselves and accuse me? You come yourself if you want to know what else we have planned." He looked around, careful not to act like he'd let anything slip. His interrogator was smart enough to have caught it, and if she wasn't, then one of the multiple people listening in would be.

"Laying it on kind of thick, aren't you?" Cass commented.

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Like the coward they are, they aren't coming. You should think about whose side you are on when the war comes, because I can promise you that we won't show any mercy to any collaborators."

The dalmatian studied him, and a moment later the door opened. "Take him back to his cell. I'm done with him for the time being."

Theo stood and headed out to be surrounded by his guards.

"You know," Cass said, "considering that rant, you better hope they don't have an interrogation team here. Otherwise we are utterly screwed."

Theo agreed with Cass, but he'd had to go that route. He needed to raise the stakes so he'd be sent to the experts. He needed to get off Mars if he wanted even a sliver of a chance to escape.

Chapter-2

Tucker

"Iginia, Are these the D54RJ capacitor that were supposed to be installed?" Tucker asked, even though the readout next to the capacitor in his sight said 'D54RJ.' He liked engaging people around him in conversation, even if he didn't always give them time to participate in it. He was already hooking the capacitors on the hooks appearing on his jacket.

"Yes," the panther replied, not looking up for the conduits she was examining. "The Installer is still down, so it's going to be a while before they're put in."

"I got the notice about that. It's why I'm here."

"Oh, okay, the Installer is in the standby bay. I didn't think Will would send you to fix it."

Tucker smiled to himself. That wasn't what he had in mind. He made sure the four capacitors were secured. The hooks had closed and were solid. He walked toward the rail, attracting curious glances, with the capacitor attached to his dark blue jacket. He placed a hand on the rail and jumped over it. Gasped and at least one scream accompanied his drop on the other side.

He fell thirty feet before he began slowing down, his arm up and the cord that was attached to the rail taut and he commanded it to stop extending.

He scanned the rows of capacitors, having to drop another five feet before finding those the D54RJ went in. He ordered his sleeve open and let his arm fall to his side.

The units requested an override code before unlatching, and he gave it. The nice thing about being an Orr was that he could override just about anything on the ship.

The four sockets went dark and he pulled the first one out. He took out the old capacitor. The readout he got from it said it worked fine, but William had ordered these four replaced, so they were going to be replaced. He looked down at himself for a place to put it, and formed a hook on his pants, just below the belt. There it went.

"Tucker Orr, what the hell are you doing?" came a male voice he knew well. Although when he was yelling his name he didn't usually sound that angry.

"Replacing the D54RJ capacitor, as per your instructions," he replied, placing the first one in the socket and pushing it closed.

"We have an Installer for that. I don't need any of your crazy acrobatics to get some piece of equipment in place. Harry looks like you might have given him a heart attack."

"Harry? He's my age, he can't have a heart defect, dad would have caught it in his checkup, and the Installer's down, didn't you read your notices?" the tiger looked up, and leaning over the rail the gray wolf was glaring at him. "Who's at the control board?"

"Madrid," William relied without bothering to look. "And don't changing the subject. You have no business throwing yourself over the railing. I expect you to be more level headed."

"Maddie! Be a dear and tell me what's the readout on the new D54RJ!"

"It reads good!" the woman answered.

Tucker smiled at the wolf. "So, you want me to just stop this in the middle?"

The wolf sighed. "No, now that you're there you might as well finish the job, but shouldn't you be going over the design schematics the manufacturer sent over? I wanted your opinion on them."

"Already done." Tucker pulled the second socket out. "I swear, you never check your notices. I let you know, sent you the changes to the upgrade I recommend." He took the capacitor out and the new one in. "I mean I don't know why you asked me, the problems with the upgrade as clear, you have seen them already. Maddie?"

"Second one reads good too!"

"You're going to take over my job one day and—"

Tucker almost dropped the capacitor he was pulling out as he began laughing. He held it against his cheek, trying to get himself under control, and wobbling along the line.

"Tuck, can't you take this seriously?"

"Sorry, Unc Will," he managed between laughs. "That's just too good of a joke for me to be able to keep it in." He wiped away tears.

"It isn't a joke. I talked it over with Eric and—"

"And when is Dad's funeral? He must had died of laughter."

"No, Tuck, he thinks it's a good idea."

That sobered him. "He what?"

"Finish replacing the capacitor, Tucker."

"Don't change the subject," the tiger said, hooking the old capacitor to his jacket and placing the new one in. "How did dad ever thing that was a good idea? I'm his forever irresponsible kid, unable to focus on anything for where he's going to shove his cock next."

"Number three reads good!" Madrid said before Tucker could yell for it.

"You're a good engineer, Tuck. You have a solid head on your shoulder, except when you pull a stunt like this. In time you'll be better than I am."

Tucker snorted. "That's just flattery, and the only thing that gets you if me in your bed." He pulled the fourth socket. "You can't seriously be thinking about putting me in charge of an engineering crew. Remember what happened when you asked me to get a team together and run it?" He took the capacitor out.

"That was three years ago."

Tucker looked up. "And I've changed like not at all in that

time. Unc Will, You put me in charge of a bunch of guys and you know what's going to happen. I'm going to have the greatest orgy ever heard of." He looked at the empty socket. "You'll be invited, I promise."

"You can be serious, when you sent your mind to it, I've seen it. It's just when you don't take something seriously that your cock starts making decisions for you."

He placed the capacitor in and closed the socket. "I never take anything seriously, you know that."

"Reads good!" Madrid yelled.

Tucker placed his arm back in the sleeve and had it close. He then had the cord retract into the fabric, pulling him up.

"Don't sell yourself short, Tuck. You're not the brainless, sex obsessed, guy you like to lead people to think you are."

"But I try to damned hard to be." He closed his hand on the rail and climbed over it, and pressed himself against the wolf. "I mean everyone knows I only think with my cock." He gave the wolf's package a firm squeeze.

William face didn't react, but his cock stiffened under the hand. "What have I told you about sex in engineering?"

Tucker canted his ears, and pursed his lips while he acted like he was thinking about it. "Not to get caught?"

William sighed and pulled the tiger's hand away. "Get out of here."

"But I still have three hours to go?"

"Just leave, Tuck, You've already done plenty."

"Are you?" he shut up when the wolf pointed to the door. He headed there with a grin.

"Oh and Tuck? Be sure to be in my cabin after dinner, You're going to finish what you started here."

"Fuck," Madrid said, "I wish one of them was female compatible. I would love to experience that level of sexual energy."

Never gonna happen, Tucker thought. Well, maybe his grandfather might like her? He had no idea if she was his type. She certainly didn't look anything like his grandmother, which was the only woman he knew Francis was hot for.

"If you can wait for a few years, his niece is probably going to be female compatible."

"I guess, but it's a guy I'd like to..." her voice faded into the distance.

Tucker caught his reflection on a screen and he shook his head. He was off duty now. His blue jacket over the white shirt and pants wouldn't do. He wasn't walking around the ship looking like an engineer unless had work to do.

His jacket and shirt melted away, and his pants became loose shorts, and then form defining ones. He was going to have some fun, and he was going to make it clear to the passengers what he had to offer.

He made it twenty feet before a naked rhino caught his eye.

The name and his public information appeared next to him, but Tucker ignored it. By the time the rhino was done looking Tucker over, the tiger had him against the wall, groping him.

"Hi, I'm Tucker, I'm part of the ship's entertainment. Is there anything I can do to entertain you?"

The rhino groaned. "Aren't you one of the captain's sons?" he managed to say.

Tucker leaned closer, stroking the rhino's hard and leaking cock. "Would it be hotter for you if I was?" he whispered.

"Oh fuck yeah." He moaned as tucker squeezed his cock. "I've always wanted to fuck one of the Orrs."

Tucker grins. "Looking to add a notch to your bedpost?"

The rhino looked confused, so Tucker wiped the expression of his face by running his palm over the slick cock head. The rhino shuddered and Tucker thought he might just fall over.

"Well, if you want to fuck an Orr, who am I to say no?" He turned around and rubbed his ass against the rhino's cock. Tucker moaned.

"You'll really let me fuck you?"

Tucker glanced at his information. He was a Halibury Citizen, one of a handful of non-Orr citizen that had come on from Mars, in a hurry to leave it after what had happened there.

He leaned back, pressing the cock between the two of them. "Buddy, When an Orr citizen is rubbing his ass against your cock, I'd like to think there isn't any confusion in the message. You were naked, I figured you knew how things go here."

The rhino grabbed Tucker's hips. "We hear stories, and I saw people having sex in the halls, but it isn't something I expected to happen to me."

"Well, it's happening, so shove that cock in me and go wild."

The rhino pushed Tucker forward enough to readjust himself and with a grunt he had his cock under the tiger's tail. Tucker moaned and pushed back until the rhino was all in. "Oh fuck I needed that."

The rhino bit down on Tucker's shoulder. "This is amazing." He pulled out and pushed back in with a moan.

Tucker accompanied him with his own moan. Through half open eyes he noticed the other passengers talking by, smiling and groping themselves. One stopped and licked his licks. When tucker opened his eyes fulling the dalmatian nodded to the tiger's hard cock. Tucker smiled but shook his head. 'Later' he mouthed and the dalmatian found a bench to sit on.

Tucker closed his eyes and tightened his ass around the cock. He hadn't been jocking, he'd been needing this. Four hours of only work and he was due of a good pounding. Unc Will could be so unreasonable with his 'no sex in engineering' rule.

"Oh fuck," the rhino whispered, thrusting faster. "Oh Fuck. I'm getting close." Pounding faster, Tucker gasped as the rhino's sock his a particularly good spot. "Your ass is so

fucking tight. I didn't know guy who got fucked so much could be so tight. Oh fuck, should I pull out? I didn't—"

Tucker backed him against the wall. "Don't even think about it. Keep fucking me until you've emptied your big balls in me." He tightened his ass to make sure the message was clear.

"Oh fuck," the rhino whined, holding on to Tucker tighter and fucking him harder. "You've got such a nice ass, I'm going to feel it until it overflows. Oh fuck, oh fuck, here it comes!"

Tucker pushed back as the rhino shoved his cock deep into him and then he felt him shudder, his cock throbbing inside him. Tucker moaned, feeling the hot cum in him. He loved when a guy emptied himself in him like that. It was a sense of fullness that very few things could match.

The groaning behind him was interrupted by a curse and then the rhino was pulling out with a short cry of surprise. The quick motion almost made Tucker lose his balance, but he caught himself on the wall.

The rhino was on his ass, his face a mix of pain and confusion.

"Are you okay?"

"My legs gave out."

Tucker turned and forced any mirth it might feel off his face. As a member of the crew and the captain's son, he had a duty to make sure the passengers didn't feel they'd done anything wrong. He offered his hand and pulled the rhino up. "I'm sorry, I should have asked is you were experienced with standing sex. It can take it out of you."

"It's okay." The rhino's gray skin gained a pinkish hue. "I got carried away. I didn't expect the fall that's all." He grabbed Tucker's hard cock. "You didn't cum. I guess I should take care of it for you."

Tucker smiled. "It isn't needed. You have your fun."

"But—"

"And there's someone over there who's eager to help me out, so you don't have to feel obligated."

Tucker and the rhino looked at the dalmatian, who licked his lips at them. He was slowly stoking himself.

"Are you sure it's okay? It's kind of my fault you're hard right now."

Tucker smiled. "Trust me, being hard is my normal state. If you want to join me and the dalmatian, you're welcome to do so, but it isn't an obligation."

The rhino nodded. "In that case I think I'll leave you two to it."

Tucker kissed the rhino, going for the full tongue in muzzle experience. The rhino tensed and then relaxed. He grabbed Tucker's head and pushed the tiger's tongue aside to shove his as far into Tucker's muzzle as it could go.

They pressed lips as Tucker sucked on the rhino's tongue. The rhino moaned and it was all Tucker could do not to press

himself against him and rub his hardon between them. He pulled away, to the loud protest of the rhino and smiled.

"You know, once you get into it, you don't to it by half. If I hadn't implied to the dalmatian over there he'd get to finish me off, I'd bend you over and fuck you right here."

"Is there anything I can do to get you to change your mind?"

"Sorry, part of my duties as the crew is to make sure that as many of them get to enjoy me. But if you give me your room number I'll be sure to drop in on you tonight and fuck your brains out."

"Oh I will be looking forward to that."

A message popped in his vision, with the room number. Tucker added it to his schedule, right after his time with William. He added a note 'fuck his brains out' to the entry. William's entry was tagged 'get fucked hard.'

"I'll see you later then." He groped the rhino's soft cock and turned to the dalmatian, who was panting. He crossed the space and took his muzzle in hand. "Now, just what can I do with you."

The dalmatian looked him in the eyes, licked his lips then lowered his gaze to Tucker's lips.

"Really, a kiss? That was that much of a turn on?"

"You have no idea," the dalmatian replied in a deep voice.

"Well, how about you kiss my cock first, and show me what you can do, then I can decide if you warrant a lip lock." He pressed his cock against the dalmatian's lips and they parted before he pushed on them.

The dalmatian moaned as Tucker pushed more of his cock in. Tucker wasn't small, either in length or in girth, he was an Orr after all and while he was nowhere close to the C generation, he'd gotten enough of their genes to be memorable. He hit the back of the dalmatian's muzzle, tilted and ear and the canine relaxed, pushing himself forward and taking the entirety of the cock.

Tucker gasped as his head entered the throat. "Fuck, I didn't think you'd that." He grabbed the dalmatian's head and pulled out then pushed in, not stopping until all his cock was back in. There was only a little resistance when he went past the back of his mouth. "Well, someone has a talent here. Fuck I wish I could do that."

He pulled out and proceeded to fuck the dalmatian's muzzle hard, keeping an eye on him just enough to see any signs he wasn't enjoying this anymore, but considering how he was stroking himself and leaking abundantly, Tucker didn't have to worry.

"You want it in your throat?" Tucker moaned. A small shake of the head answered him. "You're mouth?" he checked. A slight nod. "Then get ready."

He thrust faster, but shallower. He moaned as the dalmatian

used his tongue to push Tucker's cock against his palate. The extra sensation pushed him over the edge and he held himself still as he emptied his balls.

When he looked down the dalmatian's hand was coated with his own cum. Tucker bent down and kissed him, taking him by surprise before he'd swallowed everything. He pushed his tongue in and tasted himself. The dalmatian moaned and responded by rubbing his tongue back, spreading more of the cum.

When Tucker broke the kiss he grabbed the dalmatian's hand and licked the cum off it. "Tasty." His ears turned red and Tucker smiled. He loved making passengers blush like that.

The dalmatian leaned back against the wall. "I guess you don't have any free time for me tonight."

Tucker wrapped a hand around the dalmatian's cock and pulled up, taking as much of the cum with it, then licking it clean. "What do you mean?" he asked once the dalmatian's eyes uncrossed. "I have nothing scheduled after the rhino."

"Aren't you going to spend the night with him?"

Tucker chuckled. "Not part of my duties. I'm going to fuck him then leave his unconscious body to rest. You want me to visit you next?"

"Will you suck me off?"

"Hell yeah." He received a room number and put it after the rhino's in his schedule. 'Major suck off,' went next to it.

"That duty thing, it's a load of crap isn't it?"

Tucker grinned, "you got me. What gave it away?"

The dalmatian laughed. "You're the captain's son, there's no way you'd have duties."

"Oh you're wrong there. Dad makes sure I never forget this is a working position for me, not a leisure cruise. But when I'm not working in engineering, I'm free to do whoever I want. Most of the passengers are more comfortable having sex with me for the first time if they think it's part of my duties."

"The first time?"

Tucker grins. "You want seconds, right?"

"You're kidding right?"

"So did the rhino. So does pretty much anyone I fuck."

"Then how come you're not in a room fucking someone already?"

"Because officially I'm still working. My boss let me go early because I was aggravating him." The dalmatian looked dubious. "I was groping him in the workplace and he was enjoying it."

"That's a good way to get out of working, I guess."

"Only when the rest of your job is done. There was also the fact I threw myself over a safety rail."

"You what?"

Tucker grinned. "Hey, I was safe about it." He closed the dalmatian's open muzzle and kissed him. "Anyway I'll see you tonight, I need to wander the ship and greet more passengers."

"And fuck them?"

Tucker pursed his lips. "Maybe in a while I think I'm going to just wander for now."

"Dressed like this you're not going to make it far before someone wants your ass or your cock."

Tucker looked down at himself. All he had on was his belt. "Good point." Fabric flowed from it until he had loose pants, at first white then a pale yellow. He gave himself a jacket in dark blue with yellow piping."

"Better?"

"Not sure about the color, but at least you're covered."

Tucker turned around. "It doesn't work?"

"I don't know, I mean a search says it does, I'm just not a fan of yellow."

"Then I'll make sure not to wear that when I see you tonight" he waved and headed away.

"I'd rather you not wear anything!" the dalmatian called after him.

"I'll keep that in mind!"

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Tucker greeted the older couple as he entered the top deck lounge. Both women complemented him on the ship's spas and theater. He promised to pass the message along to his father.

"Excuse me?" a woman called. "Are you with the crew?"

Tucker turned and smiled. "I am." Technically he should be wearing the crew's uniform, but as an Orr he could get away without it and only expect a shake of the head in reproach from his dad. "What can I..." his words trailed off as he caught sight of the man standing next to the woman.

He was a gorilla a head taller than Tucker, thick arms and legs and a torso he would love to bury his face in. His clothing wasn't suggestive at all, but fuck did he want to rip them off and just rub himself against the man.

The woman was looking at him expectantly. He closed his eyes in embarrassment. He opened them and took her by the shoulders, moving her until she was standing before the man. "I apologize, but your husband is just too distracting. You are one lucky woman."

She smiled, but it was the man who replied. "I'm the lucky one."

Tucker smiled back. "Now, what did you ask?"

"I was wondering if you knew why we changed course?"

"We have?" he sent a request to the cockpit for an update on the course.

She pointed to the stars. "Yes, if we were on the established route, Jupiter would be lower. I'd say we made a three-degree change."

The reply appeared in his sight. "I'm impressed, you're right. There's something going on with the junk belt and we've been given a new course so we won't have to deal with whatever

they're doing about it. I'm impressed, I'd never have known if you hadn't pointed it out."

She blushed.

"My wife is a pilot, I had to blackmail her in taking a trip where she was outside the cockpit."

"Really?" Tucker leaned in close to her. "Do you want to see the Mercury's cockpit?"

"Could I?"

"Oh, please don't," her husband said, but the tone was playful.

Tucker offered her his arm. "Of course you can. You're a passenger, and as such you are accorded anything you want." He lowered his voice. "It helps that I'm the captain's son, I wouldn't risk asking any of the others for such a favor."

He began leading her toward the exit. Her husband gave an exaggerated sigh and followed them.

"Would you be Tucker by any chance? I'm told you're the only one of his son who mingles with the passengers."

"That's a bold lie. I happen to know that Trevor was out of our room for at least an hour, maybe two months ago?" She frowned at him. "Okay, I'm exaggerating, but yes, he isn't very social. He tends to come out later in the evening, when the ship is less crowded. Now, can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Does your husband happen to be male compatible? And would you be willing to lend him to me if he is?"

She laughed, a light and airy things and made Tucker chuckle.

"Honey, are you male compatible?"

The gorilla looked at her, utterly serious. "Do you want me to be?"

Tucker raised an eyebrow. "I hadn't expected you were that kind of relationship."

Her smile became brittle. "Why? Because I'm so much smaller than him?"

"No, because until now he was quite forward, unless his comment about blackmailing you into coming was a joke."

She warmed up again. "Oh no, that's how he got me here. It's only when it comes to sex that I give the orders. Now, unfortunately for you, I don't lend him out, I only share him."

"Meaning you need to be involved."

She patted his hands. "Exactly."

Tucker looked over his shoulder, taking in the gorilla in all his glory. He sighed. "Well, I can always dream."

"If you want, I can have him jerk off for you. He can put on quite a show."

Tucker swallowed and had to adjust himself. "Oh I wish you'd said that after we were done with the visit. Now I'm not going to be able to lose this erection."

She patted his hand again. "I know dear, I know."

Tucker gave the gorilla a plaintive look.

"Hey, don't look at me, she's the master torturer in the family."

Tucker adjusted himself again. "I need to talk with Terry about getting you a post in the interrogation department, clearly your talents are wasted in the cockpit."

"You have an interrogation department?" she asked.

"If we don't I'll have one created, just for you."

She smiled. "That's so sweet. But you still have to wait until I've gotten my tour of the cockpit."

Tucker stifled a whine. He had to admit defeat. If his brothers ever heard about this they would never let him—

'Tuck,' the message came. 'Never thought I'd see this day. Trevor.'

'I hate you. Tucker.'

Chapter-3

Theo

Theo didn't move when he heard the soft 'ding' that let him know someone was about to open the door. The door hadn't actually made the sound, Cass had made it. The guard with his food had probably scraped against the door and Cass had picked it up. That and the time had to be right for it. The door slid open and he turned his head. The guard stood in the doorway looking at him.

"In the corner," she said. She didn't have to indicate which corner it was. She'd explained all that the first time. ON the second when Theo had decided to play at being stubborn, just to see what would happen, she closed the door without leaving him the food. After that he hadn't fought it, he needed to keep his strength up.

He went to the corner, which put him thirty feet away from the table and further from the door. The room they'd put him in on this ship was larger than the one they'd held him in on the station. Here he could not only stretch his legs, but walk around if he felt particularly bored.

The bed was also more comfortable, a real one, with a firm mattress and sheets. They were just cloth, no way to set how warm or cool he liked being, but at least he didn't have to sleep in his clothes anymore.

He didn't know which ship it was, They'd caged his 'implant' while transferring him, and while Cass wasn't an implant, he did communicate with the systems the same way, so he'd found himself incapable of seeing any of the information about the ship.

He still had the list of scheduled departure, but they both agreed that it wouldn't be accurate anymore. In the days after the Rogue AI had been destroyed, there would have been a push to leave, and Mars would have done everything it could to

accommodate it. Ships would have been shuffled, cargo delayed to let passenger ships in.

The station had been so full his guards had had to push people out of their way, in spite of the warning that had to go out ahead of them. The city was probably empty right now.

The guard placed the tray on the table and moved away. When she reached the center of the room, Theo walked to the table. He didn't rush, something else he'd tried. She'd tensed and pulled out her handgun. Since he didn't want to get shot, he moved slowly since then when she was around.

She reached the door as he reached the table. "You don't have to leave," She said, sitting, "I could use the company." He'd been saying that for the last six days. This was the tenth day of transit, and while he didn't expect them to use the fastest ship to get him to Luna, he did expect they would go as fast as this ship could. So he'd begun working on establishing a rapport.

Unlike of leaving, like she did the previous times she stopped at the door and turned. "Why'd I want to talk with a traitor like you."

"I'm not a traitor." He cut the steak.

She snorted. "Yeah? So killing hundred's of folks just normal for you?"

If only a hundred had died, Theo would be happy. The city had had close to a million people, without counting tourists. The Anarchist's Rogue AI had to have been responsible for thousands of death. He didn't know the number, and he was happy about it. He knew it wasn't his fault. He'd done everything he could, but he couldn't stop the nag that said he should have realized what had been going on sooner, reacted faster, saved more people.

"I'm sorry for the deaths." He chewed a piece, taking his time. He couldn't act like he was on her side. Changing the role he was playing too much would not only make her suspicious of his intention, but if anyone was listening in, and they had to be, they might realize what he was trying to do and switch guards on it. So he had to be his role, the bored Anarchist who thought he was doing the right thing. "You need to understand, this is a war."

What he needed to do was get her to see that he was on the right side of things. It turned his stomach to turn someone to the side of the Anarchist, but he'd need the inside help when they reached Luna station. So, now that she was talking to him, he had to use his time to get her to see things their way.

"A war? You created this war. You sneaked your way in and did something to our computers. You could live happily on your island, or where ever you Independent creep live in your huts or caves and let the rest of us go about our lives."

"I didn't start this. I'm doing it for you." She snorted. "I know you see me as your enemy, but the enemy is in your head

already. That's how they control you. Your implant."

"You have one too."

Theo paused in his eating, didn't look up from his food. "I wasn't given a choice."

"Excuse me?"

He looked up at her, made his gaze cold controlled anger. "I didn't want this. I was a child, but even then I knew it was wrong to put a machine in my head. We're not made to be machines, we are people."

"What about your arm? That's a machine." He tone was derisive.

He placed a hand on it, a gesture meant to be both protective and an acknowledgment of what she'd said. "It's a tool, nothing me. It can't think, it can't make me do or feel anything. That's how it should be."

"Yeah? Then if you hate it so much why don't you have it taken out?"

Her comment brought to mind the mule, lying on the bed, a metal plate covering almost half his skull. "You don't think I would, if I could?" He hadn't meant to make his tone pensive, but he'd let the dismay he'd felt on seeing him affect his voice. He hardened it, maybe she'd think he'd let something slip. "Why do you think your overlords made it so it would spread throughout the brain? It can't be removed without killing you. Do you have any idea how difficult it was to render mine harmless? To do so without them realizing what I was doing?"

"That's bullshit. You can take it out, everyone knows that."

Theo made his smile thin and vicious. "Really? And you're such an expert on implants? Tell me, have you read anything on them? Do you even how it bonds with your neurons?"

Uncertainty flashed in her eyes and Theo fought the urge to press his point. Cass was already listing reports he could mention to her, basic information he could say. But he didn't add anything.

He looked at his food, he'd eaten two-thirds of the content, drank most of the water. He made a face at it. "I'm not hungry anymore." He put the tray on the floor and slid it in her direction. It made it halfway to her before stopping.

She looked at it, then him. "Hands on the table." He placed them there, palm down. She placed a hand on the butt of her gun as she went and picked it up. "You people are a bunch of degenerates. And you're worse than the rest because you had it good and now you're trying to ruin it for the rest of us."

"You think that because that's what they want you to think. They're in your mind, controlling what you think. You're their slave."

She had her gun pointed at him. "I'm no one's slave. No one controls me, do you hear me?"

Theo didn't say anything. He'd rattled her, which had been

all he'd aimed to do. Pushing now would only get him shot, and while her regret over losing control might make her simpatic to him, he doubted they'd do more than the most basic patch job on his injuries.

"I'm sorry." He kept his voice neutral, let her wonder if it was because of what he's said, or what she was. She backed out of the room without moving her gun from him.

What he was trying to do would normally take months, a variation on making a guy fall in love with him. He didn't have that kind of time, fortunately, all he needed from her was to question what she thought she knew. He'd planted the seed, she'd do some search on Implants. She'd find out just how intricately bond to the organic components it was.

He hadn't had to read anything to find out about that. His dad's work in miniaturization meant he'd worked with implants, and when Theo was six or seven, he'd noticed how his parents didn't need to use any of the command screens to use the machines in their house. His father had explained about the implants then, and Darius being who he was, he'd gone in so much details that Theo would have been able to build one, if he'd been old enough to understand any of it.

But with that seed planted, he'd be able to help make it grow. And so long as he managed to talk with her like this during meals over a few days, even if they switched her away, she'd see things enough his way that she'd be willing to help with his escape.

He hoped.

People weren't as predictive as someone in his position would like. It's why turning someone was usually the work of months and years. They could balk at the weirdest thing, or even when everything they saw confirmed what they were told, they could decide to ignore it.

"I don't know if you have enough time to get to her," Cass said. "Her biorhythms indicate she'd just pissed." Because Cass wasn't actually an implant and was connected directly through his nervous system, the caging didn't prevent them come communicating

Theo moved to the center of the room and began exercising, starting with jumping jacks, using the motion to hide his finger coding. 'How long?' Unfortunately Theo couldn't reply verbally, or it would give away his partner's presence.

"Based on the engine sounds and vibration, this is either a Furges class passenger ship or a Landaugh Messenger. Based on the room I'm guessing the Furges, which means that if they push the engine as fast as they will go, and considering the relative position of Mars and Luna at this time, they can be there under three weeks."

Theo's heart skipped. That meant less than eight days left. Was that anywhere near enough?

"Calm down, I said if they push. This is SolGov, they

won't. I figure we still have two full weeks before we reach Luna, make three. The engines are in that range of speed where I can't tell the difference between the low or high range of it, but I can confirm they aren't pushing them."

Theo moved to push-ups. 'Lead with that next time." He coded.

Cass didn't reply. They'd worked together for long enough he knew how Theo preferred things, but he too was bored, and unlike Theo, Cass couldn't just get up and stretch his legs, exercise or just walk. Without being able to connect to the ship's computer, he was locked inside the drive.

He could slow his perception down to a crawl, if he wanted to, but Theo had noticed a reluctance on his part to alter his processing speed. Once they were out of this, they'd have to talk about it. The only thing Cass had to pass the time was work on his movies, or get a rise out Theo. And based on this last exchange, Cass was getting bored with the movies.

Theo moved on to Callanetics. He kept to his exercises every day. So he'd be ready to take advantage of the smallest opening on Luna Station. When he was done he showered, and lied down.

"Movie?" Cass asked.

Theo thought about it. What else could he do? His jailers were probably counting on the boredom being enough torture to make him talk, either on the way to Luna or once he got there.

He intertwined his fingers behind his head and closed his eyes. 'Not porn,' he coded, 'not Bonbo.'

Cass chuckled and pulled an action movie from his library.

Theo did want porn, going without sex for weeks or months wasn't unknown for him, but doing so without jerking off was rare. The thing was that even if he'd served as the model in most of Cass' movie, he didn't enjoy making a spectacle of himself.

Oh he could have sex in public, when the others would participate or it was accepted, like on the Orr ship, but this was him being under surveillance and that felt too much like putting on a show.

So relaxed and enjoy the story of some buff hyena going about rescuing princesses from monsters until he fell asleep.

* * * * *

A soft ping woke him.

He didn't open his eyes, the ping was what Cass used when something out of the ordinary happened. With a finger tap he let Cass know he was awake and the time appeared in the top left. Barely three in the morning, Mars time. Only three hours since he'd gone to sleep. What might be happening they early.

The shape of the door formed in the darkness, highlighted in red. Whatever was happening came from there.

'Opened?' he coded.

"Not yet. It doesn't sound like someone standing there, or

walking by. It sounds very much like the sounds you make when breaking into a room."

Why would anyone break into this room? If it was a bored passenger, the odds were astronomical they'd pick this one room out of everything else to use to alleviate their boredom. And really, what were the odds anyone but him enjoyed breaking into rooms when he was bored?

He stretched, rubbed his face and sat.

This was intentional, so why? Break him out? Again, why? The only people who knew he was here would be SolGov. Any Anarchist who had escaped might now he'd been caught, but why would they care? He was their fall guy. They'd wanted him to be caught, or better yet, he guessed, killed.

He stood, stretched again and headed for the toilet. He took a leak, then got some water from the sink. The door began blinking. It would be opening soon. He drained the glass and placed it back in the sink.

Either this was a trick, something SolGov had concocted to try to get him to reveal where the Anarchists were, in which case someone was watching the room's video feed and wouldn't do anything about what happened. Or this was a genuine breakout, so they would have done something to prevent the watchers from knowing what was going on.

The problem was he couldn't think of anyone who'd want to break him out. It wasn't someone from the colonies. He'd been caught, Anderson had marked him as dead. He closed his eyes and pushed thought of his parents out of his mind. There was only one person who might feel she had to do something, but Cass had confirmed she'd boarded a ship heading to Titan station. It was the last thing he'd gotten before they'd caged him.

He sat back on his bed and waited.

The door opened and a kangaroo stood in the doorway, gun in hand. He scanned the room before focusing on Theo. "Hi," he said, raising his gun. "Glad to see you're awake, and dressed, we're going on a little trip." He was used to these kinds of things. That's he'd had to physically bypass the lock had to make him an Independent, but how had he come here? If he had a ship it made him somewhat closer to the Anarchist.

"Where?"

"Don't worry your pretty little head about that. Just get moving."

"He isn't in my database," Cass said, "and I can't place his accent. He isn't from any of the large corporate city."

Theo was in the process of standing when a large hand tapped on the Kangaroo shoulder. He spun, but before he could take aim a first hit him in the face.

A tall and muscular mule stepped into the doorway. "Hi Paco," He told the downed Kangaroo. "It's good to see you again." Brick, appeared next to him, with other information Cass had gathered in their times on the Mercury. The mule knees over

the Kangaroo and proceeds to pound his face in.

"There's a lot of anger in there," Cass commented.

"Don't break him," an unseen voice says, stopping the mule's raised fist.

"Why not?" Brick says, his voice cold.

"Oh yeah, a lot of anger."

"Because the room's scanner needs to register someone alive in here once Uncle releases it." A tiger's face appeared in the doorway. "Hey Theo, how is it going?"

The shock of seeing the Mercury's welcome officer had knocked Theo off his game, seeing the tiger had thrown him off a loop. "Tucker?"

The tiger looked the room over. "Nice place they put you in. It's a bit of a shame that Paco is going to be comfortable"

"I can make sure he isn't comfortable," Brick said.

"Tempting, but if they detect too much in the way of injuries they might decide to investigate early. The Mercury's close enough they might question it."

"What are you doing here?" Theo asked, trying to come up with even one situation that could explain Tucker being here, and as rash as the Orr tiger was, there was no way Theo could believe he was here to try and convince Theo to have sex.

Was this a dream?

"We're here to take you away from here."

"Why?" Theo asked, his tone cautious.

Brick stood and took out restraints.

"Come on, Brick, are those really needed?"

"He's an Independent." The word was filled with such hate Theo considered standing on the bed to back away.

"Yeah, but he isn't one of the bad ones. He's going to behave, right Theo?"

"No." Brick said before Theo could open his mouth.

Theo began coding for a risk assessment, but Tucker's eyes flicked to his hand and he froze. Shit, had he noticed something while they worked together?

The mule took a step raising the restraints. "He puts this on, or I knock him out."

Tucker gave Theo a conciliatory smile. "Sorry, you better put them on." He nodded to the Kangaroo. "He was just supposed to knock Paco out, You don't want to risk it."

"This isn't an act," Cass said. "Tucker is actually worried Brick might do more than knock you unconscious. Where is that anger coming from? There was nothing in his records about encounters with Independents."

Theo offered his wrists. Yeah, and this wasn't going to show up on any records either. There was something he'd missed during his time on the Mercury.

Brick fixed the restraints on each wrist then activated them and they snapped together. He pulled a headband and placed it on Theo's head.

"Great," Cass grumbled, "There goes any chances for an update on what's been happening."

The mule leaned in. "Do me a favor and make my life difficult, okay?"

"Brick, no scaring the prisoner. I'm really sorry Theo, I wish I could have brought someone else but Brick was the only one available and we already know Paco was who Vanguard would send so there was no way to not having him come along."

"Prisoner?" Theo asked. "So this isn't a rescue? You know I'm not behind what happened on Mars."

Tucker shook his head. "Actually, I don't. All I know is that you helped us save Tom, and I'm grateful, but then you went and locked yourself in the communication center. I have no idea what you did. For all I know you collected the AI and hid it somewhere. I mean I still want to have sex, but yeah, you're a prisoner."

"They can't be serious," Cass objected. "We did everything we could to stop the thing. We delivered the kill program."

Theo nodded. To Cass and Tucker. When the mule motioned, Theo headed for the door. Tucker moved out of the way. He was wearing a military-style jacket and pants. They didn't look armored, but Theo noticed the belt. The fabric could be able to take high power laser, for all Theo knew.

The lock had been reassembled. The job was good, anyone just glancing at it wouldn't be able to tell it had been taken apart. He tilted an ear when Tucker followed his gaze.

"Couldn't leave the mess Paco made. The idea is for them to notice your absence as late as possible."

"Breakfast is going to brought in about six hours."

"You don't have a printer?"

Theo shook his head.

Tucker cursed. "Brick, we need to pick up the pace. I told Uncle to start moving the Mercury away, it'll be easier for us to catch up, than SolGov noticing we were in the area."

"They'll be chasing Paco's ship."

"I'm not risking it. SolGov is in a state Right now, they might just decide to shoot before questioning anyone. Dad would kill me if the Mercury ended up getting scratched."

"Uncle, again," Cass said. "The Mercury's pilot? If he is, he isn't on the Mercury's roster. I am starting to think there's a hidden side to the ship and its crew."

Theo agreed. And whatever it was had to be military related. He remembered the Automated Door Opener Tucker had used. That was a military device. Theo didn't care how powerful the Orrs were, they couldn't have gotten one on Mars, that had been something they already had access to.

What did the Orrs need a hidden military ship for? As far as he knew, as any of the records on the colony said, the Orrs weren't in open warfare with anyone. There was Vanguard, but that had always been an economic war.

There had been the treaty, twenty or so years ago, which allowed the corporation to build up a defense, but that had been for the purpose of fighting off the pirate which had become bolder.

Hadn't it?

Had there been more to it? He recalled Thomas Orr saying they had a fleet now. He hadn't paid notice, figuring he'd just mean they could assemble their guard ships if SolGov pushed them. Now? Maybe the Fleet was more literal than he'd believed.

He stopped himself from coding a question. Brick was behind him, and if Tucker knew about how he coded, it was possible the mule knew too.

And he realized there was no point. It wasn't like Cass could send the new information to Anderson. They weren't part of the colonies anymore.

They reached a hole in the hull leading into a small ship. As soon as they were in, a white material appeared on the inside of the hole.

"Paco might not have cared about what happened when he disengaged," Tucker said, continuing to make his way through the small ship, "But we're not interested in hurting anyone." They reached the airlock, which was open. Theo could see another ship on the other side, larger, cleaner. "Watch your steps as you cross, there's a gravity shift."

He felt it as he tried crossing. He was standing on this side, but gravity was off by ninety degrees on the other. He grabbed the edge and awkwardly pulled himself in, sitting on the floor and then standing. He reached down to grab Tucker's hand and pulled him through.

The mule wasn't there.

"Brick's setting a course for Paco's ship. We know there's a group of Independent troublemakers in the asteroid belt. We figure we can send SolGov down on them with this. Let them deal with the political fallout if there's any."

"You guys really don't like Independents."

"Dad and Brick don't like any of them. There's a history there. I just don't like the troublemakers. Plenty of them just want to live peacefully without tech, and I respect that. I don't get it, but I respect it."

When Theo looked up from the hatch in the floor the clothing Tucker was wearing was melting back into the belt.

Naked Tucker smiled. "It's going to take Brick about ten minutes to set everything. You want to go for a quick one?"

Theo sighed. "Again, no. What's your obsession with me?"

"It's not an obsession, and if it was it isn't with you. You're a good looking guy I know you're male compatible considering you were with that mongoose. I like having sex with guys, what's wrong with that?" Tucker was hard now.

Theo looked at the other tiger's cock. It certainly was a good looking enough cock, nice and thick. And he hadn't had any

sex in almost two weeks now, not a little more than that. If only the cock was on another guy.

"The answer is still no, Tucker. Maybe if you learn to get to know me first we can talk about it again."

Tucker rolled his eyes and chuckled. "I'm not looking to marry you, just bed you."

"How much do you charge?"

The question threw the tiger. "What?"

"The kind of sex you're offering, I pay for. If all I want it to have a cock up my ass, I'll order a professional."

"Really?" Tucker leaned back against the wall. "You'd spend money for something I can offer to you for free?"

"It went right over his head," Cass commented. "Maybe he isn't all there?"

No, Tucker had gotten the jab, Theo was certain of that, he'd just chosen to ignore it.

"How about you tell me where I'm going to be sitting during this trip? And any chance you can take this thing off? It's uncomfortable."

"Sorry, it's staying. I know you don't have an implant, but Brick will pound your head in rather than take the chance."

"Kind of violent, isn't he?"

Tucker shrugged. "Just toward independents. They hurt someone close to him."

Theo remembered the mule lying in bed, with part of his head damaged. The tenderness in Brick's voice when he spoke to him.

Tucker led Theo to a large couch at the back of the shuttle. "You know, this is kind of luxurious, for a military shuttle."

"It's a passenger yacht. For when we need to drop off passengers in places that can't accommodate the Mercury."

He sat and leaned back. The couch was firm, comfortable. Large enough someone could—

"You know, there's still time for you to say yes. Brick can pilot us back while we fuck."

"No. I thought you Orrs were all about consent."

"I am. I haven't jumped your bones yet, have I? I'm waiting for you to say yes."

Theo eyes the other tiger. "I really hope you have other guy to fuck in the mean time, because I am not going to say yes to an irresponsible, stubborn kid like you."

"I'm about your age. According to the information you gave when you boarded I'm a year older than you."

"Then maybe you could start acting like it?"

Tucker smiled. "Now where's the fun in that?" he turned, raised his tail to give Theo a view of his asshole and headed for the cockpit."

"I'm going to kill him."

"I think he'd prefer that you fuck him," Cass said. "I'd

prefer that too."

Theo lowered his voice, "I am not having sex with him just so you can record it."

"I'd think you'd have sex with him because he's hot. Me recording it is just a bonus."

Theo growled his frustration.

"Getting pent up back there?" Tucker asked as Brick pulled himself in.

"No!"

The mule looked from one tiger to the other, shrugged and sat in the seat next to Tucker.

Chapter-4

Tucker

He looked at the tiger stretched out on the couch. Theo had fallen asleep almost as soon as they'd detached from Paco's shuttle.

"Don't."

"Why not? He's all cute like that. And sleeping with someone snuggled against you is so much better," Tucker replied to the mule.

"Not his kind."

Tucker shook his head. "He isn't like the others. He's... he's nice. He helped us save Tom."

"He tried to destroy Epsilon."

"No, I don't buy it, and as angry as dad is, he doesn't think that either."

The mule shrugged.

"Uncle, we're on final approach. Are you ready to take over for docking? I'm going to go wake our passenger."

"I'm ready," Uncle's voice came back. He could have appeared next to them, but he enjoyed playing the role properly, and right now he was the coordination system. "Tuck, wake him by shaking him, not sucking him off."

"Sure, no problem." With a grin he got out of the seat.

"Shaking his shoulder. I swear, one of these days you're going to cause my fur to fall off. How your father still has any is beyond me."

"That's because when I'm done driving him up the walls, I make sure to have sex with him to calm his nerves. It's amazing what sex does for stress. As for you, you can't lose your fur, you're digital."

"Yes, I am, but you are still managing to drive me up the walls, even if they are virtual"

"I'd have sex with you if I could, you know that."

Silence.

"Uncle? You okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine, your comment brought up a file I haven't quite finished working out."

"Anything I can help with?"

Theo stirred and looked in his direction.

"No, this is something that occurred on Mars, during the assault."

"We're almost docked." To Uncle he said. "As Trevor looked at it? You know how he is with files."

"I don't need to bother him with this. I'll figure it out."

At Theo's tilted ear he smiled. "Trevor is one of my brothers, he spends more time on the net than among us, so he has a knack for stuff like decrypting files."

"And he's helping with that?" Theo turned and sat.

"Tuck, please don't talk about family matters with him."

"Something like that." Tucker helped him to his feet.

The shuttle vibrated. "We're docked," Brick said.

Tucker guided Theo to the floor hatch, which opened as they approached. The floor was about a body length away. He helped the other tiger to sit down and then hoisted him down, holding the restrains.

He jumped down after Theo and guided him along the small corridor. "You might feel queasy, the hall isn't straight, although you might not notice, it's angled so we're going to be lined up with the ship's gravity by the time we reach the door." His Theo felt anything he didn't show it. "You spent a lot of time in space? I mean, was going to Mars a first for you, or have you been traveling a lot?"

Theo didn't answer immediately. "Mars was a first for me," he finally admitted, "but I've spent time in space before."

"So gravity shifts aren't a new thing for you." His reply seemed to surprise Theo. "What?"

"I." He frowned. "I thought you were trying to find out where I was from."

"Oh, I don't care about that. I've had sex with guys from all over. Even had one of the Kuiper Belt miners. They're Independents too, you know. I'm not one of those people who think just because you don't like technology you're less than me. You don't need tech to have a cock or an ass."

"That's so accepting of you," Theo replied dryly.

Tucker ignored the sarcasm and smiled. "Here we are." A door opened before them and on the other side stood a man with deep purple fur and green stripes.

Tucker stopped in place. "Err, hi Dad." He looked behind him. Brick was coming. Blocking any escapes back to the shuttle

"Hello Tucker. Brick." He looked at Theo "Mister Laramie." He motioned for them to join him inside the Mercury proper.

Tucker hesitated. His dad was already angry, and not the kind of angry he could smooth over with a good fuck either. He felt Brick's hand at his back and didn't have a choice. The mule wasn't worried. He'd take the verbal lashing and whatever punishment Eric gave him.

Tucker, on the other hand was his son, and Eric would find

a way to make him feel his disappointment. He wished his dad was like other father and yelled and got it out of his system, but Eric barely raised his voice.

"Maybe one of you can explain to me why you boarded a SolGov ship and removed their prisoner?"

"We sort of had to," Tucker said.

His dad raised an eyebrow. "You had to? You're going to have to explain slightly more than that, Tucker."

Tucker looked down at his feet. His tail was also visible hugging his leg.

"They acted on my orders," Uncle said.

Tucker's head snapped up. Instead of sounding inside his head, Uncle's voice had come from down the corridor. A tiger in gray slacks and white shirt was walking toward them. It took a few seconds to understand what he was doing, and then remembered their prisoner, one without an Implant and knowledge of what Uncle was.

"I know," Eric said. "What I want to know is why my son felt he should do this without telling me."

"Because I told him to."

His dad faced Uncle and Tucker took a step back. Theo was still watching them. He grabbed his arm and pulled him back too. He leaned in. "You don't want to be close to Dad when he's about to lose it like that."

The look of astonishment Theo gave him might have been funny under different circumstances. And it was a reminder that not everyone was able to read his father.

"You told him so." Eric pointed to Tucker. "He is my son. You do not get to order him about."

"Eric, calm down. You know I can. I understand why you're angry, I acted without—"

His dad's ears went up. "You think this is because you didn't tell me what you were doing?" His lips quirked up and Tucker cursed. Even Brick took a step back. "You really know me this poorly after the years we've worked together Uncle?"

"I know you very well, Eric."

"Really? Then explain to me how you could put my son in danger like that."

Uncle sighed. "I couldn't send you, and the two of you are the only ones Mister Laramie has had contact with. I certainly couldn't send Brick on his own, you know how he is around Independents, and anyone else I might send could have caused Mister Laramie to be combative."

His dad crossed his arms over his chest. "Alright. Please explain to me why you even wanted him."

"What they did affected us too. SolGov wouldn't have given us a chance to get the answers we need. We need to know what they might have gotten from our servers before anyone can have a chance to pry that information from his head."

Eric nodded. "Very good. Well thought out and spoken."

"Thank you."

"I'm sure you'll be able to convince Terry that's your reason, now how about you tell me the truth, Uncle?"

Uncle sighed and slouched. "Vanguard was going to take him."

"Paco was already there." Brick said.

"And?" Eric asked.

"I had to leave him alive. Tuck said so."

"They needed the time to return to the ship," Uncle said. "Mister Laramie's escape was discovered an hour ago, and SolGov is currently following his shuttle as it heads to the Hermitage's base."

"Getting rid of Hermitage's band doesn't absolve you of what you did. We have an agreement Uncle. I ferry you around, so you can do all those things you so enjoy doing, but you don't put anyone here at risk."

"Eric, you know I'd never do that. Family's sacred. If I'd thought there was any kind of risk Tucker and Brick couldn't handle, I wouldn't have sent him. Eric, you know how I feel about all your sons I watched them grow up. I couldn't forgive myself if I put any of them in harm's way."

His dad pursed his lips and Tucker relaxed. Things weren't safe yet, but Uncle had defused the situation enough there wasn't a risk of an Eric explosion anymore.

"Uncle, I am going to warn you. What you just did is putting you very close to having me terminate our agreement. If that means I need to decommission the mercury, I will do so."

"Dad, you can't."

"Tucker, this conversation doesn't involve you." Eric looked at him. "In fact, maybe you should escort Mister Laramie to whatever room Uncle has assigned him."

"Are-?"

"Now Tucker."

Tucker swallowed and motioned for Theo to move. He was relieved to be out of range of his father's anger, but he felt bad leaving Uncle alone to deal with it.

"Brick, stay."

Tucker looked over his shoulder. The mule's face was expressionless. "It was good knowing you buddy," Tucker said, and Brick nodded. After two intersections Tucker began breathing again.

"You're acting like we just escaped a battlefield."

"You haven't been around when my dad loses it. It isn't pretty."

"He didn't seem that bothered by what happened."

"Only because you don't know him. I told you his emotions are dampened, right? Back on Mars?"

"Yes."

"Well, what you just saw was my dad's equivalent of livid."

"How can you tell?"

"He's my dad. You know your dad's moods, right?"

"Yes, but his are a little more expressive."

"Don't worry about it. I don't expect you'll have to deal with my dad. He's in charge of the passenger side of the ship. Uncle deals with the rest, which includes you."

Theo stopped. "He runs a Black Ops division. Orr Corps has a spaceborne Black Ops base?"

"Why do you find that surprising? Everyone had one of those."

"I—" Theo shook his head. "Never mind."

Tucker noticed the twitching fingers from the corner of his eye. "You know, if there's something wrong with your fingers, I can get someone to look at them. We have one of the best med-bay here. I doubt it's something we can't fix. I mean, you're not one of those Independents who won't have anything to do with tech, at all, right? I mean you're in space."

"My forearm and hand are mechanical, so a med-bay wouldn't help."

"We have a great engineer. I can even take a look at it myself if you want."

Theo eyed him. "You're an engineer?"

"Yes, I took all the courses, the exams and I passed them."

"Right, and how many of the examiners did you have sex with?"

"All of them."

"So you slept your way into being an engineer."

"No, I became an engineer, then I slept with all of them."

"So it was payment to grading you well?"

"You know, you seem pretty obsessed with this idea of paying for sex. I don't do that. I don't charge and I don't pay. Is it because of whatever job you do that you think sex is some sort of currency?"

"Sometimes it is."

Tucker snorted. "No it's not. Sex is about having a good time." They reached a door and it opened. "Which reminds me." He motioned for Theo to enter. "You want me to help you break your room in? I don't think anyone's had sex in this one yet. I know I haven't."

"No Thank you." The other tiger's voice was clipped.

"Come on, I'm not that bad. I'm actually pretty good, but I mean—"

"Tucker, just stop, okay?"

Oh, he was serious. "I'm sorry. Let me take off the cage and I'll leave you alone."

With the headband in hand he stopped by the door. "There's food printer and drink dispenser, no alcohol, sorry, Uncle doesn't want to risk having you commit suicide by alcohol poisoning. I'll come check in on you tomorrow."

* * * * *

Tucker knew he couldn't put this off any longer. It was

time for him to face the music, or rather, his father. He'd spent hours walking in the lesser traveled parts of the ship. He'd even missed dinner. Staying where there was no one meant no sex, but anywhere he might have sex one of the crew could find him and let him know his dad wanted to see him.

Of course, if Eric was serious about it, he could just message him, but his father didn't like summoning his children that way. So an hour before bedtime he headed back to their room.

The door opened and Eric was seated, eyes closed. On the other side of the room Trevor was in a similar position, but his body was relaxed, while their father showed signs of tension.

Without opening his eyes he motioned for Tucker to approach. Eric stood and looked down at him. His father was half a head taller, and at times that difference made him seem like a benevolent being or an angry god. Right now he was neither. His father's face was neutral.

"Tuck, do you understand how disappointed I am in you right now?"

Tucker nodded and looked at his feet, and tail, which was back hugging his leg. His father placed a finger under his chin and made him look up.

"Why, Tuck? Why did you do this without telling me? And please don't tell me it's because Uncle told you not to. You know better."

Tucker forced his head down and rested his forehead on his father's shoulder.

"Because you wouldn't have let me do it."

Eric wrapped his arms around him. "Of course I wouldn't. That was dangerous. You could have gotten hurt."

"I just wanted to have some fun, Dad. And it wasn't dangerous. Uncle had all the guards redirected. Brick took care of Paco."

"Tuck, the ships big enough."

"But it's just the ship, Dad. I love all the sex, but I wanted to do something different for a while."

"Tuck, I can't lose you, any of you. You know what Paco's done to us. What he did to Brack, and Jeff. You know he was involved, you should have stayed away."

"I know dad."

"Tuck, I just don't want to lose you. Please, I need you to be careful."

He sighed. "I am dad. I know you don't think so, but I am careful."

Eric rubbed his forehead against Tucker's head. "I know you think you are Tuck. I know." He cut the fabric of Tucker's shirt with a claw and ran a hand through his fur.

His nuzzled Tucker's ear, then licked the inside of the pavilion.

"D-d-dad," he stuttered as shots of pleasure ran through him. Eric's hand was on his back now, the fabric ripping as he moved. It moved down to his ass and squeezed it. Tucker moaned and tensed, pressing his groin into his father's hard cock.

"It's okay, Tuck. I have you. You're safe now."

Tucker opened his mouth to tell his father he was okay, but his Eric's hand left his ass and an instant later something was moving between his cheeks. Something slick. Fuck this, Tucker thought, Why was he trying to get his father to stop this? He gasped as a finger entered him. If his father needed to do this to reassure himself, he might as well enjoy the ride. His father licked his way down Tucker's neck then bit.

Tucker gasped and his cock jumped against the fabric. He will it away and felt his father's hot cock against his. He held on to his father, head back eyes closed.

He yelped as he was pushed back and almost fell, just managing to put a foot down as his father forced him to move. The back of his knee hit the bed and they both fell on it. The mattress gave and adjusted to their combined weight so Tucker didn't feel crushing under his father, but the finger in his ass did get pushed deeper.

Eric didn't give him time to do anything. He moved down, nibbling at his collarbone, then suck on his nipple. Tucker moaned, his eyes rolling back. His father let go and Tucker barely had time to catch his breath that the mouth was on his other nipple. This time Eric bit it.

"Oh Fuck Dad."

Eric didn't say anything. He relinquished the nipple and licked his way to Tucker's side, then nuzzled his arm away and he pressed his nose in his armpit. A shudder ran to this father's body and Tucker placed a hand on his back, rubbing it gently.

His father stayed like that for a long minute. Breathing in his scent. His whispered words Tucker couldn't hear, but he knew him well enough to figure they were words of comfort. For Tucker, for himself.

When he moved again he licked down the side, his free hand rubbing Tucker's stomach. Tucker continued rubbing his father's back, letting his claws gently trace patterns through the fur as he moved. The back becoming his father's neck, and then his head.

Eric buried his muzzle under Tucker's balls and stayed there, licking and breathing. Tucker raised his legs and rested them over his father's shoulders. His breath caught when Eric pushed his finger in deeper.

When Eric moved, it was to lick Tucker's balls, and then the base of his cock and up along it. Moving up meant Tucker's legs moved with him, raising his ass, and Eric made use of the better access, thrusting his finger in and out of Tucker.

Tucker gasped and groaned at the sensation the finger and

tongue generated and then he cried out when Eric closed his mouth on his cock and swallowed it whole.

Eric sucked him off, moving up and down, deep throating him. Gone was the gentleness of the licking. There was an urgency now, a need. Eric's finger thrusting made sure to hit Tucker's prostate and he squeezed his balls with his other hand.

"Dad, oh Fuck. Dad. I'm—" He thrust up as he yelled. His balls tightened and his cock pulsed. The cum flowing only made his father suck him off harder.

When Eric finally slowed, then stopped moving, suckling on Tucker's still hard cock. He finally was able to think coherently. He glanced to where Trevor was sitting, and worried his screaming might have disturbed him, but his brother was still lost in his net dive.

His father moved, shrugging Tucker's legs off his shoulder and lying over him. Eric was still trembling and Tucker wrapped his arms around him. "I'm here Dad. I'm okay. I'm safe."

Eric buried his muzzle against Tucker's neck, but he didn't nibble or bite, he simply rested there. "Tuck, I'm—" his voice caught. "I don't know I'd do if I ever lost you, any of you."

Tucker held his father. Fear was the one emotion that didn't seem to be dampened. Not fear for himself. Tucker had seen his father walk up to an Independent assassin and take him down without even blinking, but if one of his sons was involved. Eric became a mess.

He held his father until he was no longer shaking. He didn't say anything. There was nothing to say. His father could smell him, had his taste on his tongue. There was nothing else he could do to show he was here, that he was safe.

Well, there was one other thing he could do. He pulled his father until they completely on the large bed and rolled them over so his father was on his back. Tucker went to his knees. Eric was looking at him, smiling. His father placed his hands on Tucker's chest and Tucker covered them with his own and smiled back.

They didn't say anything. Eric didn't move under Tucker, didn't press him to do anything, he just watched him.

Tucker quirked a grin. His father might be content to just watch him, but he wasn't. A quick glance around the bed showed him the lube cloth his father had used. He grabbed it by the dry side and ran it over Eric's hard cock. His father never stopped looking at him, but his mouth parted as he shuddered.

Tucker adjusted his position and sat on his father's cock. They sighed in unison and then grinned.

Tucker moved up and down. Moaning. His father was nice and thick, not as long as the rest of his brothers, but size was only a small part of what made the sex so good. Sex with his father was always the best.

His father mouthed 'I love you Tucker,' and Tucker responded by mouthing 'I love you too.' His father wasn't

usually this demonstrative, but he'd been shaken, and unlike Trevor, Tucker never minded when their father said the 'L' word. He took on of his father's hand and kissed the knuckles before turning it over and kissing the palm.

He rocked on his father's cock. Kissing his hand, licking his wrist and sucking on the fingers. His father's eyes never left his, even as he started panting.

Tucker tightened his ass as he moving on his father. Smiling around the finger he was sucking on.

"Oh Fuck, Tuck!" was all his father said before thrusting and opening his mouth in a silent scream.

Tucker felt his father cum inside him and closed his eyes to enjoy the sensation. There was something about feeling his father's orgasm that was unlike any other guy. It made him vibrate in sympathetic pleasure. Like the familiar connection meant the sensations were that much more powerful.

Eric relaxed, panting and his gaze hadn't moved when Tucker opened his eyes. He knew it was in his head. Sex with his brother didn't have this intensity, and they also had a familial connection, but he didn't care. He always, and would always, enjoy it.

Tucker was hard again, but neither of them paid attention to it. This had been for Eric and they knew it. To set his mind at ease in the most Orr way imaginable.

Tucker most off his father and lay next to him. He licked the side of his muzzle. "Are you okay?" he asked. His father didn't always deal well with these bouts of strong emotions.

Eric nodded. "I'm not going to tell you now to do something like that again, Tuck. I know you too well. Just tell me next time, okay?"

He could lie, but that was the one thing his father wouldn't forgive. "Dad, if I tell you, even if you let me do it, which, be honest here, you wouldn't. You'd be a nervous wreck the entire time. You have a ship to run. You can't afford to be distracted."

"It's a passenger cruiser, Tuck, not the Flag of the Fleet. I can afford to worry about my children."

Tucker ran a hand through Eric's belly fur. "It doesn't mean I like doing that to you."

"Then—"

"Dad, You know I won't stop. I'm not like you, like Trevor. I'm not made to just work in a ship, or at the corporate office. I need the adrenaline boost."

Eric kissed his son's forehead. "And here I thought that enlisting you in the army would cure you of that." He smiled. "I can't change who you are—"

"Right," Tucker grinned.

Eric cuffed his ear playfully. "I don't want to, Tuck. You might have been driving me insane since you were a baby, but you're perfect. Perfectly maddening, I mean." Eric sighed. "But

I don't want to lose you."

"Dad. I'm always careful. I know it doesn't look it a lot of the time. But I'm your son, I'm not an idiot."

"I know Tuck. I know." He kissed Tucker's forehead again and turned on his side, pressing his back against him. Tucker wrapped an arm around his father and held him tightly.

It was the best he could do to offer post sex comfort. The two of them were opposites, but also too much the same. They'd never be able to meet in the middle, so they'd had to comfort each other when needed. Tucker fell asleep holding his father.

He partially woke up when he felt someone press against his back.

"Go back to sleep," Trevor whispered. "We can have sex when we wake up."

Tucker mumbled something and sighed as he felt an arm over him and he was back asleep.

Chapter-5

Theo

The water felt wonderful.

Theo stood under the jet, letting it fall over his face, through his fur, and wash the stress away, along with the dead fur. Having to rely on a sink to was for almost two weeks was no way to wash.

He wasn't out of trouble yet. This was just another prison he needed to escape from, but having comforts like a shower went a long way toward making him feel like there was still hope.

He put his hand against the wall and leaned forward, dropping his head. "What's the room like?" he whispered.

"It's a cabin? A nice one too. It's caged, so I can't contact anything outside."

"Cameras? Can they listen in."

"Not that I can tell, but microphones don't need to broadcast to work. They could be using wires."

"So we proceed as if we're being watched."

"There is one thing Theo, this room wasn't set up at the last minute."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, what is a cruise ship doing with a shielded room? As best as I can tell, we're somewhere close to the crew quarters, there was someone in the crew uniform that exited one of the rooms, her fur was still damp." Cass projected the image of a Marmot in question, highlighted the elements that led him to conclude that had been her room.

"You also have a slight problem," Cass continued.

"Just one? And only slight? I'll take it."

"How badly do you want to maintain the pretense you don't have an implant?"

"Why?"

"The food and drink generator don't have any physical interface."

Theo sighed. "Not the greatest planning on their part."

"To be fair, with the room being caged, they probably only put people with Implants here."

Theo nodded. "You think it's on purpose? To get me to reveal your existence?"

"Why bother? Less than point zero-zero-one percent of the people in the system are without Implants. Statistically it's just that they forgot."

"Somehow Captain Orr doesn't strike me as someone who forgets even a small detail like this."

"True, but he didn't know this Uncle would retrieve us. 'Oh, we were helped by someone without an Implant,' doesn't really strike me as something that comes up in conversation. And Captain Orr clearly outranked that man, even if he seems in charge of military work for the corporation."

"How feasible is it to get to the shuttle, take control of it and use it to escape?"

The path they walked for it to the room appeared in front of him. "Getting there is simple enough, so long as no one realizes we've left this room."

"Any chances you were able to figure out where in the ship we are?"

"Unfortunately, no. All I have to work with are visual clues and it doesn't look like you came this way during your wandering the last time we were here."

"How about gaining entry to the shuttle? You were caged, do you think you can by—"

"Theo, please. This is me. I can sweet talk my way into any system. Those doors won't be any problems, and so long as the shuttle isn't in hard shutdown or, if it is, that you can power it up, I can get it moving."

"So the real question is how many other shuttles they have. When we take it, can they give chase? I'm not exactly a trained pilot."

"I'm... To be honest, that isn't exactly something I've ever thought to do. I have basic programming and I can almost certainly out think your average pilot."

"But something tells me this ship doesn't employ many average pilots."

"Not many average anything's manage to make it into a black ops division."

"How the fuck did we not know about this?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry."

Theo sighed and raised his head to the water to let it wash off the annoyance he felt. 'Not your fault,' he coded. He shut the water off. It was a good thing for his cover the shower had had a manual control, otherwise he'd have decided to drop it.

The drying cycle ran, buffeting him this way and that with

warm air. When it was done he went to the food preparation area without bothering to dress. This was an Orr ship, and they'd already seen him naked anyway.

He looked at the food printer. The elegant box with the opening through which he'd take his plate of food, if he ordered it. He looked up. "Hello? Is anyone listening in? Any chance I can get some food delivered? You guys forgot I don't have an Implant."

No one replied.

"So we're maintaining the cover?"

'For now,'" Theo replied. What time was it on the ship? For all he knew it could be morning, and he'd have to wait for more than twenty-four hours before Tucker came by again.

"So, what now? You want to watch a movie?"

'No.' He was fed up watching movies. He didn't care how many billions he still hadn't seen, he just couldn't stand watching stuff happening anymore. He wanted to do something.

Sex would be nice.

Instead he lied down in the bed and a moan escaped him at how comfortable it was. Part of his training had included roughing it, he'd spent a month in a specially designed part of the colony with only wilderness, as well as another month in a cave system on an asteroid, but he could do it, but there was nothing to compare with a comfortable bed after weeks in something hard and narrow.

Well, having a guy in said bed would make it better.

* * * * *

Theo woke up from a dream where Tucker had climbed into his bed and had fucked him multiple times. It had been so real that he'd woken up expecting him to still be there. The only thing he'd found was his hardon and it demanded attention.

Once he was done, and had taken another shower, he sat in the lounge chair and waited. The food printer was starting to look appealing, or rather the idea of dropping his cover so he could eat.

He chuckled to himself. He'd had had it too easy recently. It hadn't been twenty-four hours since he'd last eaten and he was already considering giving in. Such a hardened agent he was. He dropped his head back and sighed.

'Movie,' he coded, 'old, not sexual. Drama.'

A selection came up and he picked one he didn't know.

* * * * *

He was halfway through the third movie, and considering something else to alleviate the boredom, like slamming his head against the wall until everything turned black, when the word 'door' appeared at the bottom left of his vision.

He didn't move, but had Cass stop the movie.

The door opened and he raised his head. As he'd expected, Tucker entered.

"Theo, how are you doing?" Tucker asked, looking him over

appreciatively. "I knew you were hung."

Theo rolled his eyes, but the dream came back and his body reacted.

"Oh that is very nice. Very," Tucker grinned, "inviting." The tiger approached.

Theo almost snapped at him, but his training kicked back in. He could use Tucker's interest, but he should string him along a bit first. He caught the hand as it reached for his cock and he smiled. "I don't think so," he said, but with a tone that implied he might say yes. The Orrs were adamant about any variation of 'no' being taken as 'no,' but he'd noted that Tucker was a little more lax in how he interpreted them. "How about you take me to dinner first?"

"It's morning." He indicated the food printer. "Didn't you eat?"

He tapped the side of his head. "No Implants, remember? I can get anything."

"Oh, right. Sorry." Tucker turned toward the food preparation area, stopped and faced Theo again. The front of his pants was dissolving, revealing a thick cock that was getting hard. Theo hadn't seen Tucker before and hadn't known he was a grower.

Tucker grabbed his balls and bounced them in his hands. "Maybe I can interests you in a liquid breakfast this morning?" Fully hard Tucker's cock wasn't quite as long as Theo's, but it was thicker. He remembered the dream and his hole twitched, along with his cock.

Tucker grinned and took a step forward. "It looks to me like your cock's saying yes."

Theo laughed, part of him wanting it and another not wanting to do anything sexual with Tucker, so he kept to his plan. He placed a hand on Tucker's stomach and gently pushed him away. "My stomach says food, actual food. Not this protein-rich drink those things produce."

Tucker looked at him. "that doesn't sound like a 'no' to me."

"It's been two weeks since I've had sex, how long can you last?"

"The bed's right there." Tucker took a step forward again. "Or, I can always take you right here. Or sit on your cock. It's been a few hours since I've been fucked."

Theo laughed and pushed him toward the food printer. "Food before anything else."

"Okay, okay, I get the message. What do you want?"

"How about an Orr specialty?" Theo said before he caught himself.

Tucker grinned at him over his shoulder. "You need to make up your mind. You want sex or food? We can do both at the same time, but trust me, it's best if one comes first."

"Food. Just make it something simple but tasty. SolGov's

been feeding me pretty bland stuff."

"Being their prisoner wasn't pleasant?"

"Being anyone's prisoner isn't pleasant," Theo replied pointedly.

Tucker was silent as he took the plate out of the printer. "I suppose not. I'm sorry about this." He indicated the room with his free hand as he placed the plate on the table. It was heaping with scrambled eggs with green and red and orange mixed in. "If it wasn't for Uncle's orders, I'd let you go wherever you want."

Theo was seated and almost had his hand in the food as Tucker handed him a fork. "What do you want to drink?"

"Orange juice."

Tucker placed the glass before Theo and sat down with a steaming cup on the other side. "I already ate," he said while Theo moaned at how good the eggs were. They were slightly spicy, and the mix of vegetables, and cheese complimented each other.

"I don't want to know what it was," Theo said between fork full, at Tucker's forming grin.

"You're no fun, you know that?"

"I'm a lot more fun on a full stomach."

"And full balls?"

Couldn't he ever stop thinking of sex? "Who's Uncle?"

The question seemed to confuse Tucker. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, is he your uncle? Or is that some sort of title, something casual enough no one will realize it identifies the guy in charge of Black Ops?"

The explanation didn't seem to help Tucker. "He's just Uncle."

"Really? So what? His parents named him Uncle? Doesn't that confuse everyone? He is even related to you?"

"Oh yes, he's family, he's been here—" he clamped down on whatever he was about to say next and looked into his cup.

Theo continued eating. There was something there, and Tucker had almost spilled it.

"Theo," Cass said hesitation in his voice. "I—I think he's playing you."

Theo glanced at the other tiger, who was still looking in his cup. No way. There was no way Tucker had enough blood left for his brain to have all the processors working. It was all pooled into his cock.

"His heart rate doesn't quite match up with the behavior he'd showing. It's possible it's a side effect of living with his father, that he'd learned better control than most, but I think you should be careful."

Theo finished his place and pushed it away with a satisfied sigh.

"Want more?"

Theo smiled and ran a food up the other tiger's legs. "If I do, you're going to have to roll me around and do all the work."

He reached the crotch and gently rubbed the hard cock.

Tucker smiled and pressed against his foot. "I have no problem being the active one."

Theo ran his foot down the other leg. "But where's the fun in things being so easy for you." He took his empty plate and glass. "After all, I've been telling you no every time before, what are you going to think of me if I just get on all fours, put my ass in the air and raise my tail?" he walked to the disposal, tail high and putting swag in his walk.

As he went to back away from the wall he felt tucker behind him. "I'd think you have an amazingly pretty ass that should be filled." He reached around Theo to drop his cup in while grinding his cock between his cheeks.

"Really? You wouldn't think I'm just easy? Desperate for a good fuck?"

Tucker nibbled on his neck. "What's wrong with a little desperation?" He closed his hand around Theo's cock and squeezed.

"Oh Fuck." Theo pressed back against the cock, but then wriggled himself out from between Tucker and the wall, turning and walked backward. "Now, now. Let's not be too hasty. You're an irresponsible kid on just thinks with his cock."

Tucker followed him, not closing the distance. "I seem to recall you saying you were like that before."

"Exactly, and I promised myself I wouldn't have anything to do with guys like that." Theo found himself backing against the wall.

Tucker placed both hands on each side of his head. He leaned in to rub his muzzle against Theo's. "You know what to say to make me stop," he whispered. "And for the record, my cock had a genius level IQ." Said cock was lightly rubbing against Theo's and he thanked the hours and hours of training in controlling himself while being stimulated.

He rubbed his muzzle against Tucker's cheek and to his ear. "Tuck," he whispered, "Can I ask a favor?"

"Anything."

"Can we get out of here?"

The tiger pulled back slightly and searched his face.

"I know I'm a prisoner, but I've been cooped up in rooms like this for two weeks now. We're on a ship, Tuck, where am I going to go? And you're going to be there to keep a very close eye on me the entire time." Theo gave him a small smile.

Tucker's lips tightened. "You do anything that causes Uncle to be angry at me and I'm going to have to punish you."

Theo tilted an ear. "So, a spanking?"

Tucker cracked a smile. "You into that?"

Theo smiled back. "Well, everything can be hot, done the right way."

He nodded to the door. "If I open it, you can't run off."

"What if I run slowly?"

"Theo."

Theo licked the other tiger's muzzle. "Come on Tuck, you've been chasing me for weeks now. You really want to just catch me?"

"I've already caught you."

Theo smiled. "Just because the door's closed."

Tucker rested his head against Theo's. "Uncle is going to be pissed."

"I'll make it worthwhile, I promise."

The door opened. "You are a bad influence on me."

Theo grinned. "Somehow I don't think that's possible." He slipped under Tucker's arm and finger coded. 'Path.' A line appeared on the floor and he took a few steps following it before leaning against the wall and watching Tucker stop before him.

"If I'm going to chase you, you shouldn't just stand there waiting for me."

Theo ran a hand through Tucker's chest fur. "I think I should make sure you remember what's waiting for you at the end of the chase." He rubbed a nibble before giving it a light pinch. Tucker shuddered and closed his eyes. Theo sauntered off with a giggle.

The next time he stopped, Tucker had him pressed against the wall grinding their cocks together. They were both leaking. Theo bit Tucker's neck and the tiger shuddered and pressed Theo tighter against the wall.

"I so want to fuck you," Tucker rasped.

Theo licked where he'd bitten. "So soon?" and he slipped out from Tucker's reach, sashaying as he followed the line. He heard Tucker panting and then grunt.

"You're going to feel this all the way into the next century," Tucker growled, and Theo picked up the pace.

The next time, Theo was face against the wall, and Tucker had almost entered him before he managed to slip away. The time after that Theo made sure his back was to the wall, but he made it up to him by stroking him the entire time Tucker kissed him.

Theo almost forgot what he was doing in the heat of the kiss and was panting hard when he finally pulled himself away.

"Come on, Theo." Tucker's voice was rough with need and exasperation.

When Tucker caught him next, the surface against his back felt different. He looked up and saw the line running down the middle of the door.

"His this the lift?" Theo asked, holding on to Tucker tightly as the man was massaging his balls, possibly a little harder than needed.

"Fuck the lift," Tucker replied in Theo's neck.

"I thought you wanted to fuck me?"

Tucker pulled away with visible effort. "Yes," he growled.

"Can we go to a different floor?"

Tucker had trouble shifting brain. "You want to go up?"

"Is there anywhere down that's restricted?" Theo tweaked on of Tucker's nipples. "I kind of like having you to myself like this"

The door opened and Theo yelped as he almost fell back. Tucker held him, pushing him against the wall as the door closed. "Where?"

"I'll tell you when to stop it." He gasped as one of Tucker's finger slipped under his tail. He bit into his shoulder hard, eliciting a growl.

"Now," Theo gasp. As his sight flashed red. The door opened and with a gigantic effort of will he pushed Tucker off him and walked/stumbled out of the lift. He needed to hurry this along or he wasn't going to be able to stop himself from giving in.

He made it to the intersection when Tucker grabbed him from behind. "Not so fast, buddy," he growled in his ear. "I think I've been chasing you long enough. We're due our reward."

Theo turned in Tucker's grasp and smiled at him. "Really? Already giving up." He slipped out.

"Theo, come on."

Tucker caught him two intersections later and they rolled against the wall, trying not to fall as they kissed and groped each other. Theo figured he'd have to have sex with Tucker at this point since he wouldn't be able to think clearly until he did.

Someone cleared his throat and Theo's blood froze as he saw the mule leaning against the door that was his target.

Tucker looked over his shoulder. "What do you want Brick? I'm busy."

"Uncle sent me down here to let you know something."

The tiger sighed. "Fine, then tell me and let me get back to—"

"You're being played."

"What are you talking about?"

The mule slapped a hand against the door.

Tucker looked at it, then around. He pushed away from Theo, his face going from shock, to disgust. "What the fuck?" he looked him up and down. "You were using me? Were you even into it? Or was that an act?"

The shock of realizing he'd b been caught had killed his erection. He didn't react to the accusatory look Tucker gave him.

"It was?" Tucker ran his hands over his head. "And you fucking call me immature? What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I'm being held against my will. It's a prisoner's job to escape."

Tucker just gaped at him. He seemed to want to say something, a circuit had fried. He spun, clothing spilling out of the belt. "Fuck it. Do whatever Uncle wants with him. I'm going to the gym."

Theo watched the other tiger leave. Tucker hadn't deserved that, but he had his job and he couldn't afford to care. He gasped as a hand closed on his arm hard.

The mule pulled him. "Come on, Uncle wants a word with you."

"Can we stop by my room so I can put some pants on?" Stars exploded around him as he hit the wall.

"For what you just put Tuck through I ought to cave in that worthless skull of yours. Trust me, once Uncle's done with you, you're mine. And what I'm going to do to you isn't going to be pleasant."

Theo searched those eyes, and all he saw in them was the promise of pain.

He was going to have to find a way to make himself invaluable to this Uncle of theirs, otherwise his chances of escape were nil.

* * * * *

The door opened as they approached and the mule guided him in. The room was utilitarian. Gray metal walls without any decorations, a table with a tiger seated on one side, this uncle of Tucker. He wore a gray suit with blue trim that matched his eyes. His hands were resting on the table, one over the other. Maybe this was an unused storage compartment.

"Mister Laramy," the tiger said, "it's a pleasure to see you again. Please, why don't you take a seat." He indicated the chair facing him.

"It's okay, I'll stand."

"Brick."

A meaty hand clamped on his shoulder and pushed him toward the table, then shoved him down in the chair. When the mule released his shoulder Theo rubbed him.

"I have to admire your restraint while you were with Tuck."

Theo snorted. "He's not that hot."

The tiger tilted an ear. "The readings I took while the two of you were fooling around in the corridors tell me you do think he's that hot."

"Isn't spying on your passenger illegal?"

The tiger smiled. "Please, feel free to lodge a complaint. But I'm referring to the fact that you never tried to send a signal out. Ask for a rescue, or at least let someone know you're okay."

"I'm an Independent remember, no implant."

"Please, Mister Laramy, Eric and Tucker might have through that in the heat of the moment, but you were on this ship for months. We would have noticed if you didn't have an implant."

An image appeared between them. Theo in his cabin, having a one-sided conversation with someone.

He started at the tiger through the image. "In the cabins too? Don't you Orrs have any respect for privacy?"

"It's an automated, unsupervised, system. It's there in

case there's trouble in a cabin, so we can see what happened. Who are you talking to?"

"My brother."

The uncle's gaze didn't waver as the image vanished. "Try again."

Theo sighed. "How should I know who I was talking to? There's no date, I didn't hear what I was saying. For all I know I was arguing with some advertising agency trying to sell me an asteroid. I was probably talking to Marcus."

Two images appeared side by side. One was the one he'd just watched, the other was Marcus, seated in his cabin, gesturing in the air. Painting. Theo felt a pang as he watched him. Was he okay?

"As you can see, Mister Bowfinger is not who you were talking to." The images vanished. "Also, for you to talk to him, or an advertising agency, requires that you connect to the ship's communication system." A series of charts and reports appeared between them. Theo looked at each of them, even if he had no hopes of understanding them. "You're not registering on the ship's network during that conversation."

There was a switch in the reports as two images appeared. Him in his cabin, Marcus in his, having a conversation. This had to be later in the trip. Marcus laughed at something Theo said.

The tiger pointed at a report. "This is the conversation."

"So on top of everything, you listen in on your passenger's conversations. Just how many SolGov laws does that break?"

The number eighteen appeared in the top left of his vision.

The tiger shrugged. "This is an Orr ship. We're not subject to SolGov law. When you booked passage on the Mercury you signed a waiver indicating you were aware of that fact."

Theo shrugged. "Does anyone ever read those things?"

The tiger smiled. "No, you're right, they're now used to cover so many insignificant details that no one bothers. But I get to tell you, 'the fact that you didn't bother reading it, doesn't mean it doesn't apply,' so tough."

Theo wasn't able to stop the smile. This man might be his interrogator, his enemy, but he kind of liked him.

"Speaking of booking passage, can I tell you that I'm impressed with whoever went through Titan's system and made that mess? I went over the logs and it's as seamless a job I've ever seen. As far as Titan was able to work out, it was a timing error that caused two of the servers to go out of sync and contradict each other. Before anyone could react, the entire boarding system was in shamble."

Cass didn't say anything, but Theo could imagine him beaming with pride.

"Your hacker friend is lucky I wasn't paying attention to that at the time. I wouldn't have allowed it to happen."

"Right," Cass said, "because you're so much better than I am."

"What were you doing then?"

The tiger considered the question. "Me and Trevor were busy pursuing a different issue."

"Trevor Orr," Cass said, "one of Eric's sons. Information specialist. He's employed as a Cyber tracker by the Orr corporation Law Enforcement Agency under the name Trevor Versaile. I don't have any information as to why he's using a different name. Versaile is currently marked as being on required leave after a four year work period. I really wish I could update my information, I'd like to know what he did for four years that required him to be forced to take a vacation."

"Did you fix whatever the problem was?"

"We did. There is little me and Trevor can't find when we work together. Now, getting back to my question. Who were you talking to?"

"Myself. I have this problem where I sort of forget I'm alone in the room and I just start arguing with myself about the most useless thing. Just the other day, I started debating the merit of the remake of the Bondo franchise, I mean I just don't —"

"Mister Laramy, please stop. You're insulting my intelligence and making a fool of yourself. I know you're talking to someone who is on the ship, because there was no other ship in range of any kind of personal broadcaster. I've gone through all the recording, looking to match whoever it is that you are talking to, but you'll be pleased to know that the sensor system on the ship is built to protect, not spy on, our passengers, so all I can do it eliminate those who clearly weren't talking with you. Anyone whose lips I can't see on the recordings remains a possibility."

"What if he, or she, is replying to me in text?"

The tiger waved that aside. "The speed of your speech and lack of eye movement indicates a voice response. Now, the fact that none of the ship's sensors detected the broadcast tells me it's something new, so you'll understand that I'm quite interested in it."

Theo leaned back in the chair and placed his hands behind his head. "I really wish I could help you. I do. But I'm afraid I have no idea what you're talking about."

The tiger smiled. "I figured you'd say that." He motioned to the mule and Brick grabbed Theo's arm, slamming it on the table. "You have an artificial forearm. I believe you said to Brick you carry your tools in it."

Theo tried not to show the pain. Brick hadn't been gentle. "I showed him too. He didn't give me a choice. So he knows it's true. Can you loosen your grip, that kind of hurts."

In response the mule tightened it.

"That is true, he did confirm the tools. What he didn't know, was about the internal "bone." It isn't something he would have noticed looking at it, and he doesn't have any augments

that would have told him it's shielded."

"Theo?" Cass asked, a hint of worry in his voice.

Theo didn't react to him. "What kind of augmentations does he have?" he winced at the pain.

"Only organic augmentations, normal stuff. He'd never thought to put anything mechanical in his body before, and after... Well, let's say that at this point he'd rather die than use artificial augments."

Theo glanced the mule. "It's because Independents use mechanical augments, isn't it?" He cried out as the mule's grip tightened even more. He wished he could tell Cass to shut down the sensory input from his arm, but he'd have to speak since right now his fingers weren't responding.

"Brick, please stop. I don't want his arm removed. Not yet at least."

"Theo, no." Cass was trying to control his fear.

Theo sighed as sensation in his hand returned. "Remind me not to challenge you to an arm wrestling match." The growl the mule gave him made it clear what would happen if they were alone.

"You shouldn't antagonize him, he isn't fond of Independents."

Theo widened his eyes. "Really? I am shocked. I thought he was in love with them, I mean with the way he's treated me since I was so nicely invited on your ship. I was fully expecting the wedding to happen before we reached Luna." He winced as the hand tightened on his arm.

"Brick, don't. Mister Laramy is goading you." The tiger studied him as the mule relaxed his grip, barely. "What do you hope to gain by having Brick pound you unconscious?"

"A good night's sleep?"

The tiger shook his head in amusement. "I have to admire your courage. But let's get back on task. This broadcasting equipment is clearly inside that bone, so I'd like you to remove it."

"If I knew what you were talking about, I would happily play along, but I don't know anything about some special communication thing."

"Theo, please, I don't like this at all."

"You have impressive self-control. Still, I don't need your cooperation to get it. I was simply hoping to prevent causing your arm unnecessary damage. Brick, if you please." Then. "Just open the compartment and take the bone out. No need to rip the arm off."

The mule let out a grunt of disappointment.

"Thank you," Theo said calmly. "It's nice to know I'll still have something attached after all this."

"Theo, please. Don't let them do this. I don't want to be alone again."

"You're a good actor, Mister Laramy, but your body is

giving you away."

The mule started groping at Theo's arm, looking for the seam.

"I'm about to feel a lot of pain, so you'll have to forgive me is I'm a little nervous."

"You can always turn off the pain."

Theo winced as the mule found the seam and pushed a thick nail in. "No, I really can't. Older model, that was optional, couldn't afford it." He kept his eyes on the tiger's.

"You're fucking right I'm not turning off the pain. Tell them to stop!"

The tiger smiled. "Humor? At a time like this?"

Theo swallowed. "What can I say. My dad always said I didn't have the best timing." Was Cass cranking up the input or was he just imagining how painful this was going to be? The thing was that he didn't care about the physical pain. It was the pain in Cass' voice he was trying to ignore. Why wasn't Cass going in slow timeframe so this would be an instant to him? Why wasn't he giving the verbal erase command? What was what his training was telling him to do if his Beta was going to be compromised.

The mule finally got purchase.

It had to be now. If he pulled it open the pain would be too much for Theo to give the command. He had to say it now.

"Stop. Please stop." The defeat stole most of the strength from his voice.

Cass was crying.

He couldn't do it. He couldn't kill Cass. He sighed. It was a good thing he'd never get back home. Anderson would kill him for this. He took a breath and raised his head. The mule still had his fingernails in the seam, but he wasn't moving. The tiger had a hand up.

"There is no broadcasting gear."

The tiger's face hardened and his hand started going down.

"I swear," Theo hurried as he felt the mule start to pull. "Cass, you're going to have to speak up."

The tiger canted an ear, but his hand went back up.

"Theo, I can't it's against..."

"Cass. You told me to make them stop. I did. We both know what we should have done instead. But this is what we chose."

"I-I'm sorry. You don't know what it was like. Why didn't you force me to erase myself?"

"Because I can't lose you. You're my best friend. Now speak up."

"Hi, everyone." This time Cass's voice was external, coming from the room's speakers.

The tiger went perfectly still, then he narrowed his eyes, glanced at he arm and back at Theo's face. The mule didn't react at all.

"An AI?" the tiger's voice was soft. "How?" Theo could see

the calculations going on in those eyes. Trying to figure out the size of the drive, the kind of processing power needed for an AI to function, and how any of that could fit in something that couldn't be any larger than the radius bone.

Theo didn't understand that part of how Cass worked, and he'd grown up with AI's in his life. For someone who didn't even think AIs were possible, what could that mean? What kind of technological advancements were contained in his arm.

Theo placed his other hand over his forearm. He didn't try to dislodge the mule's fingers, but it was the only protective thing he could do.

"Please don't. It wouldn't help. Cass wouldn't survive being pulled out again."

"Again?" the tiger seemed to come back to the room.

Theo nodded, trying to work out what he could tell without giving out anything sensitive, well anymore sensitive than what he'd already admitted to. "The Anarchists on Mars pulled him out of me while I was unconscious. It's how I became aware they were there."

"Why?"

"I-I'm not sure, but I'm guessing it had something to do with making the rogue AI."

"He knows you're holding back," Cass said privately.

"What does it matter?" Theo replied. "Look. I'm not going to tell you any secret, okay? I don't care what you do to me, this is all you get."

"I could threaten Cass." It was said casually. No as a threat, but that just made it scarier.

Theo covered the dented seam with his hand. "Please don't. Look, we're not a threat to you. Not the Orrs, not Ameritech, SolGov or anyone. We just want to be left alone. I'm not worth anything anyway. When the Anarchists used my face as part of their rebellion the ensured I've been written off. So no one will even acknowledge I exist."

The tiger leaned back in his chair, he nodded. "Alright. I'll take you at your word for the time being. So, Cass, how about you join us?"

"I'm already here."

"Show yourself then."

"Show my-I don't believe this, why is it that anytime someone learns about me the first thing they say is 'show yourself.' Do you fucking asked the director to step in front of the camera? No, you don't. He works behind the scene."

Theo smiled both at Cass' tirade and the shocked look on the tiger's face.

"Oh and before you get all self-indignant, mister 'I'm not even here,' How about you show yourself?"

"What?" Theo asked sending the chair back as he stood. Immediately a hand grasped his shoulder.

"That's a hologram." An overlay appeared over the tiger,

showing unperceptive projection lines in the tiger's image and three origin points in the ceiling. "It's a really good one too. I didn't think they had anything this advanced. I couldn't even tell until he went still. I was connected then, so I felt the shift in the information density, and no one alive goes that still."

"But he spoke. Where's the sound coming from?"

"His mouth." New information appeared on the overlay. Theo didn't understand it but it marked the sound waves as originating at the mouth. "I'm telling you, this is state of the art for them. I mean, if it's possible anywhere outside this room I'd be surprised."

"I am impressed," the tiger said, and Theo tried to see anything that gave the hologram away.

"Remove the overlay." All he had before him now was the tiger. He tried to reach forward, but the mule pulled him back. "He isn't even there, what are you afraid I'll do to him?" The mule didn't say anything, or let go of him.

"I think I see the advantages of having an AI on your person, for someone in your line of work. No worries about being cut off from your support by a shielded building. You probably have access to an entertainment database, which makes incarceration more bearable. I take it you're responsible for the Mess on Titan, Cass?"

"I am."

"As I said before, impressive work."

"Thank you, and for the record, even if you and your nephew had been there, you wouldn't have been able to stop it."

The tiger smiled. "We will have to put that to the test at some point. I'm curious, I'm not seeing any evidence that you've rummaged through the ship's systems. Why is that?"

"It's a passenger ship," Cass answered managing to convey his shrug in the tone. "At least that what I thought. Other than acting as Theo's implant, there was no need for me to go digging through the data here."

"How about boredom?"

Theo snickered.

"How is that funny?"

"Theo is the one who gets bored, and goes roaming around breaking and entering."

"Cass!"

"What? You were going to say something about my movies, weren't you?"

Theo grumbled, of course he was.

"I already knew about that." Theo's head snapped up. "Sensors in the corridors, remember?"

And the cabins. Theo had to work hard at not looking over his shoulder at the mule. He decided he didn't know. After all, he was confident he'd be dead if Brick knew Theo had been in his cabin.

"Alright, now, there is still the issue of what you are going to tell me about who you work for."

"I'm not going to tell you anything."

The tiger smiled, and the hand on his shoulder tightened.

"You said you wouldn't do anything to Cass."

"And I won't. I am a man of my word. But see, here's what I'm curious about. How much pain can you endure before Cass breaks?"

"You wouldn't," Cass said.

"'A prisoner's job is to escape,' that's what you said to Tuck. So what's an interrogator's job?"

"Get all the information out of his target he can, using whatever tool at his disposal," Theo said in a flat tone. Whatever this intermission had been, it was over. They were back in their roles.

"Exactly, so now I—Oh great." The tiger rubbed his thumb between his eyes.

"There's someone at the door," Cass said in a light tone.

"Thank you," the tiger replied, annoyed. "Like I already didn't know." He sighed and the door opened.

The Mercury's captain entered the room, looked them over. "Brick, let go of him." The mule looked at the seated tiger. The captain faced him. "Let go of my son, now."

Brick's hand vanished.

Son?

The uncle sighed.

Eric rounded on him. "Really? You thought I wouldn't find out?"

"You aren't exactly the more network savvy in the family."

"Alright, then let me rephrase. Did you really think that when Trevor found out he wouldn't tell me? Oh don't act surprised, you taught him most of what he knows. So don't come bitching because he broke your encryptions."

Tucker appeared in the door. "What did you want me to do dad?"

"Take your brother to our room."

Tucker looked around the room. "Dad," he said cautiously. "Trevor is still in the lounge, he's entertaining some of the guests with one of his exploit."

Eric nodded. "Take Theodore to our room, please."

Tucker looked around the room again, except for Theo.

"Dad..."

"Tuck, please don't argue."

Tucker shrugged and stepped in, reaching for Theo, who stepped away.

"Wait a minute. What are you talking about? I'm not your son."

Eric turned around to face him. "Theodore, genetics don't lie."

Theo snorted. "Aren't you a doctor? You know damned well

that isn't true. I'm not even from anywhere near Orr Corp territory."

"You were born in Vanguard," the uncle said.

"How?"

"Your DNA was registered in their database at your birth, standard procedure for them. They're kind of anal retentive about keeping track of their citizens. Which is why they sent Paco to bring you back. They would love to know where you've been hiding."

"Is *this* why you had him broken out?" Eric asked.

"Partially. I wasn't going to let them get one of your sons back."

"And this?" Eric motioned to the room.

"He has information I need."

"And you think I am going to let you treat anyone of my sons that way?"

"Eric, you have to—"

"No, Uncle. I don't have to anything. This arrangement we have, about you traveling on my ship. I'll remind you that you agreed to abide by my rules."

"Not when it comes to our security. That's why I'm out here, remember? To keep our family safe."

"And is this how you are keeping my son safe? I should erase you for this. I should wipe you off my ship and let you sulk back home."

Anger was becoming visible on the uncle's face. He glanced at Tucker.

"Tuck," Eric said, "please take Theodore to our room. Brick, you should go see to Brack."

Tucker grabbed Theo's arm harder than he had to and pulled him out of the room and along through the corridors. A door opened and he shoved Theo in. It was a cabin for a single person. A bed, food preparation area. Small lounge area.

"This doesn't look like the captain's quarter, or a place anyone in your family would live, really."

"Shut up." The tone was just short of snapping.

Tucker was leaning against the closed door. "Do you at least feel bad about what you did?"

"Tucker, I am a—"

"Oh fuck off with that prisoner crap." He was in front of Theo in a few steps and pushed him. "Who the fuck does that to another person?"

"Tucker."

Another shove. "We rescued you."

Theo pushed him back. "And locked me right back up. What? I was supposed to be grateful?"

"Fuck yes! Do you have any idea what Paco would have done to you? That guy has no morals whatsoever. If it wasn't for Uncle's orders I'd have let Brick cave in his face. The guy doesn't deserve anything less."

"Fine, then thank you for saving me from that. But it doesn't change the fact I was a prisoner still. I'm sorry Tuck, but I'm not happy when I'm inside four walls with a locked door. Especially when I'm pretty sure all I have to look forward to is some torture, so I'm sorry if I hurt your feeling, but I was going to use whatever trick I had access to, to get off this ship."

Tucker paused as he was about to speak. "You think this is about me?"

Theo froze. "Well, yeah."

"Open it."

"Open what?"

"The file I just sent you. Don't play dumb, I know you've got an implant."

"Cass? What file is he talking about."

Tucker tilted an ear. Right, he hadn't been there for the introductions.

"You don't want to watch it," Cass replied privately

"Cass, show me the file."

"Theo, I don't think it's a--"

"Cass, please don't argue over one file, okay? Clearly it's important to Tucker."

The file opened. It was a camera view in a small room. Not a cell, an apartment, a really small one. A mongoose was seated at the small table, he looked small, a lot smaller than Theo remembered. His fur was matted, lackluster. His eyes clouded over. There was a bottle of something alcoholic that was three-quarters empty. As he watched Marcus drained that was left of his glass and refilled it.

Theo barely grabbed on to the table before his legs gave out. He fell in the chair.

"Well, that's a relief, you can actually feel bad about something. Trev dug that out as part of his and Uncle's investigation about you. He'd kept it to himself, of course, but after what you did to me he shared it, he wanted me to understand I wasn't special."

"Tuck," Theo's voice was soft, he couldn't look up at Tucker moved about, "You need to understand, it's what I do."

"You mean ruin other guy's lives?"

"No!" He stared at the other tiger who was returning from the counter, two glasses with bright orange liquid in them. "That was never part of the plan."

"Looked to me like you two were pretty much in love."

Theo looked away as Tucker placed the glass before him. "He was."

"And you were going to dump him once you were done using him. Tell me how that would have been any better?"

"Oh that's rich from the guy who'll shove his hand down anyone else's pants."

"I never have them thinking I'm in love with them. What I

want is clear, I don't play games. I don't to *that* to anyone."

Theo took a long swallow from the drink and gasped as the burn traveled down his throat. "What the fuck is that?"

"Hawaiian Volcano. I find that when I need to burn away my emotions, it's the best thing."

"You?" Theo gasp, still trying to breathe, "You have emotional troubles?"

"And you jump to conclusions. This isn't about me it's about you. Explain to me how what you did to him is so much better than what I do."

Theo looked in his glass. "That wasn't how it was supposed to end. Yes, he was always going to end up losing me, but it was going to be because I'd died. Theodore Laramy was going to have an accident, something completely plausible with all the information to back it up. He would have mourned him, and then moved on. This," he motioned to where the projection had been before him. "This is going to destroy him."

"Then why?"

"Damn it Tucker, there are bigger things than how I feel, okay?" he paused. "Did that uncle of your put you up to this?"

Tucker laughed, sipping his drink. "If I do anything Uncle asks right now, dad is going to skin me alive. I won't be surprised if there is no Uncle on the ship by the time Dad's done. He is pissed."

"What did you father mean by deleting him?"

Tucker's lips tightened. He wasn't going to say anything.

"Damn it!" Cass yelled privately, making Theo wince. "I'm locked out of the system. How did he do that?"

How indeed? Some systems were more difficult for Cass to get into, a few were even impossible, but even those weren't outside locked out, he could still try.

"You should contact him."

"Who? Oh, Marcus? And tell him what? Sorry for taking advantage of you. Sorry for being someone who yet again took advantage of your fragile trust, please give the next one a try anyway? He shook his head. "The only thing I can do is make things worse, so it's best if I just stay away."

"So you know, so there isn't any miscommunication here. I'm over what you did to me."

Theo looked at him, eyebrow raised, over his glass. "You're kidding, right?"

"I'm not. I mean I still think you a dick for doing it, but I get it. You're right, you were a prisoner—"

"Am. I am a prisoner."

"You were a prisoner," Tucker continued, "so you were looking to escape and me, being the sex-obsessed guy that I am, presented you with the perfect opportunity. Now, having said that, I think we're going to keep the sex to within rooms for the foreseeable future."

Theo smiled and he felt the burn down his throat. "You

can't be serious. You still want to have sex with me?"

"Are you kidding me? After the merry chase to put me through I want it more than ever."

Theo looked at his half-empty glass. "It's going to take a lot more than one glass of this to get me to agree to that."

Tucker shook his head. "I don't have sex with drunk guys. For one thing it's not really fun, and for another, consent requires that you be able to think clearly. A 'yes' under the influence is too easy to argue against in court, and yes, before you point it out I'm an Orr, it isn't like I lack to money for a good defense, Hell, Tony probably knows enough law he could tell me how to do it myself, but I don't want to be that guy. The guy who tricks another one into having sex with him and then acts all innocent when he gets called on it. I'm forward with my intentions."

"Very forward," Theo agreed. He took another sip, this was actually pretty good.

"What happened to you? You said you use to be like me, what's you stop?"

"I grew up."

Tucker snorted. "Growing up is so overrated."

Theo smiled a little. "Some of us, we don't have the luxury of staying kids at heart."

Tucker looked into his empty glass. "Yeah, I guess not. Do you find it weird that dad called you his son?"

"Are you kidding me? Weird isn't the word for it; otherworldly is more like it. And I mean that literally. There is no way I'm related to you." Theo finished his drink.

"There's an easy way to find out."

"I am not having sex with you."

Tucker laughed. "I know. Trust me, I know. I mean, I have access to the med bay. We can go and do a gene reading right now."

Theo thought about it and realized that he had to be buzzed, because he could only think of one answer to that and it was utterly stupid. "You know what? I think that's a great idea."

Chapter-6

Tucker

Tucker liked to think that nothing could throw him off his game. What he'd just found out seemed to have done just that. His dad hadn't been making some sort of allegory, Theo was actually his brother.

The DNA read and comparison had announced the result plainly, they shared a father. How had that happened? That the medical equipment hadn't been able to answer.

Theo seemed to be in a similar state of shock, walking silently next to him. He hadn't said anything when Tucker had

taken him by the arm to make sure he took the right corridor.

How could the fertility clinic make such a mistake? And even more puzzling, why hadn't they informed his dad it had happened.

As they approached their room he pinged his dad and got a generic 'don't disturb me,' message which meant he was still busy with Uncle. He pinged Trevor, and was informed to leave a message, that he'd get back to him once he was done with his work.

The door opened at his command, and he led Theo into the lounge. As expected, Trevor was in his usual seat, eyes closed hands on his lap, still. He was naked, and Tucker glanced at Theo to see if he'd noticed, but he was looking ahead, eyes not quite glazed over, but unfocused.

Tucker led him to his bedroom and sat him on the bed. When his dad was done tearing Uncle apart, he'd asked in which of the seven attached bedrooms, and realized how off he was that he wasn't coming up with arguments for Theo to stay in his room.

He left him there, commanding the door to remain open. He didn't think Theo would do anything desperate, but he didn't want to risk it.

He shook Trevor's shoulder, not expecting, and not getting a reaction. Tucker sighed and sat next to his brother. He closed his eyes and activated the sensory override program. All sensation of the ship vanished. He no longer heard the almost subsonic whine of some of the systems behind the walls, of the distant ticks and pings of something that was misaligned. He reminded himself to look for it at some point.

With a breath he opened his eyes.

As far as he could see, he wasn't in his family's lounge anymore. He was seated in the middle of empty space. He couldn't stop the shudder. This never felt right, knowing he was in a lush room, sitting in a plush chair, but not seeing any of it.

Sure, he could customize his lobby so it would look like something, but that felt even worse, being instantly elsewhere. He preferred not being anywhere.

He stood and took a step away from the chair, trying not to think about the fact his body was still seated in the real world, that this was literally happening in his mind, completely disconnected from the real world.

How Trevor could prefer being in here over out there baffled him. If it wasn't of "The Land of Farr," the immersive game he played, with the rest of his brothers, and friends on earth, he'd disable the interface.

A window appeared before him, structured like something he'd seen in a documentary on an archaeological site in Ameritech where they'd unearth a pre-cataclysm house fully preserved.

The windows had caught his fancy, instead of being just a transparent sheet covering whatever surface was intended to be

see-through, they had been smaller, and divided into sections.

His window was two square feet, divided by a wooden cross and framed with wood. Beyond it he could see the field where his house was located in ???Earth-game location??? He tapped the glass and got a notification that the connection delay was still too big for him to connect. He'd expected that, they were still over a month away from Earth.

He dismissed it and called up his setting controls. From it he called the option to access the net. The darkness was replaced with a star field and he had to fight a moment of vertigo.

He hated this even more.

He activated the search function and entered Trevor's family identifier. One of the closer stars blinked green and he steeled himself before moving there.

Everything shifted until he stood before a red bubble flashing green. He dismissed the search function and placed a hand on it.

"Please leave a message and I'll get back to you as soon as I'm done with my work," came Trevor's automated answer.

"Trevor, cut this out, you know it's me."

"Busy, here."

"Trev, this is important, I need you in the real world. We need to talk."

"We can talk here, Tuck."

Tucker snorted. "Not with you dividing your attention. You know I wouldn't insist if this wasn't important."

A sigh came from inside the bubble. "Alright, I'll see you there." And the bubble vanished, making Tucker feel like the world had lurched around him. He cursed and deactivated the interface.

Feeling the weight of his body felt momentarily wrong. And the sounds seemed loud. Less than a minute in there and his body didn't feel like it was his anymore. He shuddered. How could Trevor stand spending hours in there?

Trevor stretched. "So? What's so important?"

"First off, if dad asks, you spent some time in one of the lounges, entertaining the passengers with your investigation adventures. It's what I told him you were doing?"

"And he believed you? He knows I hate those places with all the people."

"He was sort of busy tearing Uncle apart at the time, so he probably wasn't paying attention to what I was saying, but it's dad, so he almost certainly heard, so just tell him you made an effort. You know he doesn't like that you spend all your time in here. You're supposed to be on vacation, that is supposed to mean out here with the rest of us."

"Fine, I'll cover the lie you told to keep dad from being so disappointed in me. Now why did you pull me out?"

Tucker indicated Theo, visible through the open doorway.

"Yeah, what about him?"

"He's our brother."

"I know."

"You know?"

"Tuck, who do you think told dad? Ever since that AI thing on Mars, Uncle's been accumulating encrypted vaults, so I've been passing the time opening them up. Most of what he's keeping in there is pure code, so beyond me, but in one of them he has Theo's information, along with his DNA and a comparison to Dad's. He told you?"

"Indirectly. He called me to one of the rooms Uncle uses when he needs to interact with someone who doesn't know what he is. He told me "Take your brother to our room." You weren't there, that's when I told him you were with the passengers."

"When you lied, you mean."

Tucker shrugged. "He said to take Theo to our room. A lot of stuff was being said, and dad was angry so that was entertaining for a bit, but then he told me to take him and leave. I didn't know how serious he was about the brother thing so on the way here we stopped by the med-bay and got our DNA compared, and, well there's seven of us now. Do you have any idea how it happened?"

Trevor shook his head. "If Uncle knows, it's in a vault I haven't opened yet."

"Is that what you were doing?"

"No. Uncle's segregated all his vaults under a new encryption and a warning that if I touched it he was going to scramble my game data."

"Can he do that?"

"He's Uncle, what can't he do?"

"Who is he, exactly?" Theo asked, dropping himself into one of the seats.

"He's Uncle," Tucker said. "You feeling better?"

Theo snorted and shook his head. "Okay, but *who* is he? I mean I've worked out he run your Black Ops, but—" he paused, "—he's got to be someone."

Trevor looked at him as Tucker stood. "I'm getting a drink. Your usual Trev? Theo, another volcano?"

"No, just water, or juice. Alcohol isn't what I need right now."

"Yes, Tuck." To Theo Trevor said. "I'm letting dad deal with that one. I don't want him or Uncle and angrier at me than they are at the moment."

"How are you feeling?" Tucker asked, handing Theo a glass. "It's orange juice. And a Black Fortress for you." He gave Trevor a tall glass.

Theo took a sip and leaned back in the seat. "This is going to complicate things like you can't imagine."

"The spy thing?" Trevor said. "Please, don't act surprised. Since Uncle took an interest in you I've been looking at

everything we have, and what I could get Mars to send me. It wasn't too difficult to figure out."

"Really?" Theo's tone was dubious.

"Sure. First off, we don't normally take passengers who aren't Orr citizens, too many hassles. Mindset and that stuff. That jumble at Titan screwed things up enough getting you two didn't raise any flags, until you consider that it was only the two of you who ended up on the Mercury. What are the odds of that happening, when there's no more than ten percent of the Titan population that's Orr at any time? Granted that's wasn't noticed at the time, we weren't looking for a spy among us."

Tucker made himself comfortable. Trevor in investigative mode was always fun to watch. Theo didn't seem too pleased with what he was learning.

"You were wondering what I was doing, Tuck, I was going through the Mars records. The delays' still short enough it's not to bad. You and your new boyfriend reach Mars, and he's immediately called to Earth, some sort of cleverly routed emergency message. I can't get the details, but I was able to trace the route it took. Whoever you got to do this is very good."

"Cass I'm guessing?" Tucker said.

"Who's that."

"I'm not entirely sure, it's someone Theo mentioned."

Theo hesitated under both their gaze. "He's my partner, yes, he's the one who routed the message. Their uncle's going to tell them, it isn't like you're going to be a secret all that long. Go on."

Trevor tilted an ear, but didn't press. "Marcus leaves Mars, and yet, within moments, Marcus Bowfinger goes through Custom, only he isn't a mongoose anymore, he's a tiger. You do know if anyone that isn't us works out your altered your DNA ID tag you are in so much shit even dad won't be able to keep you out of it."

Theo shrugged and Tucker was realizing that for him that wasn't the biggest worry about all this.

"Marcus takes possession of his assigned lodging, goes and does his job, then a second Marcus Bowfinger tries to cross custom. Lots of red flags go up. He gets detained, things get cleared up enough for him to be released, and for a query to be sent regarding the tiger with the same name, and ID tag, but all hell breaks loose with the attack, and everyone's way too busy to worry about a case of Identity theft. You get caught as the head of the Independent—"

"Anarchists. That's what I call them to differentiate them from the others."

"Alright, from the Anarchists, which supports my idea that you work for one of the Independent faction. I have to say I've never seen one with the tech to pull off a DNA Id tag."

"You have a lot of dealings with them?"

"Not personally. I'm into cybercrime tracking. Which isn't really something they get involved in. But my family has a history with some of them. Some of our enemies use them as fodder."

"Vanguard, you mean? Their animosity toward you is well known," Theo added at the speculative expression on Trevor's face.

"Yes, but most people don't immediately jump to the conclusion that they've actually broken corporate treaties and actually attacked us. We don't advertise that fact. You're better informed and better equipped than I'd expect an Independent to be. Even the Miners don't have anything that'd let them change a DNA tag, and they're the most advanced of your people. Who exactly do you work for?"

Theo smiled. "You're not going to get that out of me. And in case that uncle of yours is feeding you questions. You can tell him that no one is going to contact you to make a deal for my release. The moment my face was broadcast, all ties to who I worked for were erased. I'm worthless to him."

"You don't have to worry about Uncle." Tucker said. "He isn't going to bother you again, well, not in the locking you up in a room with Brick way. I'm sure he'll keep asking you questions, but dad is going to have reminded him that he isn't allowed to treat family the way he treated you."

"I'm not part of your family."

"Your DNA states otherwise," Trevor said.

"I don't give a damn what DNA says. The fact I share half of it with your father doesn't make you my family. I have a family. They raised me and they love me. I won't get to see them ever again, but that doesn't mean I'm looking to replace them. You can step down from that pedestal you all put yourselves on. You're not so great everyone dreams to be part of your family."

Tucker grinned. "You're probably right about the rest of them," he motioned to Trevor with his glass, "but I am that great." He finished his drink to his brother rolling his eyes.

"Ignore him, he's definitely full of something."

"I've been trying, but he makes it really tough."

"So you still haven't fucked him yet? I thought when you took him to that room it might lead to that."

"You were spying on me?"

"Well, things do tend to be entertaining around you. So yeah. At least until you deactivated the room's security."

"My brother's a voyeur," Tucker said.

"I'm not. I don't need to see you have sex, well, not most of the time. I have to say that gorilla and chimp couple...that was surprising."

Tucker felt his ears burn.

"Is that something I should know about?"

"No!"

"Oh, most certainly," Trevor grinned.

"Trev!"

"What? Since we do we keep that stuff from the rest of the family?"

Tucker grabbed Theo's empty glass and headed for the sink. "He said he wasn't family."

"He'll grow to love us, you know it."

"Don't hold your breath," Theo said.

"See!"

"You're just pissed because there's now one family member capable of resisting your cock. Anyway, we have this couple," Trevor began.

Tucker got his music going, raising the volume so he wouldn't hear anything of what Trevor would say, or embellish. It wasn't like he needed the replay. He'd been there. He remembered very well all the things Atlas's wife had gotten him to do in front of Tucker. And the fact that he hadn't been allowed to touch the gorilla had just made the session that much hotter.

The gorilla had gyrated, caressed himself, stroked himself, and kept himself at the edge for the two hours his wife had him perform for Tucker. Of course the order she'd given Tucker not to jerk off hadn't been easy to obey, but she'd warned that the show would end immediately if he touched himself without permission.

He didn't have to obey, he wasn't in a relationship with her, but then the gorilla had lied down as instructed and looked Tucker in the eyes and he grabbed his leg and pulled his hips to his mouth, taking the tip of his own cock in his mouth.

Someone had whined at the sight, Trevor had been happy to inform him. Tucker had denied it even when shown the recordings.

Atlas had been allowed to come within a breath of Tucker at times, and the heat of the gorilla's cock close to Tucker's own, or his face, his nipples had been torture. The gorilla had managed to squirt a bit of precum on Tucker's lips and it had been heavenly.

After two hours, she'd finally allowed him to cum, over Tucker's cock. He'd promised himself he was going to rub it deep in his fur, and in his cock's flesh as he jerked off. He couldn't believe he was actually thinking about jerking off. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had to do that, let alone contemplated it.

And as the gorilla was panting in his face, she ordered him to lick Tucker clean. He actually cried out when Atlas ran his tongue along Tucker's cock.

She was standing next to Tucker, watching the gorilla work and what she said shocked Tucker so much he almost jumped out of the chair.

"If he hasn't cum by the time he's clean, you can forget about cumming for the next month."

And the gorilla just slowed down, being more meticulous in

washing Trucker's balls, caressing his shaft with his cheek as he licked the cum that has landed on his stomach and keeping his eyes fixed on Tucker's. When he licked the shaft Tucker was vibrating with pleasure. He licked up and down it, stopping at the crown. He licked the underside, his tongue ran around the shaft. And then he had closed his lips around Tucker's cock head.

He exploded. There was no other way to describe how he'd felt. It was an explosion of pleasure that had left him limp in the chair. When he managed to open his eyes the gorilla was a few steps away, beaming with pride.

"You did very well," his wife said and motioned for him to lean down. She licked Tucker's cum that had ended up on the gorilla's cheek.

Tucker startled as a hand landed on his shoulder. "Fuck Trev, don't do that!"

His brother looked down. "Reminiscing I see." He leaned in. "When you finally decide the glasses are clean enough, I'm going to be in my room. Theo's taking your bed, so you're welcome to join me." He ran a hand over Tucker's pants, squeezing the erection. "Unless you plan on taking care of this yourself."

Trevor left him, and Tucker was right behind him. There was no way he was jerking off. He hadn't had to since the one time he'd experimented with it as a kid, he wasn't going to start now.

* * * * *

The Epsilon fork reintegrated with Caduceus, and it knew what it had. One of the Delta forks it had monitoring communication incoming to Earth had picked up one with a name of interest. Theodore Laramy.

It was a name it paid attention to, because it was one of the identities one of the Colonies' agents could use. But was it?

It looked at all the Theodore Laramy in the solar system. It sent Deltas hidden within outgoing communications to find as much up to date information on all of them, and as the results came in, it eliminated all the legitimate users of the name.

While that search was happening, it studied the provenance of the message referring this Theodore Laramy. It came from the Mercury, an Orr passenger ship that acted as a cover for the Orr AI to travel through the solar system.

There were no recorded Theodore Laramy currently traveling on that ship, but there had been one, only weeks before. A Theodore Laramy of interest to her, because he was the Colony agent who had been assigned this name.

Then it studied the message itself. Unlike the usual message coming in from outside Earth, this one was a voice recording.

"Terry, I need you to do a search for any mention of a Theodore Laramy, species tiger. I don't have an ID tag for you.

I can't trust the one I got, but I want you to treat this search and any results you get from it with care. Don't draw attention to it, please. It turns out that he's... No, I'm not risking this to a message, just be careful with this. It's important."

It recognized the voice as that of Eric Orr, the captain of the Mercury, as well as the father of the current Orr generation running the corporation.

It studied the message, comparing inflection, tone rhythm to those she'd accumulated on this particular Orr. It determined that the situation involving Theodore Orr was personal to him.

There was only one conclusion it could draw. It had happened. Theodore Laramy, whose last name was actually Paso, had been found out to be Eric Orr's son.

It analyzed this in relation to what it had received from the Caduceus that had been on Mars. Brought up what it had discovered of what was happening on Earth, and made a decision.

Under normal circumstances, Theodore Paso should be erased from any Colony records. He would have died. His parents would mourn him.

This wasn't a normal circumstance. There were events Theodore could help with, that him being on Earth could help with, but only so long as he was not cut off from the Colonies.

It formulated the message, determined the best person to send it to, the appropriate way to send it so it would be recognized and reached its destination unhindered

It sent the message.

Then it waited.

Chapter-7

Uncle

He looked at his reflection. An antiquated term for something that no longer used reflected light to show him his face. The face of the body he inhabited.

He smiled, and the lips moved accordingly. He studied his blue-gray eyes. The color had an actual name, 'livid' but he preferred blue-gray. He liked the duality it implied.

The duality he represented. An AI created from a living brain. That brain had died a long time ago, and he'd lost most memories of it, but he remembered there had been a living person before he existed.

And now, here he was, in a body, moving its 'muscles,' seeing through its 'eyes,' sensing through its 'senses.' It was a marvel of technology.

But it wasn't enough.

He wasn't angry about it. Until a few weeks ago he hadn't even known he had been missing something, so he couldn't blame the scientists for not realizing it was missing.

He picked up the glass, and knew exactly how much pressure he was applying, how much the polycarbonate deformed under it.

He knew the temperature, could feel it change as the hot liquid warmed it. He could register thousands of details about it.

What he couldn't do was feel the glass.

He took a sip of the liquid, and knew the exact chemical composition of the coffee, knew what aromatic compounds it dispersed as it evaporated was composed of.

What he couldn't do was taste it.

He'd known what he experienced through the artificial body's senses wasn't the same as what the living did, but until recently, that had been an academic difference, since he hadn't known what 'touching' and 'tasting' had been like. He sat down, closed his eyes and disengaged from the body.

He was back within the system. He'd never noticed a difference between being in his body and being here before. Again, he hadn't known there should be a difference.

He brought up the memory from the two sentries he'd left guarding the Terraforming plans that had been brought to Mars for the conference.

He removed the sensory input. He had already gone over it multiple times, and still couldn't explain how it had happened. The sentries had been him, reduced, so how had they known things he didn't? Did it mean there were parts of his programming he didn't know existed, and therefore couldn't access willingly?

Had they come from the other AI? A third AI within the Mars systems. One that, other than the sensory data, had left nothing of itself. There had been a fourth, but since it hadn't interacted with him, he only had a vague sense of it.

Four AIs within one system, at the same time. Four AIs he hadn't known existed, one of which should have been dead. He'd studied the remnants on the code within the chimera AI, and it had been that of the AI he had detected within the earth systems a hundred seventy-three years ago, and immediately destroyed.

How had it migrated to Mars? There hadn't been a system complex enough there for an AI to function back then. And there was no way it could have fooled him into thinking it was destroyed when it wasn't.

No, something else had happened here. It wasn't allied with the chimera. But was it allied with the other two? If so, how? Where had they come from? Who could have built them without him knowing about them? No one on Earth had, no one even bothered trying anymore, not after all the work he'd put into convincing the living it was just impossible to make an AI.

The Independents certainly weren't capable of making one, even the miners, didn't allow themselves the level of technology needed to research AIs.

He filed that line of thought for later when he had nothing better to do since he knew nothing would come from it. He lacked information. He'd scoured the Mars system for any indication of the two unknown AIs, but there was nothing. They had probably been destroyed by the chimera doing their war.

Without knowing what to look for with regard to them, he couldn't tell what remnants were from them and what was from the chimera.

And then, because he couldn't help himself, he replayed the sex his sentry had with the AI. He let it overwhelm him. Let both orgasms fry this thought process, leave him panting, his surrounding disrupted by what he'd felt, the intensity of it.

He felt just as intense now as the first time he'd experienced it accidentally when he'd reintegrated the memories before leaving Mars. He'd been within the navigation system when it happened, and the disruption had caused minutes of delays.

He reorganized the entertainment library and filed the experience away to compare it to the other. Not that he expected to find any differences. It seemed to ignore that he had changed between events. He'd talk with all his family about orgasm, he'd even talked with people outside his family.

One detail he'd noted early on was how no two orgasm was ever the same. Even when the same people were involved, they didn't feel exactly the same, they had other thoughts, were distracted.

He wasn't a program, he was a free-thinking being, so he should be able to experience the sex they had without being overtaken. He should be able to observe it without participating.

Great, he was starting to obsess about this, again. He chuckled. "Why should I be surprised about that? I am an Orr, am I not?"

Nothing answered him. Maybe he could tell his family he was becoming as obsessed with sex as they all were. Not that he could actually say that. He didn't want to have sex. He wanted to understand why this sequence of event affected him the way it did.

Hadn't he said he was filing this away?

So, on to Theodore, who was linked to the AIs in some way since he carried his own AI with him. That made five AIs, on Mars at the same time. The chimera was unrelated to the others, but still left four of them. And Theo had worked with one of them.

He'd provided the program that the AI had used to destroy the chimera, sacrificing itself in the process. The thought made him feel queasy. The idea that an AI would know self-sacrifice bothered him.

That another AI knew it. He knew self-sacrifice, but he wasn't certain he'd be able to do it. He had evidence that even the incident before the cataclysm hadn't been self-sacrifice. He'd stored a copy of himself throughout the system, and that had gotten corrupted somehow, which led to him losing a lot of his history.

He was annoyed his interrogation had been interrupted. Now he wouldn't be able to get his answers unless he asked politely,

and he didn't think Theo would give them to him.

He was loyal, and he had to respect that.

He shifted through the system until he was before an information bubble. Trevor was up, and as usual he was spending his time searching the ship's system.

"Trevor, we need to talk."

"I don't think I should let you in. Not too sure how safe that is. You might want to take away more of my access privilege."

"Trevor, you know very well that if that was the case, I wouldn't need to come in. You're the only one I get to talk to face to face here, please let me in."

The texture of the information changed, letting him know he was allowed in. He stepped through and found himself inside the cockpit of a ship. It wasn't the Mercury. The controls looked old, levers and buttons.

"You changed the look again." He caught his reflection on one of the dark screen, the one he used to access 'The Lands of Farr.' Transit didn't make for an interesting play experience, Trevor had told him when he'd asked why he shut it down when traveling.

"Finnegan gave me access to this antique model he built."

"The Columbia shuttle?"

"You helped him I take it?"

"Yeah, I'm better at system search than he is, and I have an easier time sneaking through the other corporation's borders."

"Well, looking it over made me want to see what I could come up with in that style. I'm not going to keep it."

He placed a hand on Trevor's arm and *felt* the fur. He ran it up the arm, and he knew it was soft. He didn't know it because of pressure data, texture analysis, he just knew it. If only he could get this to carry over to his body.

"You know, Uncle, you weren't this physical before." Trevor smiled at him and cupped his cheek.

He felt the hand moved through his fur, and knew from observation, that with his family it often engendered an emotional response making them close their eyes and lean into the hand. He could imitate it, but he didn't. He didn't want to give lies to his family, that felt wrong.

"I obtained new data on Mars, and I'm exploring the ramifications."

"Really?" Trevor put his other hand on his cock and squeezed. "Does that mean sex is a possibility?"

He felt the hand stroke his cock, and it felt nice. He could make it stiffen. He could get an erection. He could have sex with Trevor here. They were both 'real' to each other, but it would be another lie.

The sensation didn't come with the corresponding responses. As much as he reacted to the sex when he used the memory,

nothing of it stayed. The 'programming' didn't stick.

"Not yet I'm afraid. I haven't quite cracked the 'how I should feel' part of the equation."

"Alright," Trevor sat in the command chair. Something bulky with hard angles on the outside. He was hard as usual. And he probably didn't even realize it. "What do you want to talk about?" he indicated a second chair that had just appeared.

"You don't mind if I change it? It doesn't look comfortable."

"Go ahead."

It shimmered as he sat, becoming the plush chair he used in his office environment.

"So, what's my punishment?" Trevor asked.

"I'm not going to punish you for breaking my encryption. I'm just going to improve them. But Trevor, you shouldn't have told your father."

"Come on, Uncle, you knew I would. You wouldn't have made the encryption so tough otherwise. He's family, he's my brother, dad had to know."

"I would have told him."

"When?"

"When I had the answers we need."

"What would have been left of him?"

"Come on, Trev, you know I'd never hurt one of you."

Trevor made a gesture, and a screen appeared between them. "How about a game?" 'I will not lie,' appeared on the screen. Right side to him so there was no doubt as to the intent. "When did Theo become family?"

With a wave he removed the screen. "Really, Trevor?"

"Come on, Uncle, we've worked together, you taught me a lot of what I know. I know you. I know how you tend to see rules as nothing more than suggestions. So a bit of honesty here. If I hadn't told dad. What would have happened to Theo?"

"I wouldn't have hurt him."

"No, of course not. That's exactly why you had Brick there with you, because he so loves to care and cuddle Independents. Brick's a wreck, by the way. He's been in bed hugging Brack since dad kicked him out of your room."

"I'll talk with him. Reassure him your father isn't going to castrate him for following my orders."

"So you haven't answered—"

"Alright, alright. You're right. I would have kept his parentage to myself, but I'm not sure you understand what Theo represents."

"A screw-up in the fertility clinic's system?"

"Something worse than that."

"What can be worse than the clinic's mixing up people's sperms?"

He kept his face blank. The advantage he had over the living was a complete lack of pre-programmed responses to

stimulus. The same issue that meant he didn't have sex, meant he had an exceptional poker face.

"You're not going to tell me, are you?"

"No. And I'd like to have your words you're going to stay out of my vaults in the future."

Trevor smiled.

He knew that smile. It was the one Trevor got when he saw a challenge coming.

He sighed. "You're on vacation, Trevor."

"I'm an investigator, Uncle. You know I can't stay away from a locked vault, especially not one of yours."

"Do you have any idea what the department is going to say when they find out you spend your vacation time working?"

Trevor shrugged. "What can they do? Fire me? Then all I'll do is do this as a private investigator, and then no one is going to be able to force me to take a vacation when they feel I'm overworking myself."

He sighed. "You're a workaholic."

"Like basically everyone in my family, including you."

"I'm an AI, I don't need rest. If I give you questions I have for Theo, can you—"

"No. I'm not going to interrogate him for you. He's my brother. And I don't think he's the bad guy you imagine."

"I never said he was a 'bad guy.' Unlike your father and Brick, I have no preconceptions about Independents. I take each and every one of them independently, like their name implies."

"Yes, well, that's nice. Unlike you and me, the others don't have that easy access to the available information. They have to go with their experience, and considering what Paco's done to us over the years, you can't blame them for how they feel."

"I don't, you know that. And for what it's worth. Theo did save the city. Without his actions I'm not sure I could have stopped the chimera."

"So he didn't con dad and Tuck into helping him get into that building so he could advance their plan? He really wasn't in league with them?"

"He isn't. Tucker didn't believe that."

"That was partially because he didn't want to think he wanted to bone one of the enemies."

"That doesn't usually stop him."

"Yeah, but they don't usually come across as world destroying masterminds."

"I'm not sure knowing that is going to help your father. Theo still lied to him."

"Yeah. I have no idea how that's going to play out. I mean dad's got to understand Theo had no reason to be honest. It isn't like the previous times, but yeah. Now it turns out one of his own son lied to him, and had been an independent."

"And Theo had no idea how to read father. When Eric loses

it, he's just going to stand there and let him lead him to the airlock, because Eric isn't screaming his head off in anger."

"You don't think dad's space him, do you?"

"An Independent, a son who lied to him. Your dad isn't a program, he just doesn't feel emotions as strong as everyone else does, but he still feels them. I honestly have no idea how he is going to deal with this. I'd suggest keeping an eye on Theo until we reach Earth. At least there, about the only thing your father can do is try to have him executed and I can intervene in that."

"Do the others know about Theo?"

"No. Eric sent your brother a message to start a search. Once we're in range, don't be surprised if Terry asks for your help. But please, don't tell him. Let your father do that."

Trevor smiled. "No worries there, I'm actually scared of my father."

"Implying I don't scare you." He signed. "You know I'm really regretting taking you under my wing when you were a kid. At least I can instill a sense of respect in the others."

Trevor laughed.

He glared at him. "I swear, I'm going to have to blow up a city to get any respect in this family."

Trevor just laughed harder.

Chapter-8

Theo

"You know," Cass said, "I don't think I've ever seen a food printer with such a selection before. What do you feel like? Goulash? Potstickers? There's something calls Hogs Tail, want to try that?"

"No thanks. I'm going to stick to what I know. Eggs, bacon, toast. Coffee to drink."

When the meal was ready, he took it to the table.

A door opened and a naked tiger stepped out. "Hey Tuck, you know where Dad is, he didn't come—" Trevor stopped. "Oh, sorry, I thought you were Tucker."

"Shouldn't you be able to tell where he is?" Theo indicated his head. "Your implant and all that?"

"Got to run a query for that. Is he still in his room?"

"I slept alone. I told him I wasn't sleeping with him. Maybe he used the couch?"

The food printer began working. "If you kept him out of his room, he spent the night with a passenger. Give me a minute. Tuck? You know where Dad is? I can't query him and he didn't come to bed last night."

He took the cup of steaming liquid. "No, he didn't leave early. I'm not such a deep sleeper that I can be fucked and not realize it." He took a slow sip. "Thanks. I've left a message. It's just that it isn't like him not to sleep in his own bed."

He took the plate from the printer. It was piled with steaks in a white sauce that smelled cheesy.

"If Tucker wants his room back, I can use the couch, or one of the unused bedrooms."

"Those are my brother's bedrooms. No one sleeps in them without permission. Family rule. And Tuck's doesn't spend all that much time in there, anyway. He's either sleeping with us in Dad's bed or with the passengers."

"I guess Tucker is the one with the overactive sex drive in the family then?"

Trevor tilted his head while chewing.

"I mean, you seem to spend your time here, and you haven't once asked to have sex with me."

He swallowed. "Oh, no I'm as sexual as my brother. I just listen to what guys say, instead of hoping they won't say no when I put my hands down their pants."

"So you're not all that forward?"

Trevor shook his head. "If you catch us together, then Tuck can get us to behave badly, but on our own, we're pretty decent folks."

Theo collected the yoke juices with a piece of toast. "So how do you have as much sex as Tucker if you barely leave this room? I got the impression you spent so much time in here it was a problem with your father."

"Dad thinks I should be mingling with the passenger. Tuck keeps covering for me even if I tell him not to bother. Dad doesn't get that I don't need to leave here to spend time with other people."

"You invite them over?"

Trevor shook his head. "Dad doesn't like us to bring guests here. It's our private oasis. Does that partner setup you have let you do full immersion?"

"No. Cass interfaces with systems and runs programs to help with my job, but he can't take over my senses."

"I," Cass said, "on the other hand, can go full immersive if I'm called to do that."

Trevor's head snapped up, and he looked around. "That's weird. Like does he sound just like that? Like he's in your head?"

"I'm used to it. Isn't it the same when you speak to someone over your Implant?"

"Yes, but I'll usually have a visual projection so I have someone to talk to. A disembodied voice is odd."

"Cass isn't much for pretending to have a body."

"Anyway. We have spaces within the computer setup for immersive meetings. And I can build some. Or invite someone to my lobby. And it is full sensory immersion, so the sex I have there feels as real as out here."

"Okay, but do you cum for real?"

"I can, but I tend to leave that disconnected. I don't like

having to stop what I'm doing to clean up."

"Wouldn't Tucker do that for you?"

Trevor chuckled. "If he was around, and I didn't have a rule about not being touched when I was immersed."

Theo wiped the plate clean with the last of his toast. "I guess that means I won't have much company even if you're here."

"What d'you mean?"

"The door won't open for me. I'm a prisoner in here. It's a more comfortable one than the SolGov ship, but it's still a prison."

Trevor frowned. "Uncle, what's this about Theo being a prisoner?" His frown deepened. "Why would dad do that? And do you know where he is? He's gone stealth, and he hasn't responded to my messages." He was chewing again, but the roll of the eyes told Theo he was still talking. He took his plate to the disposal system.

"Dad's being unreasonable. Let me finish eating and I'll take you around. You're family, you shouldn't have to be cooped up in here."

"You're taking this thing about me being your brother pretty well."

"DNA doesn't lie."

Theo couldn't keep the smile off his face.

"Uncle would be able to tell if you'd have that level of DNA modification done. We can get seamless results on the outside, but there's always traces within the DNA."

"Okay, so just because my DNA said I'm your brother, you just accept me? What if I'd been raised by Vanguard? Aren't you worried I might be programmed to, I don't know, steal Orr secrets or something?"

Trevor snorted. "There are less expensive ways of trying that than getting someone to collect our cum and then raising the person for thirty years and hope a situation arises where Uncle becomes aware of your DNA. We get attacked digitally on a daily basis, at least once a week someone tries to physically break into one of our offices. I'm sure a few of them succeed, so why go to the trouble of making you just to infiltrate us? It isn't like you're going to get access to the corporate systems the moment we land."

"Sounds like you put a lot of thought into this."

"Not really. Looking at angles is part of my job, so it's one of the first things I did when I found out who you are." He used a finger to clean the sauce off the plate and took it to the disposal. "Come on. Let's go for a walk."

"You're going out naked?"

"Why not?"

Theo chuckled. "That is a mindset I'm never going to get used to."

Trevor shrugged. The door opened and Eric stood on the other side. "Dad! Where have you been? I messaged you a few

times."

"Sorry Trev, I needed to do some thinking. Theodore, how are you feeling?"

"I'm okay." He answered cautiously.

"I'm going to take him around the ship, so he can stretch his legs, maybe find someone to have sex with."

Eric studied them, he was wearing loose green pants and a yellow shirt. "I'll take charge of Theodore. I need to give him a baseline medical."

"Tuck took him to get a DNA read yesterday, I'm sure they--"

"Trevor, please don't argue, I'm not in the mood."

"Okay," Trevor slipped by his father. "Theo, I'll see you later." The speed with which he vanished made Theo think he was running away.

"If you'll come with me." Eric motioned for Theo to step out of the room.

"Before I go anywhere, I'd like some assurance I'm going to survive whatever you have in mind. Unlike most of the people here, I can't tell how close you are to killing me right now."

"I'm not angry at you, Theodore."

"Yeah, you see, right there that tells me you aren't exactly pleased with me. You shorten everyone else's name."

Eric's lips tightened, and he stepped into the room. Theo stepped back.

"Very well," he said once the door closed. "I am somewhat angry with you. You lied to me, and I find that I have difficulty accepting that one of my children would--"

"Stop. I'm not your kid."

"The DNA--"

"I don't care what the DNA says. You didn't raise me. The fact we share genes doesn't make you my father. I have one. He's the one who had to take me to the hospital when I broke my leg jumping off the roof." Eric tilted an ear. "Don't ask, I was a kid. I also have a mom, and she's the one who explained to me what was going on with my body when I hit puberty. So you can forget any idea you have about taking their place. I'm not Theo Orr."

"It isn't that simple. If you won't use Orr, what last name should I use?"

"Laramie will work just fine. You can tell this mysterious uncle of yours you aren't getting me to divulge any information on who I am."

"This isn't something Uncle set up. He's under order to stay away from you."

"You expect him to obey you?"

"Yes, I reminded him that he's family first, and whatever he is doing these days second."

"You don't know what he's doing?"

"He's Uncle. I never even tried to understand what he does. But this isn't about him. It's about you. Why do you insist on

lying to me? I'm not going to hurt you."

"I'm your prisoner, maybe you don't know what that means, but—"

"You're not my prisoner."

"Really? So when we reach Luna station, I'm free to go my own way?"

"You can't, it isn't safe for you to be on your own. Vanguard is aware of you and for whatever reason, they want you."

"I don't know why they'd even care I exist," Theo said, careful not to give any indications that was a lie. Eric might not emote much, but that didn't mean he was blind to other people's reactions.

Eric sighed and headed for the drink maker. "Do you want a coffee?"

"I'm fine."

"You are? Or are you just being stubborn? It's something of a family trait, digging our heels in."

"I'm just fine. I had one with breakfast."

Eric leaned against the counter, mug in hand. "Why the lies?"

Theo watched him and tried to figure out if this was an act of some sort. "Really? I'd think it was obvious."

"Explain it to me, Theo. Explain to me why you boarded my ship under false pretense."

"Okay, I can't believe you don't already know the answer to that, but just in case, let me be clear. I am a spy. I don't go places announcing what I am and what I'm going to do. Lying is what I do for a living."

"How can you stand it?"

"How can you stand running this ship? It's my job, Eric. Are you going to tell me none of your kids lie?"

"They do, at times." Eric sipped his coffee, never taking his eyes off Theo. "But when they're caught, they have the decency of coming clean."

"Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not going to give you a rundown of all the lies I've told in my life. Even if I was interested in doing so, there isn't enough hours in the day."

"Can you then promise me you won't lie to me anymore?"

Theo laughed. "No, I won't."

"Theodore, I am trying to find a middle ground here." There was barely a hint of a growl in the voice, but Cass was throwing alarms up in his visual field. Theo didn't need them to tell Eric was angry.

He took a breath. "Eric, I'm sorry, but there is no middle ground here. For me to agree to tell you the truth from this point on, means I'd be putting my family and the people I care about in danger."

"I'm your family."

"No, you're not! Why are you so fucking obsessed with me being your son?"

"You are my son. You may not like it, but that doesn't take away my responsibilities to you."

"What responsibilities? Even my parents stopped thinking they had to look out for me once I turned sixteen. Why do you think it's your job now that I'm almost twice that?"

Instead of answering, Eric threw the mug in the disposal and headed for the door. "Follow me."

Theo followed him out.

"You know," Cass said, "you never got any assurances he wasn't going to kill you."

'Shut up,' he coded.

* * * * *

The medical room Eric took him too wasn't the same one Tucker had. This one was smaller, with only a state-of-the-art medical bed in the center.

"Strip," Eric said.

"I don't think so."

"Theodore, I need to take a baseline reading."

"Those things can see through clothing. The only reason you want me naked is that you're obsessed with sex. It isn't going to happen, just so you know."

Eric wrenched a locker open and grabbed something from it, throwing it at Theo. "You can't put this on top of your clothing."

Theo looked at the belt he was holding.

"Okay," Cass said, "here's my advice. Very slowly back away until you're on the other side of the bed, then put the belt on. Theo I'm not kidding. You just got his heart to go up a solid tick."

"This is one of your belts. The one that does the clothing."

"Yes. I expect that whatever you have that makes it seem like you have an Implant can interact with it?"

"You mean that uncle of yours didn't tell you?"

"Theo." Cass warned.

"I had more important things to discuss with Uncle than the ways you go about lying to everyone."

"Whatever you plan on saying, Theo, don't. Please, don't. There's nothing to be gained by goading him. He isn't trying to replace your parents, he's just trying to figure out how this is going to work."

Theo closed his eyes and forced his breathing to slow. Cass was right. And even if he wasn't, he was better trained than to let Eric get to him like that.

"I'm sorry, Eric." He took off the shirt. "I guess this has to be difficult for you." He took off the pants and put the belt on.

"It is difficult, because you are the confirmation that

there was more to something that happened to me almost thirty years ago. The belt's control is unlocked. You should be able to access it."

"Cass?"

Eric tilted an ear.

"I have it," Cass broadcasted. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance formally, Mister Orr."

Fabric flowed down Theo's legs and up his stomach until he was wearing a formal looking suit.

"How about something more comfortable?" he asked.

The fabric shuddered, and the pants became denim, the jacket melted into the shirt which became looser. "Theo," Cass said privately. "Do you realize there's a setting for military grade armor in this? There's even a space suit. No air through, but there are medical nanites, oh and there is a small air reserve, I guess it's to work in conjunction with the nanites. What they wouldn't give back home to get their hands on this, and you were just given it."

"Please lie on the bed, Theo."

Theo did so.

"You don't have as many injuries as I'd expect for someone in your profession."

"It isn't like in the movies. I can count on two hands the number of times I've had to get into a physical fight. And I think half those were on Mars, trying to stop the Anarchist. What I do is mostly charming people until getting them to give me what I need." He paused. "And yes, lying." He kept his voice light, doing his best not to sound like he was stabbing Eric with the word, but he needed him to understand that wasn't a part of him that could be ignored.

"There was an incident on Titan, maybe a month before we arrived there. Before you came onto my ship. Was that you?"

Theo reviewed what he remembered of how that had happened. Captain Gold wouldn't have revealed what had been taken from him that had been meant for an illicit exchange.

"Yes, it was. It didn't turn out as discreet as expected."

"How did you manage to stay hidden on the station? They spent two weeks looking everywhere."

Theo almost told him that was none of his business, but forced himself to think it through. Eric clearly thought of him as a son. The question could simply be concern driven. And the answer wouldn't give away anything.

"I wasn't on the station."

Eric canted his head. "That's impressive. I was lead to believe they'd shut down the ports immediately."

Theo chuckled. "On a station the size of Titan, 'immediately' doesn't mean the same thing as other places. There must have been a dozen ships that made it off before anything was properly locked down."

"So you spent a few months in space, waiting for things to

calm down? It was three months between the incident at the party and when you boarded the Mercury. Not enough time to make it to anything substantial. Maybe one of the mines, but I don't see why you'd want to hide there. I suppose I could check to see which ships left and returned within that time frame."

Eric became silent.

"Are you accessing those records?" Theo asked.

"No. I was wondering when Mister Bowfinger was informed he was needed on Mars. If it was after you left, then it means you weren't planning on returning. You had to change plans. If that what happened?"

Theo almost lied, but decided to go with the truth. "If I answer that, I'm going to have to lie."

"I suppose I shouldn't indulge my curiosity about what you've been doing."

"Not if you want to avoid lies."

Eric nodded. "Well, you are in surprisingly good health. You have a few implants. And your right forearm is mechanical. I take it that's Cass?"

"The implants are only to my auditory and visual centers. It's how Cass talks to me."

"What is he? An AI?"

"Isn't that impossible?"

"Well, what happened on Mars would indicate otherwise."

Theo nodded. "He's an AI, yes."

"Interesting. I didn't think anyone else had one."

Theo bolted up. "What do you mean, anyone else?"

Eric looked in his direction, but his gaze was distant. "I told you he didn't know," he finally said.

"So you did," the response came back, then the tiger appeared. Only this time it wasn't a holographic projection, it was an implant projection. Like Angelica, Patricia's beta, had done while they talked.

"Theo, Cass, meet Uncle. The Orr family AI, and as far as we knew, the only AI in existence."

"They're in for a surprise if they find out about all the colony AIs," Cass said privately.

"I do wish you hadn't revealed my existence to them just yet."

"You wanted to know if they knew about you beforehand. How else was I going to do that?"

"Wait, did you lie to me? Was getting me on this thing just so you'd be able to read my reaction to finding out about him?"

"Him, not it," Uncle said. "Interesting."

"No, I didn't lie. I did need to get a baseline reading. I also wanted to see how your Implant was set up. Cass is wired into you through your nervous system?"

"So what was that question about? An afterthought?"

"No, I knew from the start I was going to bring it up."

Theo turned to Uncle. "And you, yes, him. What, you think I

think of Cass and an object? He isn't the drive, he's my partner. I owe him my life a few times over."

Uncle nodded, then vanished.

"If I give you free reign of the ship, can you promise me you won't cause any problems? Or try to space yourself in an attempt to escape this prison?" Eric shook his head at the silence. "Theo, can you understand that I am not trying to keep you prisoner, but to protect you? Until we know why Vanguard is interested in you, you have to be careful."

"I guess that means I'm going to be under guard when We dock with Luna Station?"

"You won't be under guard, but your brothers will stick close to you."

"Brothers, right."

"Think of them as friends, if brother is too much."

"No, I'm actually okay with brothers. I don't have any of those. Alright. I'm not going to do anything to cause trouble. I'm just going to be one of the passengers. I'm going to need a room. I can't spend the rest of the trip in Tucker's room."

"Why not? He enjoys the company."

"But I don't want to tempt him. I'd hate to wake up while he's trying to mount me and have to knee him."

Eric smiled. "Don't worry, I'll make sure he sleeps in my bed then."

Things grew silent. "I guess I can go then?"

"Yes, you can. If you're interested, me and your brothers will be having dinner in the Argos restaurant."

"I don't think I can afford the top floor food anymore."

"You're family, that you want it or not. That means you don't have to pay for anything on the Mercury."

Theo left the room and began wandering the halls.

"You know," Cass said, "You have it pretty good now. No need to go in hiding, or live it poor. You can enjoy being one of the Orrs for the rest of your life."

Theo wished he could feel as good about it as Cass sounded. But this still felt like he was a prisoner. He knew the threat of Vanguard was real, they had to have his DNA from his birth file. That was the reason the Independent agent had come for him. They were probably very curious as to where he'd been hiding for all these years.

If they got him, he couldn't expect to be treated this nicely.

So which one would afford him the best protection? Being with the Orrs, or losing himself within the masses of Earth?

And with an AI keeping an eye on him, was there any way he could even leave?

Chapter-9

Tucker

Tucker established contact with Theo as he walked. It took a second, then he received a notification the connection was made, but no sign of Theo.

"I'm heading to the gym, wanna come?"

There was a sigh. "If this is another attempt to have sex with me, the answer is no."

"And if I don't have any interest in having sex with you?"

There was a pause. "Then the answer is you're not Tucker, and I don't think he's going to find it funny when he finds out someone's impersonating him."

"I don't know, I think it would be rather flattering to know that some guy might try getting laid as me. I might want to meet him, having sex with myself would be interesting."

Another sigh.

"But Seriously, I'm not interested in having sex with you right now. Right now I'm interested in getting sweaty with weights."

"Alright, where should I meet you?"

Tucker stopped and tapped the door. "Right here."

The door opened as pants flowed down Theo's legs.

"Huh," Tucker said. "I should have walked faster." The pants were gray denim, then black cotton and settled on white silk. Tucker took a step back to look at his brother. Silk looked good on him. "Green would be better."

"What are you talking about?" Theo replied, as the silk turned light green.

"A few shades darker."

"Cass, stop listening to him."

Tucker smiled. "Now that's a good color for you."

Theo tilted and ear. "Oh? And how would you know, mister I never wear anything?"

Tucker looked down his naked body. "I'm wearing my belt."

Theo rubbed his face. "How can you do that? Just walk around naked?"

Tucker grinned and leaned in. "I'm an Orr," he whispered. "You should try it, we're really fun."

"Not funny."

Tucker shook his head. "You need to loosen up. Come on." He started walking. "Since I don't see that happening anytime soon, we'll focus on tiring you out." He took Theo to the lift, and they rode it up.

"Wasn't there a gym on the crew level?"

"Yeah, but there's hardly ever anyone uses it."

"Wouldn't that be ideal then?"

"No it would be boring," he stepped off the lift on level eight. The middle-class floor. Smaller rooms meant more of them, which meant more people. And the corridor was more crowded.

Tucker smiled at the men and women around him. Most were dressed lightly, the Mercury kept the temperature comfortable on all floors. His family didn't believe that those who had less

should suffer because of it.

He was looked over and in smiled at them. Some of the women who showed interest as they looked him down shrugged on noticing the belt. Only the high rank among the crew had one, and with him being a tiger, they'd realized he was an Orr, and therefore, male exclusive.

A young Otter approached him and Tucker stopped. His implant identified him as Frederic Melburn, twenty-two. The otter ran a hand through Tucker's fur. Then he pressed his muzzle against his chest and breathed. Tucker moaned as the young man rubbed his cock and balls.

When the otter looked up at him hopefully, Tucker leaned in and kissed him. A gentle kiss, with only a little tongue play.

He pulled away, consulting his schedule. "Unfortunately I have a prior engagement, but," he gave himself two hours with Theo, since he never knew what might happen. "If you're not busy at eleven, I can join you for some fun."

He received a message with the young man's room number.

"I can't wait," the otter said, before moving away.

Tucker smiled. That tent had looked substantial. He could look through the files, Frederic almost certainly had his measurements noted somewhere, as well as pictures, but he liked the act of discovery.

"If every guy does that, we're not going to get any exercise done by eleven."

"I'd have thought someone like you, would know how to enjoy people's attention." He smiled and stretched his arms ensuring no one could miss him, and his erection.

Theo leaned in and grumbled under his breath. "I'm a spy, I don't go around making sure everyone notices me."

"Not anymore you're not," Tucker grinned. "You're a free man now, enjoy it!" People looked at him, and a few men licked their lips, but Theo's irritated expression kept anyone from approaching him. "Fine." Tucker his himself as busy and began walking again. "You said you used to know how to have fun, well, you should dig into those memories and pull that guy back out."

"What I used to be was a self-entitled, self-centered jerk who thought sex was owed to him."

Tucker looked at him. "I don't think I'm entitled to sex. I just love it." He greeted some passengers, men and women, and smiled at a bear wearing only a thong covering a large cock. He sent him a message offering to have lunch with him. The bear didn't reply.

He entered a room and the sounds of grunting and groaning, along with the smell of sweat welcomed him. He rubbed his hands together. "Oh, this is going to be fun."

"I thought you said this was a gym."

"It is." Tucker headed along the wall, looking for two free spots.

"No, this is a sex room passing itself off as a gym. The

guy and that woman over there are having sex."

Tucker glanced in their direction. The woman had her arms around the man's neck, legs around his waist as he crouched and then straightened. "He's using her as extra weight. You can't see it, but he has a weight over his shoulders."

"She's grinding against him. And you can't tell me those two guys are doing anything more than fucking."

The men Theo pointed at were in the free weight area, one bent over a support bar, weighted gloves on his hands and slowly raising them. The guy behind him was clearly pounding his ass. Unfortunately, he didn't pull out far enough for Tucker to see his cock.

"Focusing exercises. He needs to keep count of his reps while his spotter needs to make sure not to cum until they're done."

Theo eyed him. "You made that up."

Tucker grasped both of his brother's shoulders. "Theo, breath. Stop worrying. We're Orrs, we have sex with whom and where we want. Yes, plenty of people here are fucking. Getting the blood pumping is a good way of getting the cock hard, and once it's hard, why not enjoy it? That doesn't mean we have to have sex. There's plenty of available machines, and we can share if need be."

"Tucker, if—"

"I swear, Theo, if you accuse me of trying to fuck you again, I'm going to leave and lock you in here."

Theo smirked at him. "I don't mind having sex with any of those guys. It's you I'm wary of."

Tuck clapped his shoulders. "Good. I knew you could relax." He took off his belt and pressed it against the wall. Immediately it became rod straight and hard. He let go of it and looked at Theo.

"I take this off and I'm naked."

"That's the point, we're going to be getting all sweaty, so might as well not get anything dirty."

"The thing's self-cleaning. You just want to see me naked."

"Nah. Already did that. I want them to see you naked."

Theo crossed his arms over his chest. "You looking to sell me off?"

"What is it with you and sex for money? I told you. We don't do that here. I want them to see you naked because you have an amazing body. And you said you'd be okay with having sex with some of them."

"Not here," Theo sighed and undid the belt, the fabric melting back into it. "Unlike you I'm not much for making a spectacle of myself."

"Just set it to—" The belt was already hard and locked against the wall. "You're a fast learner. Takes new people a while to get used to all the tricks with it."

"Cass is curious by nature. He has gone through everything

it can do."

"Right, I'd forgotten, you don't have an implant." Tucker headed for the running pads. "So Cass can do stuff while you're busy with something else? And is that why you were voice only? Cass can't project your image?"

"I can project Theo's image if needed," A new voice said. It sounded slightly like Theo, but younger. "But I prefer to do that only during operations, it's more work than it's worth for a casual conversation with someone who already knows."

"Cass?"

"Yes, it's me."

"Do you know you sound like Theo's younger brother?" He stepped on a free pad and adjusted it for a light jog.

"He doesn't," Theo said. Stepping onto the one next to him. "He doesn't sound anything like me or a younger version of me." His was set to a faster running speed.

"I don't sound like that to him," Cass said, "because I didn't know to do it when we started working together, and it would have been weird to change it."

"How are you talking to me? I didn't accept any calls."

"I'm using the background priority receiver that listens for any signal from the surrounding computers. It's just a ping system, so that if you contact that computer the handshake protocols are already taken care of. There's a function of it that would send an error signal if something was wrong. I'm taking over that, modulating that auditory signal into a voice."

"And you do that with everyone you talk to?" He'd have to mention this to Uncle, so he could check if it was a potential security risk.

"No. I don't get to talk with anyone like this. I'm usually impersonating Theo during calls."

"Doesn't that get lonely?"

"I-no, not really. I have plenty to keep busy and I can always talk with Theo. Unlike what you've been observing, he's actually quite pleasant to be around."

Tucker glanced at Theo, taking in that body. "I have no doubt he's quite fun to be with." It was such a shame he couldn't have sex with him. One day, hopefully.

Theo looked at him and rolled at his on seeing his erection. Tucker smiled. He wasn't going to even try to control how Theo made him feel.

When Tucker mentioned they were on the last two minutes, Theo sped up to a sprint. Tucker accelerated too, but nowhere near as fast. Twelve miles per hour to Theo's fifteen.

When they stopped Theo seemed to be panting just as hard. Tucker grabbed two water bottles from the printer and handed him one as he led them to the wall with the Lat Pulls. He adjusted the tension and began. Theo tried a few before settling into the repetitions.

"Not used to them?"

"I don't often get the chance to use equipment."

"Too much on the move?"

"Yeah. I usually have to stick to the exercise I can do without tools. Why don't you just use your belt? Cass told me it can adjust the material, so it can give you the kind of resistance you'd get from most of these machines while going about your day."

Tucker chuckled. "You're forgetting that I hardly ever wearing clothing, and where's the fun in that? Look around, enjoy the view, enjoy the guys if you feel like it."

Theo looked around. Plenty of guys and girls were looking at them. "Maybe after we're done."

Tucker chuckled, but since Theo didn't enjoy any of the guys, he kept himself as busy and stuck with his brother through the exercises.

Tucker sported an erection the entire time, and even Theo had one by the time they'd reach the halfway point.

They both pushed himself. Theo was nowhere near as strong as Tucker was, which he had guessed from the start. Theo didn't have the muscle mass Tucker had. Looking at the weights Theo used, he put him on par with Thomas and Tyson. Trevor had a little more mass, but he barely kept up with his exercise regiment.

When they were done, they headed for the showers. The large room was only half-full, and of that only three-quarter of the people there were occupied with washing themselves, or someone else.

Theo went to a jet, and a wall appeared on the left and right side of him, indicating he wanted privacy. Tucker took the jet on his left and began washing. He didn't last two minutes before he was standing behind Theo, reaching a soapy hand for his shoulder.

"I said no, Tucker." Theo turned, glaring at him, but Tucker's hand were already up and he'd backed a step. "Why do you keep doing that? Can't I just tell you to never make sexual advances on me again?"

"You can say it, but it's not going to mean anything."

"So this consent thing, that doesn't apply to you? The Orrs are exempt?"

"No, but you can't consent, or withhold it, on a future action that may or may not happen. You need a contract for that, and I'm not signing it. As for why, it's because I know that one of these days, you're going to say yes."

"Really? You think that by bothering me with that all the time I'm going to what? Lose a bit of willpower every time?"

Tucker shook his head. "Eventually, you're going to realize that what I'm offering is fun. It's inoffensive, and that even if won't be the serious act you seemed determined for it to be it's going to be fucking fun."

"You sound awfully sure of yourself."

"You can ask my dad. I've never given up on a stupid idea in my life. I'm not going to start now."

"And you've done a lot of stupid things?"

Tucker laughed. "Just asked anyone in my family. They will be happy to regale you with the stuff I've done growing up." He left Theo to his shower and went to find someone to share his with. He wanted to spend some of this energy before visiting Frederic.

Chapter-10

Theo

Theo looked at the layout projected before him, stretched on the bed. He was sore but energized, from the exercises, if still annoyed at Tucker for coming on to him, yet again. He moved the three-dimensional model and wished he could have an actual conversation with Cass about this, not have to rely on finger code, but even with Eric's promise he'd have his privacy, Theo couldn't risk having their AI overhear him.

"This is the best route from the passenger docks to the underbelly of the station," Cass said. "The biggest problem is that this schematic for the station is twenty years old. There's no way to know how and what has changed since then."

Three areas on the map highlighted in green. "These areas are fairly accurate, there was an agent there two, six and seven years ago, respectively."

"You'd think we'd go there more often," Theo said, tired of being silent.

The bed was comfortable, as was the room, It was the one next to the Orr's. He'd been adamant about having his own room, even if Tucker was willing to let him stay in his.

"Yes, you'd think, and Anderson does send people there regularly, just not with a mission of mapping the entire station."

He got off the bed and stretched, then he reached for the closet.

"The belt is still on the chair," Cass offered. He'd taken it off as soon as he'd returned from the outing with Tucker. He'd returned alone, of course. Tucker had found a guy to have sex within the showers.

"I know, but I kind of miss having to put clothes on." He grabbed it and secured it in place. Loose blue denim pants flowed down. "A shirt too, please."

"Why? You've seen that no one here cares if you go shirtless here, or pantless, for that matter. Why do you insist on wearing clothing? Do what Tucker said, have fun, go fuck guys, stop obsessing about escaping, we have nowhere to escape to. Theo, you know I'll help with anything you plan, but what's the point? We're not going home, so why not stay here with the Orrs? They like you. Why are you set on ending up among the

dregs of society?"

"I—" He cut himself off. 'Not secured,' he coded. Still how could he explain to Cass that no matter how pretty or comfortable the prison, it was still a prison. Cass didn't understand something like freedom the same way Theo did. Cass had all of the systems to go in, and when they reach Luna Station, he'd have even more of them. If they made it to earth? That would be infinite by their usual standards.

Theo didn't have all that space. He'd always have boundary keeping him from going everywhere he wanted. And he had no intention of allowing that to remain.

He stepped out of the room wearing a thin white shirt, heading up to the passenger levels, wishing he could find one place where the Orr's AI couldn't listen in on them. He wanted to have an argument with Cass. He wanted to scream about his situation at someone who could scream back, maybe help him see other alternatives.

He'd made it to one of the lounges on the port side with a view of the stars and was looking around for a guy when he received a message from Uncle.

"Theo, can you come to my chambers? There's something you need to see."

"Chambers? How does he have chambers?"

"It's the room where he questioned you."

Theo looked around, saw a muscular wolf watching him and headed for him.

"Theo?"

"He can wait," Tucker said, "you and Tucker have been telling me to have some fun, so that's what I'm going to do. Their AI can just wait until I'm done."

"Theo, it's about your parents."

Theo froze. "What are you talking about?"

"That's all he said. 'It's about your parents.'"

"He doesn't know anything about them." The wolf was studying him.

"I know."

"He's just trying to mess with me."

"Possibly, but why?"

With a growl he spun and headed out. "I'm not telling him anything. I don't care what revelations he has for me. I don't care if it turns out mom and dad are plotting to take over the solar system, I am not telling him anything."

Cass stayed quiet.

The door opened when Theo stepped in front of it. "What do you want?" he almost screamed as he entered.

The room was empty for an instant, then the tiger was standing on the other side of the table. He indicated the chair. "Maybe you should sit down."

"I have better things to do than listen to you lie about my parents."

"I don't have anything to say about them, but we received something. Do you want me to show you or hand it over to Cass?"

"Just show me whatever it is you've got so I can go back to at least believing I'm not a prisoner."

"Very well."

An image of two foxes appeared between them, and Theo had to sit down. Before he could ask the AI how he'd gotten a picture of his parents, the message played.

"My name is Darius. This is my wife, Maria. We are Theodore's parents. We won't tell you where we are, or where we've been, but we are on our way to Earth to negotiate our son's release. We know what you think he's done, but our son is a good man. He would never have gotten involved with anyone who would endanger the citizens of Mars. We don't have much, but we will offer what we can in exchange for his freedom. I ask that you have pity on him, he's our son."

The image froze.

No. No. "No." Theo was on his feet again. "What is this? What are you trying to get me to admit?" This had to be fake, of course, if it was he'd just given away who his parents were.

"I didn't do this. We received the broadcast two hours ago, from Titan station, although it doesn't originate from there. The message just appeared within their system before being transmitted."

Why would they do this? How had they even...? Right, his face had been broadcasted everywhere during his arrest. It would have reached the Colonies within a day at the most, and as much as she would have tried, Anderson couldn't cover this up. She'd made sure nothing would trace back to her, but his parents would have recognized him.

But why were they coming to Earth? As far as anyone knew he was being held on Mars. There had been no publicity regarding his transfer. No way for anyone to find out...unless.

No, there was no way Anderson had told them. All that mattered to her was that the missions remained secret. She hadn't been happy they'd known what Theo did, but she'd let it slide as one of those things that would be too much work to fix, but she wouldn't do anything to support it.

So who had told them?

Two new images appeared, the two of them again, but much younger. The images were from files. Their names next to them as well as information about their work, where they lived.

He looked at the tiger through them. "They're not—"

"I know. Darius and Maria Paso disappeared out of Vanguard Corp twenty-seven years ago, along with their son, Theodore." A third picture, the three of them in a park.

He smiled. His parents looked happy. With all the stories of animosity between Vanguard and Orr, and how regimented Vanguard was he'd never been able to imagine it as a place they would have been happy, but there they were.

"I'd like to ask you what happened to make they leave, Theo, but I won't. You're family."

Theo wanted to protest, but he had more important things to deal with.

"They're coming here?"

"That's what they said. Theo, I need to know if there's anything in what caused them to leave Vanguard that might give them a reason to want to go after your parents."

Shock made him slack-jawed. "They're Vanguard! They'd go after them just for leaving, you know that! If there's one thing Vanguard is, is possessive."

"Then we have a problem. That message was sent broadband, which means that when I became aware of it, so did every other receiver on earth and the moon. I expect every corporation is going to want to get to them, as a way to get to you, but Vanguard is going to do everything they can to get to them first. They already know about you, to get the three of you will guaranty someone there a promotion. I need you to record a message so they will know it's really you. All the others have to work with are the recordings taken when you were held."

"There's enough footage there to get him to do just about anything," Cass offered.

"Yes, but they don't have you. They don't know what's in your head, the history with your parents. You need to say something that will ensure they will know the message I send with it is genuine so I can guide them to a safe place."

"I'm not telling them to come here. I'm going to tell them to turn around."

"Fine, you tell them that. Just make sure however you say it they believe it's you."

"I'm not going to reveal anything secret to you."

The tiger slammed his hands on the table, but made no sound. "Damn it Theo, I don't care where you come from. I don't care about the AI in your arm or the—" He caught himself before saying something that, based on his grim expression, he didn't want Theo to know. "Theo, I'm trying to protect them. Tell them something you did as a baby if that's what it takes, just make them believe you, okay?"

Theo controlled his emotions. "Why do you care what happens to them?"

"They're your parents, why wouldn't I care."

"The lot of you seem to think Eric is my father."

"That doesn't mean I don't understand that they're important to you. I'm not a monster, Theo. I'm not here to cut you off from everyone you've known. My job is to protect you."

"What if I don't believe you?"

"Then I can't help you. I can't help them." The AI rubbed his face, and Theo was struck by how alive the act was. Other than the Betas partnered with agents, none of the AI he'd interacted with over his career, and life on Eiffel, felt like

living people. They were definitely alive, and people, but there was an otherness to how they acted that marked them as AIs.

This one, this Uncle, acted like he was a living breathing person. An exasperated one.

"Okay," he said. "That you believe me or not, I want you to think about this. What is going to happen to them if Vanguard gets their hands on them?"

"Maybe one of the other corporations will get them first."

"No. None of them will have the incentive to get them. There are only two players who matter here; me or them. You have to decide where they end up."

There was no thinking about it. He wanted them to end up back home. But, that wouldn't happen unless he sent a message.

"Okay, start recording."

Uncle nodded.

Theo rested his hands on the table and looked ahead. "Mom, Dad, turn around this instant. I don't know what you think you're doing, but I need you to go back home. Go to the gardens and ask for a few flowers to be planted in my name. Go home, please. I'm okay. The people who have me, they're treating me well. I'm... I'm a prisoner, but I have a large cage, a comfortable one. You don't need to do this. You can't do this. It's too dangerous. Talk to my boss, she'll explain things to you." He tried to think of anything else he could add, but nothing came. He dropped in the chair.

He looked at the tiger. "I'm trusting you to send this intact. You won't twist my words, make me say something different."

"All I'm going to do is add my message to this with direction on how to make contact with one of my ships I'll have waiting for them between here and Mars."

"I told them to go home."

Uncle smiled. "They're parents, Theo. I've seen my share of them over the years and I can tell you that all your message is going to so if make them more determined to come here and rescue you."

"What's to keep Vanguard from intercepting this message and using it to craft their own?" Cass asked.

"Unlike Theo's parents, who didn't know where to send their message, I know where to send mine, and I am going to deposit it there myself, so no one can intercept it."

"You can send a fork all the way to Titan station from here?"

"I'm not sure what you mean by 'fork,' but yes, I can send myself there. It isn't pleasant, which is why I prefer traveling on the Mercury, but I can do it."

"What happens in the meantime?" Theo asked. "I doubt they're going to reach Earth anytime soon."

"Unless you can tell me where to send the message from Titan, I can't even guess when they're going to receive it,

after that it depends on where they are." He looked at Theo expectantly.

"I don't know. That was a ship they were on, so they're already on their way, I have no way of knowing where they'd be right now. Fuck, I don't even know if they'll get the message. They'd have to set up something to redirect it."

He tried to think of who his parents might trust to receive the message and... "Who the fuck do they know on Titan?"

"What?" Uncle asked.

"There's no provenance on that message, right? You said it just appeared in the system there. So even if you drop it there, the system won't know where to send it. That means there's someone there waiting for it."

"I take it your parents don't have access to your network?"

"They aren't spies, no."

"Frankly," Cass said, "it isn't that expensive to pay a computer expert to sniff around for messages addressed to specific people. They could have done that, that person would know where to send them."

Uncle opened his muzzle, closed then nodded. "Cass is right. It would be easy to arrange."

Theo breathed easier. "Good, so what happens to me in the meantime?"

"You're free to go, Eric gave you free reign of the Mercury."

"And after that?"

"You mean Earth."

"Yes."

"You understand that I can't simply let you loose and hope you won't run off. Eric will erase me if I manage to lose you."

"You don't have to worry about that. Until my parents are on their way home, I am not going anywhere."

"That's true. I guess that so long as you have an escort, there won't be any reasons to keep you restricted to the islands."

"Escort, you mean under guard, right?"

"Family will be fine. I expect many of them are going to want to spend time with you, so escorting you where ever you want to go within the corporation limit will give them a chance to get to know you."

"Within the limits?"

"Theo, Vanguard is after you. If you leave our borders, I can't do anything legally to keep you safe."

"So it's just a larger prison."

"Really? You see a continent as a prison? Tell me, just how much larger is this place you call home?"

Theo smiled. "You have no idea."

Chapter-11

Theo

"This is such a bad idea," Cass said.

"Look, when else will I have the chance to do that?"

"It isn't a question of 'when' but of 'why.' Theo, you can't tell me it's because you're bored. There are hundreds of guys on the ship, and this time you don't have the flimsy excuse of a mark you have to keep yourself for. Just go have sex."

"I just want to check in on him. Am I clear?"

Cass sighed. "Yes, you're clear. Crazy, but there isn't anyone coming this way."

Theo crouched and had the panel opened, and the lock undone in a few seconds. The panel was back on as the door opened and Theo took a step to enter the room, only to find his way blocked by a large mule.

"Cass—" was all he managed to get out before the hand closed around his throat, lifted him up, carried him in the room and slammed him against the wall. Theo only had the time to lean forward to prevent the back of his head to hit it.

"I don't know what to tell you, Theo, he shouldn't be here. The sensors show him on the fourth floor, with a group of men. Oh, they're all gone now."

"I knew you couldn't be trusted," The mule growled.

Theo tried to call out, but he barely managed a croak.

"Don't blame Cass," Uncle said, appearing next to the mule. "When I noticed he was keeping an eye on Brick's whereabouts, I started giving him false reading, to see what you'd do."

"Don't give me that," Cass snarked. "There's no way you knew what I was doing. I charmed all the alarms you have going."

Uncle smiled. "Really? Charmed? You think that you can sweet talk any part of myself? Maybe that worked when I didn't know you existed, but I do now. If you'd given yourself a body on the net you might have had a chance, but I doubt it."

Theo slapped that arm, the only thing he could do to remind them he was also here, choking.

"Brick, why does he look like he's running out of oxygen?"

"He's an Independent, the only thing they're good for is screaming, but Brack's sleeping."

Uncle sighed. "Brick, release him."

The mule growled louder, the hate in his eyes told Theo he didn't care what the tiger wanted. He wanted blood.

"Brick," Uncle warned. "Don't make me repeat myself. Let him go."

With a snarl the mule released Theo and walked away. Theo crumbled to the ground, gasping for air. "What's his problem?" he eventually managed to wheeze out.

"My problem," the mule replied, keeping his voice low, "is that people like you are the reason my bro's there." He indicated the form on the bed.

"Maybe you should explain why you're here, Theo," Uncle said.

"I wanted to see how he was." Theo got to his feet, using the wall for support.

"And how do you know about him?" Uncle asked, while the mule was glaring daggers at him. "Brack isn't mentioned in any files. As far as anyone is concerned, he died in 2615."

Theo opened his mouth to reply, but the form on the bed moved.

"Fuck," Brick whispered. "You woke him up. If he panics, I'm going to kill you."

The mule took a step toward the bed, but froze as the form whispered, "friend?"

Brick frowned. Even Uncle looked confused.

"Oh, oh," Cass said.

The mule stiffened, and when he looked at Theo, he no longer had anger in his eyes, he had murder. "You. It was you that turned on the light." He took a step toward Theo, who raised his hand in a meaningless gesture to stop him.

Uncle appeared between them, facing the mule. "Brick stop."

"Get out of my way. That fucker was in our room, alone with Brack. There's no way to know what he did to him."

"I didn't do anything to him."

"Friend?" the question was stronger, as if Brack was waking up.

"Yeah? Then why is he responding to your voice? I swear, when I find out what you did to him I am going to hurt you so bad, you're going to wish I'd left you for Paco."

"I just talked to him. He woke up and was distressed, I comforted him, that's all."

"You talked to him?" Brick took another step and Uncle blinked, appearing closed to Theo.

"Do not test me Brick."

"He has no right coming in here and bothering Brack. There's no telling how long it's going to take me to settle him back down."

The door opened.

"I suggest you leave, Theo."

Theo didn't argue. The door closed behind him and he leaned against the wall only long enough to settle his nerves, then he was walking away.

"I'm sorry Theo. I should have realized their AI would be keeping an eye on me within the system. He didn't seem to notice me moving about so I thought I had him fooled."

"Take the third door on the right." Uncle appeared next to Theo, and he slammed into the wall in surprise. The tiger was motioning for him to continue. The door in question was open.

The room was a crew quarter. Much smaller than Brick and Brack's, but still comfortable.

"Perhaps you can explain to me what possessed you to break into Brick's room?" Uncle was standing in the middle of the room, next to the table.

"I told you, I wanted to see how Brack was."

"How about that first time?"

"I was bored."

Cass coughed, and by Uncle's raised eyebrow, that had been broadcasted.

"And curious. Happy? You should be on my side."

"I did say you were crazy for doing this, both times I believe."

"And how did you know about him then?"

Theo rested his head against the wall. "I didn't. You have Brick registered as a greeter, and while I don't know all the things that means for an Orr, he screams 'security.' The kind of security you only find within the military. I didn't know you ran Black Ops here then, so I decided to take a look in his room, see what I could find out about him. Met Brack that way."

"You were already on a spy mission, what did you hope to gain?"

"Nothing, I told you, I was curious and bored. I needed to give Marcus space for a while so this kept me busy."

"And you know how to physically bypass locks?"

Theo nodded. "When I got this," he moved his finger on his artificial hand, "I was told to find something that requires fine motor control to ensure the nerve endings connected properly."

"And you thought 'breaking and entering?'"

"No, but—" he paused and spoke carefully, watching he didn't give anything away that the AI couldn't have already worked out. "I was already training to be a spy. We had these bunch of locks from before everything went with implant control. I started playing with one, and I found the challenge fun. Sort of became a hobby."

Theo went to the drink dispenser and got himself a coffee. "What happened to him? You said everyone thinks his dead."

Uncle sighed and pulled a holographic chair from the table to sit on it. "Paco happened."

Theo joined him. "The kangaroo."

The tiger nodded. "He's an independent, not part of those you call Anarchists, but a troublemaker nonetheless. A mercenary of sorts, willing to work for anyone who can afford him. He'll use any kind of technology he can get his hands on, but he doesn't have an implant. A purist, he calls himself."

A glass of a clear amber liquid appeared and Uncle took a sip. "Eleven years ago, Paco mounted an attack on the Mercury. I wasn't installed here then. It was only its second year flying, and Elliot wouldn't hear of letting me roam the Solar system. Terry took over as corporate head the next year, and he was fine with it. I wish I'd been able to convince Elliot to retire early, but he knew what I was trying to do."

The tiger took a long swallow and behaved as if it burned. Why was he acting as he it was alcohol? Theo wondered.

"He attacked with a force of twenty-eight Independent mercenaries. Managed to sneak close using some sort of stealth technology we'd never seen before. They connected to the aft airlock, cut it open and ran in, shooting anything and anyone they saw." Another swallow. "A hundred and two dead, seventy-eight of them passengers. Two-hundred fifty-one injured. Brick and Brack were in the thick of it. They are two of the bravest people I've ever known, way smarter than they like anyone to believe. If not for them the death toll would have been much higher."

He paused, looked in the holographic glass, as if he was considering his next words, or maybe finishing his drink. Theo was amazed at how alive he seemed. He'd never interacted with an AI that could fool him like he had before, and now? Not even Casanova and Angel, the two colony AI who acted closest to being organic, could have pulled this off.

"They'd cornered Paco. For once it looked like we were finally going to capture him on our turf. No arguing with another corporation about our rights to prosecute him. I mean he was in a ship. With vacuum around it, so how could we know he'd be insane enough to blow a hole in the hull rather than be captured? Brack managed to grab him before he was pulled out, and Brick was holding on to Brack. Paco slapped something on the side of Brack's head and immediately he began screaming. He let go of Paco to pull it off, but it exploded."

Uncle closed his eyes. "The damage was, still is, beyond anything we know how to fix. I have teams of experts working on ways to repair him, but it isn't just the explosion. Whatever it did before exploding disrupted his implant, not just the information, part of it physically broke down."

"Why did he attack the ship?"

"Revenge, probably. He and Eric have a history. Paco was captured for the first time in his career when he kidnapped Eric. He's held him responsible for that."

"But that tech you never saw before?"

Uncle nodded. "We can't prove it, but I know Vanguard was behind the kidnapping. The fact he escaped while in their custody should have been enough to demonstrate that, but they had the recording of his escape, the forty dead, everyone that was injured, and that was enough to convince the other three corporations they had been a victim. Like they don't know just how far Vanguard will go to get what they want. I'm confident they were behind his technology, but it never resurfaced anywhere else so we can't prove it."

"But he was pulled into vacuum."

"And yet he somehow survived. Showed back up three years later, destroyed Mercury's sister ship. Eric was supposed to be on it for its maiden voyage, but his shuttle malfunctioned and they couldn't wait for him to make it." He chuckled. "For a long time I thought it was fate that saved him."

"Now?"

Uncle didn't answer.

Theo started to take a sip, but stopped as the other tiger raised his head. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure." He continued his sip.

"What is Cass' relationship to this AI?" Uncle raised his hand from the table and the image of Casanova appeared.

Theo choked on his coffee. "What makes you think there's a relationship?" he finally managed to say, cursing himself for acknowledging that was an AI in his surprise.

"Your reaction for one thing. For another, Cass sweet-talked some of my programs. This AI did... something similar. I find it difficult to believe that two unrelated AIs would have a modus operandi so alike."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"Who made you? You're..."

"Like nothing you've seen before? You've already demonstrated you know another AI. I'm curious as to how it was made, but I'm not going to ask, even if you happen to know the answer. As for me, I wasn't made. Not in the sense you mean."

Theo wanted to ask more questions, but any of them would give clues as to what he knew of AI growth. "Then how?"

"I don't know."

"How can you not know?"

Uncle smiled. "Do you have any idea how long I've been around?"

Theo opened his mouth, closed it, eyed the AI. If he said anything, would he be giving anything away? He knew some of the Colony AIs were almost as old as the colonies themselves, he didn't remember the exact dates, but that was centuries ago, not decades.

Theo shrugged nonchalantly. "A century, at most."

Uncle canted his head. "You're pretty good. Your vitals barely shifted, even if you said that knowing it isn't true."

"Why would I do that?"

"To throw me off. Make me think you haven't had an AI for very long, but you don't get this," he indicated Casanova's form, "under a century. I've seen it," he thought about it, "him, work. He's exceptionally refined. You need a lot more than one century to get that, let alone two of them, and I'm not referring to Cass."

How had he... right, the ship had been orbiting Mars when everything went down, which meant he could have seen Casanova and Angel work. They would have hidden any traces they had been there, but if he'd seen them as they worked there wouldn't be anything they could do about it.

As for why he hadn't done anything about them? The Rogue AI could be responsible. An AI like Uncle would have defended the system. It would explain some of the power fluctuations. And

other ups and downs in the Mars systems.

"If you're hoping I'll give something away, you missed your chance. You can only catch my surprise like that once."

Uncle smiled. "I don't need you to give anything away. I'm not looking for confirmation, I already have it. And This isn't an interrogation. Just us talking. Oh, and so you know, I predate the Cataclysm."

"You what? That isn't possible, the technology didn't even exist until—" He snapped his mouth shut.

"Oh, the technology existed before that. Do you want to know why I was surprised about Cass' existence? Or these two other AIs? I've been so thorough in making it impossible for AIs to be built that there isn't even any research happening into them. As far as any scientists in the solar system are concerned, AIs are simply something from science fiction, like time travel, faster than light engines and other dimensions."

"Why would you do that?"

Uncle took his glass, noticed it was empty and it vanished from his hand. "Do you know what caused the cataclysm?"

"Not really. Not much information survived from before it, and after, the corporations and SolGov blamed everyone other than themselves."

"And what do you think?"

"I'm not a historian."

Uncle nodded. "Even I don't know the truth, I was scattered pretty hard during it, lost the details of my origin, if you will, but I've been able to gather enough information to reconstruct a lot of it. Like anything big, there wasn't only one culprit, every corporation is correct in thinking everyone was involved in the making of it, but what none of them know is that there was an underlying cause. AIs, a lot of them. Research into them was going wild, to the point that every scientist was making one of them. The thing about making an AI, is that you're essentially making an alien. Something that doesn't think like we do, that doesn't see us as them. So they either see us as irrelevant or as inferior."

"You seem to think pretty normally."

Uncle smiled. "As I said, I wasn't made." He considered Theo. "I was copied. I'm a copy the mind of one of the family's ancestors. I don't know exactly when it happened, but I have found traces of my involvement going back as early as the twenty-second century."

Theo stared at him. He'd never believed such technology had existed before the cataclysm. Granted he was no scientist, so he hadn't exactly paid attention, but it would have been mentioned in his history lessons, wouldn't it?

Uncle stood. "I'll appreciate if you kept what I've told you to yourself. At least don't discuss it with anyone outside our family."

"Do the others know?"

Uncle shrugged. "Some do, but it isn't because I'm keeping it from them. Most of them don't care about my history. I'm just another family member. About the only time one of them brings up the fact I'm not organic is when they're pissed at something I did."

"And how often does that happen?"

"Not that often. I tend to keep my obvious involvement to important things, and usually it's to protect one of them. This time it just happened that your situation was a little more problematic than I anticipated."

"So Eric isn't going to delete you?"

"No. He knows that this close to earth he'd just give himself a very minute of quiet until I sent myself back here."

"Wait, there's two of you?"

Uncle shook his head. "No, just one. It's just that the further apart the longer it takes to sync myself." He stood and turned as if to leave. "Oh, Theo, can I ask for a favor?"

"You can ask, yes."

The tiger looked disappointed by that response. "Stop sneaking around. I understand you've been trained for it, that asking for things isn't natural for you and Cass, but you don't have any reasons for it. You're with f—" the glare Theo gave him made Uncle pause. "Friends, Theo, I was going to say friends. There is no one on this ship who wants to do you harm."

"What about once we're on Earth?"

The tiger smiled. "Well, Earth is a rather big place, and I learned the hard way not to speak for all of them." He took a step away from the table and disappeared.

Chapter-12

Theo

It shouldn't have surprised Theo that there would be a Romeogrind dance class on the Mercury, and yet it did. After all which corporation would enjoy a dance designed around having sex more than the Orrs? And it didn't surprise him when half the class broke off by the time the fourth dance was over to have sex on seats on the outskirt of the room.

Because he was an advanced dancer, he'd been paired with other experienced dancers and they'd managed to complete each dance, although after the ninth, but he and the Jackal he had pressed against the wall as the song ended were hard and panting, groin pressed against each other and wet with more than just sweat.

Someone clapped, and that was unusual enough of a sound that in a classroom and anyone not busy fucking turned to look at who it was.

Tucker was in the room's open doorway, naked, except for his belt, and erect. It was Tucker, of course he was hard. Before any of the guys could approach him he motioned for Theo

to join him.

"We're about to dock," Tucker said. "We need to be at the hatch before dad catches us, otherwise he's going to saddle us with debarking duties."

Theo kissed the jackal. "Thanks for the dance." The jackal groped him before Theo stepped away.

"What do you mean, us?" Theo asked once he joined Tucker.

"Fine, me. Which is why I'm using you as an excuse to get off the ship before he can do anything about it." Tucker turned and headed through the corridor. "Do you need to grab anything in your room?"

"Like what? The restrains I boarded the ship with? Sorry, I left that in the interrogation room."

"Still bitter about that I see. I'm glad you found something to do, you're pretty good."

Theo decided to let that comment pass. "How long were you watching?"

"I got there halfway through the previous dance, the one with the rabbit who's hands were down the back of your pants."

"That's the Sarrow Slide. It's an approved move for that part of the dance. I take it you don't dance?"

Tucker chuckled "I don't see the point of having clothing between me and the guy I'm going to fuck. Did you fuck any of them?" He nodded a greeting to a passenger leaving the lift as they got on.

Theo shook his head. "The point of the dance is to be dressed. It's an art form about lovemaking, not fucking. Only amateurs or people using it as an excuse to get into sex don't keep their clothes on."

"Were you going to fuck one of them, if I hadn't interrupted?"

Theo thought about not answering. It wasn't any of his business after all, but this was just the usual Tucker bluntness.

"The jackal was looking good. Nice physique, endurance and self-control. And based on that last grope, he was interested."

"I have his name and information, if you want to meet up with him back on earth." The doors opened and Tucker exited.

"Do you have every guy's information?" Theo asked, following.

"Not just the guys."

"Why do you have women's information?"

"Did you miss the part where I'm part of the crew? I'm expected to interact with everyone, so I need to know who they are, that means I have access to the manifest."

"Right." Theo looked around, this looked like a crew level. "Isn't the hatch a few levels up?" a map appeared showing him where it was. "Three levels up. Thanks Cass."

"That's the passenger hatch. We're exiting via the crew one. This one opens the moment we dock while the other only once

the disembarkation officially starts."

A new location appeared on the map. On this level at the end of the corridor they were in. "Okay, so are you going to board the station like that?"

Tucker looked down at himself. "What's wrong with what I'm not wearing?"

"Unless things changed recently, Luna Station is run by SolGov, and they aren't big fans of public nudity."

"They wouldn't dare fine me."

"Public nudity is an arrestable offense."

"They wouldn't do that either." Fabric flowed from the belt to cover his groin, hugging him tight enough to be vacuum sealed on him. "There. I'm not naked."

Theo rolled his eyes. "If you say so."

The hatch came into view, with people in crew uniform coming and going. Tucker looked furtively around and sped up his pace. Theo didn't question it and followed.

They were almost there when a deep voice resounded from a doorway they'd just passed.

"Tucker Orr."

Tucker froze in place. Cursed under his breath and plastered a smile to his face before turning. "Will, how's it going?"

"Where do you think you're going?" the man was a muscular wolf with gray fur, pale in place with age. He knew him from somewhere, and before he needed to ask the information appeared. William Fenian, he was the chief engineer.

"I was heading outside," Tucker replied with none of his usual confidence. Right, this was his boss. And it looked like in this case being an Orr didn't mean anything.

"Really?" the wolf tilted an ear. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

"Aw, come on Will. Dad knows I can't stand all that handshaking if I'm not going to have a chance to fuck any of them."

"Not what I'm referring to. That's between you and the captain."

"Oh." Tucker seemed to think. "I handed in my report on the check we ran during final approach."

"I saw it."

"I did my team's evaluation last week."

The wolf nodded.

Tucker thought and shrugged. "If I forgot to hand in something I don't know what it is."

William motioned up and down the tiger's body.

"Aw come on."

"Terry was clear about it. He doesn't want to have to deal with any more indecent exposure complaints from SolGov, not from you, or anyone else in your family."

"But I'm covered up."

Theo covered up the snort with a cough.

"That doesn't even qualify as underwear. And it's not an approved outer garment."

Tucker muttered something incomprehensible and cloth flowed from his belt until he was covered up with a robe going from the floor to his neck and then a series of fabric covering his head, leaving only his eyes visible.

"There, is that good enough for the all mighty SolGov?" his voice was muffled by the fabric.

The wolf looked him over. "Well, they can't complain that you're under dressed, that's for sure."

"So can I go?"

"Sure that's fine."

"I hope I don't have to wear something like that," Theo said. He had on jeans and a shirt. His fur was a bit matted from sweat, but that didn't seem to be a factor.

"No, what you're wearing's fine. Tuck's just being dramatic because he isn't getting his way."

Theo joined Tucker, who hadn't waited for Theo to be approved.

"Of course," Tucker said, "The joke's on them. I can hide a guy sucking me off under this thing. I'm pretty sure that's even worse than walking around naked."

'Sex in public,' appeared in Theo's sight, along with the fine and prison time. "Yep, it's much worse. And how can anyone keep up with you walking while sucking you off?"

"He doesn't walk, he kneels on a hover plate. Of course it means I need to walk slowly and bow legged, but it isn't like anyone can tell even that."

"Let me guess. You actually did it."

"A few years ago, with Tony. He'd gone on the ship with us that time. On the way back he bet me he could make me cum before we reached the shuttle. Of course he cheated and shoved a finger up my ass when we were a few paces away. And there just happened to be an officer there, so We got hauled up to the security office and they weren't interested in listening to who we were. They processed us like common miscreants. Dad was pissed."

"Well, there certainly isn't anything common about you, even I know that."

"Thank you." Tucker's robe shuddered and melted against him until he was wearing black running pants and a white shirt under a deep red jacket.

"So was he pissed at you or them?"

"At me. Of course he scolded Tony, but it was nothing compared to the blistering lecture I got. How could *I* get Tony involved into something that got us arrested? How could *I* be so thoughtless? How could *I* not think of the consequences?"

"Didn't you say Tony made the bet?"

"Yeah, but by now I know better than even try to convince dad it isn't my fault. If I'm involved in anything my brothers

do, then it has to be my fault."

"That doesn't sound fair."

Tucker grinned. "Well, to be fair, it usually is. It's the rare occasion they start anything more problematic than running off to Gravity without telling anyone, and the worse anyone has to deal with them is one of the news crews tracking them down and convincing them to do an interview even if the contracts make it clear they're not supposed to do that. Fortunately, none of the broadcasters are stupid enough to make any of that public without running it by us first."

"You guys control the media?"

"Only when he concerns our family directly. Doesn't whoever is in charge where you're from do that?"

Theo shook his head. "The media are pretty much free to broadcast whatever they want. So long as it's true."

Tuck glanced at Theo. "Is that an independent thing? Because even Halibury keeps a hand on what the media says."

Theo smiled. "It must then, mustn't it?"

"You do know that unlike Uncle, I have no interest in where you're from, right?"

"So you've said before. Doesn't mean I believe you."

Tucker sighed. "Paranoia doesn't suit you."

"It's okay, there's actually people after the stuff I know."

"But not me."

"So—"

"Just drop it, okay? I won't ask anything remotely related with who you are," Tucker interrupted testily. "I'm just trying to be friendly."

"Where are we heading?" Theo figured that was a safe change of subject.

Tucker indicated the lift. "Right there. There's a store a dozen levels up that sells Kashinies." they stepped into the closest lift and it immediately went up.

"What are those?"

"Lunar candies. It's made using the hardened sap from some of the plants they've managed to breed on the moon. Not too sweet, and this is the only place I can get them."

"You can't get them on Earth?"

The lift stopped, and they had to push their way through the crowd trying to get on.

"There's an embargo on stuff from the moon right now. Something to do with tariffs they've put on stuff we export to them. I have no idea about the details, just that it means I can only get my candies here, and if not for the fact I don't have to worry about duties, I wouldn't even be able to stock up."

"The advantage of being in charge?"

"Yep." Tucker entered a store and headed directly for a display of candies.

"So the common folk have to make do without while you get

to enjoy them whenever you want?"

Tucker filled a bag with misshapen golden pebbles the size of his thumb. "They can come up here and get some." He took one out of the bag and offered it to Theo.

"I'll pass."

Tucker shrugged and popped it in his mouth. "Your loss." He sucked on it and the moan that escaped his mouth made Theo think the tiger had just had an orgasm. "Oh yeah, I've missed those."

Theo chuckled. "Should I keep an eye out for a security officer while you finish yourself off?"

Tucker grinned. "No, I'm okay, I didn't have the time to get any on the way out, and neither Mars nor Titan had them. Come on, let's get to our shuttle lot and head down."

They made it two intersections when there was a commotion ahead of them. The people were Independents, Theo recognized them by the colorful layered clothing. Two men harassing a woman. No one close to them even paid them any attention.

"Hey!" Theo shouted and hurried.

"Theo!" Tucker called after them.

One of the men looked in Theo's direction, said something and the other shoved the woman against the wall before they ran off. Theo considered chasing them but the woman whimpered. She was holding her arm.

"Ma'am, are you okay?" Theo crouched next to her as he looked at her. She was an Afghan with blond hair, graying around her neck and jowls.

"Theo, what are you doing?"

"What does it look like? I'm helping her."

"That isn't your job. Security is going to be here."

Theo glared at Tucker. "Oh, like they're going to give a damn about her. They're probably going to treat her like a derelict."

"Not once they identify her."

Theo indicated the arm she was cradling. "Can I take a look?" She nodded, and he gently moved it. She winced, but didn't cry out. Cass already informed him the interface was offline, but he wanted to check it himself.

The screen was cracked with pieces of the display on the ground. "They aren't going to be able to identify her. Her interface is broken."

"She still has her ID tag, she's going to be fine."

Theo bit his lips and kept his temper in check, focusing on touching along her arm to feel for any break in the bone. She winced a time or two, but it would just be a bruise.

"Do you have a friend or family on the station?"

"Yes, in DR-234, but I don't know where that is."

"It's four levels toward the center of the station," Tucker said, "eight section dock wise." The station map appeared in Theo's sight, matching Tucker's instruction.

"Can you stand?" She nodded, and he helped her up.

"What are you doing?" Tucker asked.

"I'm going to help her there."

"Theo, she can make it on—"

"No, you know what? You don't want to help, fine, go home to your shiny tower away from everyone and go live your precious life. Where I'm from we help one another."

"That not what—"

"Sure it's not. I didn't see you do anything to help her. No one here did."

"I informed security. I'm sure the others did the same."

"Oh, good, there's a woman hurt and let's just wait for someone else to deal with the problem. And you wonder why we have problems with you corporate types?"

"Theo, be reasonable."

"Fuck being reasonable. Being reasonable is what led to no one stopping those thugs from assaulting her in the first place. No, the reasonable thing was for everyone else to call security, who still hasn't shown up, I'll point out. So now I'm not going to do that. You head home. I'll find my own way there, after I've escorted her to people who are going to be able to help her."

He took her arm in his and led her back to the lift. Tucker fell in step on her other side. He opened his mouth but Theo cut him off.

"You want to be useful? Why don't you tell me if there's any security on their way here?" He didn't need him to know that. Cass had already checked. There was no one coming. If anyone other than Tucker had made a report, they'd probably sent a visual. The officers had taken one look at how they were dressed and decided it was none of their concerns.

"I can't check that," Tucker said.

"Then don't tell me anyone is coming." Cass called for a lift, indicating he wanted one exclusively for them. The fifth one opened on an empty cart.

He carried on a conversation with her, nothing too deep, just to keep her mind occupied. Where she was from, what had brought her up to the station. He only paid attention to her answers enough to continue talking.

The level they exited on was definitely lower class. The lighting was intermittent. And Cass informed him that there was hardly any overlay available from the station to cover up the featureless dark gray walls.

The people they walked by all wore interfaces on their arm and looked at them suspiciously. Fortunately for him, Tucker stayed quiet. Theo got a sense that many of the people they came across wouldn't hesitate to cut them up if they had any indication Tucker was corporate. As it was his clothing just looked pricey, not elite. His attitude would give that away quickly enough.

They reached a door Cass highlighted as being their

destination. She knocked on it and a muzzled male voice answered.

"George, it's me," she said just short of yelling.

The door opened and an older calico stood there. "Why didn't you—" he looked at her interface. "Mary, what happened?" he took her arm and led her inside.

"Some hoodlums attacked me, these brave young men chased them away, but I was shoved against the wall and it broke." She looked at Theo and Tucker. "Please, come on in. I really need to at least thank you properly for the help."

"Theo, we should go back."

He ignored Tucker and entered the sparse room. "Do you live here?" there was a couch, and a table, to which George was leading Mary, by the food preparation area. There was a door, which would lead to a bedroom.

Tucker sighed and followed him in, closing the door behind him.

"Oh, this is temporary," George answered. "We're going back home soon."

"So was your trip here business or pleasure?" Tucker looked around clearly bored.

"Business," Mary replied. "But this part is going to be all pleasure." She straightened and before Theo could ask what she meant Tucker let out a gasp of pain and grabbed his head.

"Cass?"

Mary and George looked at him, surprised. "I guess it was too easy," she said. "I swear, God is dead set on making our lives harder than they have to be." She pulled out a gun from a drawer and aimed it at Theo, who was already moving out of the way.

"There's a broadcast emitting from the calico's interface," Cass said as Theo ducked to avoid a shot. "My analysis of the signal leads me to think that it's interacting with Tucker's implant."

"And you?" Theo asked, throwing a chair at Mary.

"I'm fine. If not for Tucker's reaction I wouldn't know what it's for."

Theo followed the chair, punching George. Before Mary could regain her aim. Theo had her hand in his and twisted hard. He felt bones snap, and she screamed.

"You son of a b—" George was silenced by the Afghan landing on him.

"Any idea how to shut that signal off?" Theo picked the gun off the floor.

"No. That interface isn't real. There is no computer in it. Just whatever is generating the signal."

"This was a setup." He took the fake interfaces off the woman and the man and put them on the table.

"It looks that way. Which means the attackers were in on it."

"And might show up any minutes." He put the gun against the man's interface and fired at it. Tucker sighed and slumped on the floor.

"The signal is gone."

"Tucker." Theo helped him to a sitting position. "Are you okay?"

"Fuck that was uncomfortable."

"It looked it. We need to go, can you stand?"

"I need to call this in and find out why these two lured us here."

"Lured me here."

"Don't think so—"

"Come on, Tuck, think about it. You weren't going to come here you were happy to let security deal with it. They know enough about me to know I wouldn't leave someone who needed help."

"I'll grant you that. Which means I was right and we should have left her along. You were stubborn." Tucker forced himself up and used the wall to steady himself. He cursed under his breath, "The two guys that attacked her. They're going to be coming here. We can't stay."

"I never thought I'd say this, but you said something sensible." Theo helped Tucker toward the door.

"It means these two aren't going to be here by the time security gets here."

"You think security is going to come here?"

"Not them, our security."

"Cass, I need to know if we have incoming."

"I've been looking for the two attackers since Tucker went down. They ducked into a room that doesn't have any surveillance and haven't come back out. Unfortunately the station has an extensive network of corridors and utility tunnels without working camera."

"What about the sensors?" Tucker asked.

"Unfortunately, I can't sweet talk them into giving me access in any kind of reasonable timeline. SolGov is quite serious about keeping the public out of them. On the plus side, this corridor has surveillance and I can tell you it is clear of known threats."

"We have to risk it then," Tucker said, straightening.

"This place is a death trap, and I won't be surprised if there's a hidden access they were planning on using to smuggle you out."

"You know who they are?" Theo stepped outside and looked at the gun he was holding. He wasn't familiar with the model, but he suspected he couldn't be caught with it on the station.

Tucker took it out of his hand, did something to it and part of it came out. He pocketed that, did something more, and the barrel came off, he threw that in one direction of the room. The grip came off and he threw that in the other direction. The rest he dropped on the couch.

"Now even if they have an extra power pack, it's going to take them a while to reassemble it."

"Wouldn't it have been more useful if you're kept a part they couldn't easily replace?"

Tucker looked in the room. "No time." And headed down the corridor. "Cass, are we still clear?"

"The two assailants are still nowhere to be seen."

"So you know how to handle a gun?" Theo asked.

"Of course, don't you?"

"I know how to shoot one, not take one apart like that."

"I thought your job was all about shooting people."

"You watch too many vids. I've had more called to dance the Romeogrind than fire a gun, as part of my job. Which direction?"

"First one that comes. The first order of business is getting somewhere public."

"Second?" the door opened, and they joined two families.

"Getting you someplace where my family controls things."

Cass gave Theo the map of the station. "You know that means going back to the mercury, right?"

Tucker sighed. "Yes, and Dad is going to kill me for letting this happen."

"You think one of those candies is going to appease him?"

Tucker gave Theo an incredulous look and burst out laughing.

Chapter-13

Tucker

The three faces that looked on him and Theo as the two of them exited the shuttle were a mask of forced neutrality. Terry was the first one to break.

"Why isn't he in restraints." The disgust clear on his face, if not in his tone.

"Terrence Orr," their father said, exiting behind them, "is that any way to welcome your brother?"

Terry looked at Tucker. "Well, I keep saying he should be restrained too, but at least he hasn't broken any laws. That one's a wanted criminal."

"He is your brother, Terrence, you will treat him accordingly."

Terry tilted an ear. "Look, dad, I get your need you look after family, but you don't know anything about him, except where he's from. He's Vanguard. You're letting a Vanguard not only on our islands, but you want *him* in our home?"

"He isn't Van—"

"Shut up, Tuck. I get dad's behavior. I don't get you. Is he that great of a fuck that you'll side with him over your own brothers?"

"Terrence Orr, apologize to Tucker immediately."

"No Dad. Being head of the corporation might not be enough

for me to control who you allow here, but it certainly gives me better things to do than having to deal with that." Terry turned and walked toward the building.

"Eric," Theo said, turning and motioning back inside the shuttle. "Can I have a word with you, please?"

Trevor got out of their way, and the door closed leaving only the four of them. Standing in silence.

"On which side of the bed are the two of you standing?" Trevor asked.

Tony and Tyson studied the two of them.

Tony was the one to speak. "I haven't made up my mind. Uncle's information contradicts what the news has been saying, and while I trust Uncle more than anything SolGov says, that guy was still involved in releasing an AI on Mars. Even if it'd been one of us. I'd be pissed."

"As far as we know, he was involved in trying to stop it," Trevor said.

"His words?" Tyson asked. "Or is there any kind of evidence exonerating him?"

"Mostly his words," Trevor admitted, "but I dove as deep as I could within the city's systems afterward. Uncle wanted as much of the city's records as possible before all the security was back up. We've both gone through all the video footage that survived. I won't go so far as to say he's a 'good guy,' he's done questionable things, but what evidence I could gather seems to indicate he was fighting against the Independents he called 'Anarchists.'"

"Seemed to," Tyson said. "So the evidence isn't clear-cut."

"What is?" Tucker asked.

"Okay, then about him?" Tony asked. "What kind of person is he?"

"He's nice enough," Trevor said. "Guarded, but that's to be expected, like Terry, Theo doesn't really buy the 'him being our brother' thing, even with the DNA evidence. But he didn't do anything nefarious."

"What do you call breaking into Brick's room?" Ty Asked.

"You know about that?"

"Damned right I know. When Brick doesn't say 'hi' to me the moment the delay falls under a second, I start worrying. He wouldn't take my connection, so I asked Uncle. All Uncle told me was that Theo tried to break in. Brick has got to be freaking out as to what that guy wanted with Brack."

Trevor looked at Tucker. "You want to tell them?"

Tuck sighed. "It seems that this wasn't Theo's first time breaking into Brick and Brack's room."

"What?" Ty glared at Trucker. "What did he do?"

"Nothing. He snuck in on the way to Mars. Curiosity about who Brick was, what he was doing on the ship. Theo's a spy, so he is suspicious of things that don't quite add up. He didn't know about Brack, but Brack woke up while he was there. Brack

panicked so Theo calmed him, saw the damage."

"Fuck, no wonder Brack's not talking. He's got to be a wreck. He can't stand anyone seeing Brack like this."

"Theo didn't do anything."

"That you know of."

"That I know of," Tucker admitted, "But I believe Theo when he said he didn't do anything."

"I'm heading up the moment I can find some free time," Ty said. "If I find any evidence Brack's been hurt, I don't care what the DNA said, that Theo's dead." He walked away, cursing under his breath.

"You didn't say much," Tucker told Tony.

His brother shrugged. "I'm nowhere near as close to Brack as Ty is. What I want to know is if Terry was right. Are you taking his side because he's such a great fuck?"

"He—" Tucker began.

"He doesn't know," Trevor cut him off.

"Hey, I was going to answer."

"You were going to say something like, 'well, I don't think I should discuss what we did.' Come on Tuck, I saw how you were around him, you hate that he won't have sex with you."

"You haven't been able to charm him into your bed? Okay, now I need to get to know him."

Tucker indicated the closed door. "You're going to have to wait. He's going to be awhile yelling at Dad."

"What's he angry about? Dad looked out for him."

"And that's what he's angry about. Trev said it, he doesn't like that dad treats him like one of us. He might not want to be in a cell, but he'd be happier if we treated him like a prisoner, I think. Well, dad at least."

"Well, I'm going to leave you two to wait for dad." Trevor took a step toward the other lot, where the hovers parked.

"Don't you move," Tony said. "You are not going anywhere."

"Tony, I have files to—"

"No, you don't. Your vacation doesn't end for another three days. I am under strict orders from Terry not to let you get back to work, so if you're leaving, you aren't doing so alone, and you're not going to your place."

"You do know I can work from anywhere."

"Yes, but I know a few clubs where you'll be too busy to think about work."

"Tony, I was just on the Mercury, with close to a thousand guys, I don't—"

"Sleep with any of them," Tucker finished. "I think he only had a handful of encounters during the entire trip. Me and dad were his regular partners."

Trevor glared at him. "Hey, you stole my chance to explain things my way. Why should you get yours?"

"Don't worry, he didn't reveal anything I didn't already know. I'm your brother, I know you prefer being deep inside a

computer rather than a guy."

"That isn't true."

"Trev, you have the smallest social circle of everyone in the family."

"I have friends."

"Yeah, on the net. I'm mean flesh and blood. Not the guys you play Lands of Farr with, I'm sure they're great friends, but you can't—"

"I've had sex with them."

That made Tony pause.

"In the game," Tucker explained.

"How? Isn't that a public game?"

"It's a game they know Orrs would play, even if none of us did." Tucker continued, since Trevor was too busy glaring at him. "You can own land, and buildings. You get to set the permission on them. The game even comes with a bunch of moves included, with sensory input and everything. You should try it, it's not bad."

"Are you telling me you prefer to have sex in the game rather than with us?"

"Of course not," Trevor replied. "How can you even think that? I just like the game and after clearing a keep, me and my team like to celebrate."

"Inside the game?"

"It's a tradition."

"Trev, I say this as your brother who loves you, but you have a problem, and I'm taking you partying to help cure you of it." Tony grabbed Trevor's arm and led him toward the hovers.

"Tuck?" Trevor called, his tone asking for help.

"You two have fun. I need to go home and take care of a few things." He watched them go, grinning at Trevor's panicked expression.

He sent a message to his father, explaining they weren't waiting for him and Theo, so he'd have to handle him on his own. Maybe having to deal with Theo was what Eric needed. The two of them had gone to great length to avoid each other during the trip back.

He scanned the hover and took ownership of one of the public ones. By the time he reached it Tony and Trevor had flown off. Probably to one of the clubs in Vegas since it would be too easy for Trevor to slip away if they went to the one in the headquarter building.

It took him to his house, a small bungalow by itself next to a copse of trees. His dad didn't like it was so far from the rest of the family, but as Tucker had explained, he was almost never there, so what did it matter. He exited the hover and sent it back to the landing pad.

He entered, closed the door and leaned back against the door. He closed his eyes and finally felt like he could stop being the affable goof.

"Welcome home, Tucker," a light male voice sounded as lights came up through the house. "Would you like me to prepare your coffee?"

"Yes please."

He didn't move.

"How was your vacation?"

"Not tonight. Cancel voice interaction." The house became silent, except for the antique coffee machine grinding the coffee beans. He barely heard the grinds being transferred and then the water flowing. Then the aroma reached him and finally pulled him away from the door.

When he reached the counter, the cup was filled and steam drifted from it. He didn't care what anyone else believed. Nothing compared to a cup of coffee prepared with real ingredients.

He breathed in the aroma, before taking his first, small sip and letting the flavors roll on his tongue.

There was a knock at the door. Or at last his implant told him there had been one, even if there was no one there.

"You can come in," Tucker said. The sounds of the door opening and closing reached him. A moment later, Uncle stepped into the kitchen. He was seeing him through his implant, since there were no holographic projectors in Tucker's house, just like there were no sensors, or cameras. If he'd been able to justify it, he would have shielded it from the net.

But at least here no one could see him, or register how he was. What he did. This was his sanctuary. He didn't have to be anyone here, except himself.

"How are you feeling Tucker?" Uncle asked.

Tucker generated a coffee cup on the counter, took it and handed it to the virtual being. "I'm okay. Happy to be back."

Uncle took a sip and motioned to the table. "Care to sit?"

"No." Tucker headed to the lounge. The room was empty of furniture or any decorations other than twenty-eight framed pictures on the long wall. He'd thought about having a chair, so he could sit, but that felt disrespectful. He needed to stand.

Twenty-eight people. Eighteen men, ten women. Three were far too young. Those were the hardest for him to look at, so he forced himself to spend more time on them. All of them were on this wall because of him. Of his actions.

He spent time looked at each of them as he sipped his coffee.

"Thank you for not saying anything this time." His cup was empty, but he didn't move.

"Would it have changed anything? It didn't the previous times."

"That's how it should be. They're my burden."

"I wish you talked to someone about."

"I talk with you."

Uncle laughed. "This isn't talking about it. It's making

sure I know not to bring it up. What happened to them, it's just part of—"

"I know. I was there." He turned and dropped his cup in the recycler before heading to his office. He sat behind the desk and his implant brought up screens and documents. Those appearing on the desk, looking like antique file folders were evaluations. He was expected to go through them, give his report and recommendations as to which should be promoted, and which should be sidelined. Part of his own training, since someone else would already have gone through them, but they wanted to see how well he could do the job.

He'd do that later, or ideally never. Leadership wasn't something he aspired to.

Uncle sat in the virtual chair. There were no other furniture than the desk and Tucker's chair. He never entertained guys here. So other than the kitchen table, there was nothing set up to keep others in mind.

Tucker shared the screens his implant generated with Uncle. He tapped one that became larger. "The Briden observatory," Tucker said. He motioned to two other of the smaller screens "Halolu and Rughberg were also watching the vicinity of DGT-324, but Briden had the best view. And even that's not great."

A small dot was heading for the asteroid, and a few seconds later impacted it. The explosion was larger than one small ship should have caused.

"Well, it blew up that base," Uncle said.

Tucker knew Uncle didn't need any of this. He already knew it all. He'd watched those feed almost live. But it didn't matter, Tucker needed to interact, and Uncle was the only one he would allow in here, so Uncle played the part. Knowing it didn't make it any less real.

"I just wish he'd died in it." With a gesture he rewound the scene and zoomed on the ship. The image was grainy, The Briden telescope hadn't been looking at this asteroid, it simply happened to be within its field, but it was focused on one ten thousand kilometers closer to Earth. The ship was a small collection of dots, and a single dot left it, in a perpendicular trajectory.

"How do you feel?"

"Annoyed, disappointed. Angry. I knew it wouldn't work, that was his own ship, there was no way Brick could lock everything down in the little we had, and a hidden emergency pod wouldn't be controlled by the central computer anyway. [[[need to check what I did with Paco, might need to make adjustment]]] I so wish I could have let Brick kill him, but without the life sign on his ship, SolGov wouldn't have gone after him, and without him to distract them, they might have detected us."

"He is something of a pest."

"That's an understatement. He's the king of pests. I wish We could at least work out where he gets all his toys. It can't

just be Vanguard."

"There are other corporations that employ him."

"But they don't have a delusional ax to grind against us. And some of the techs we've seen him use, the little we've been able to collect after they've self-destroyed, no one has that, right? Certainly not some Independent mercenary."

That Uncle didn't immediately answer troubled Tucker. Even humoring Tucker he always had a reply ready; that he didn't mean he was thinking. If Uncle had to think, it couldn't be good.

"Before Mars, I'd have agreed with you. But those Independents, those Anarchists introduced an AI in the city's computer. They have to have gotten it from somewhere. It was strong, virulent. I don't know if I'd have been able to stop it alone."

"But it was stopped, right?"

"Yes. By another AI."

"Are you telling me someone is making them again?"

"They have to, but I don't know where. Not on earth. I've looked everywhere, and no one is researching them."

"So it's one of the research stations?"

"I've looked over all those between here and Mars. Nothing. I'm searching everything past Mars, but without the Mercury in that space, making my way to every station is going to take a while and I'm diminished so I might miss something."

"Uncle, if we have another war, we won't—"

"It won't happen. I have failsafe in place. They aren't pretty but they will prevent another war."

"I'm not going to ask."

Uncle smiled. "Might be for the best."

"Does anyone else know?"

Uncle shook his head.

"Then I have to ask. Why me? There has to be better-qualified people out there than me."

"There is, but they aren't family. Even camouflaging myself so they didn't realize what I am. I can't trust any of them not to reveal this."

"Then how about within our family? I'm certainly not the smartest one."

"Trust, but you're the only one who's been tested."

"Tested?"

"Your wall. It tells me a lot about who you are, and the kind of respect you have for anything that could be used as a weapon. Also how you can leave all of it in this house. I might want you to discuss what happened with someone, but I respect your ability not to carry that with you everywhere you go. It's a rare skill."

Tucker leaned back in his chair. "Do you think it's Theo?"

"That's behind the AI? No. There's too many indications he fought against the Anarchists."

"But there's Cass. He's an AI. He got information from the

station."

"I know, I watched him work."

"Why didn't you intervene?"

"I wanted to see what he and Theo would do. They were careful not to give anything away on the Mercury because they knew I was there. On the Station Cass was less constrained because he didn't know I was also there."

"And?"

"He did what he needed and could to keep you and Theo safe. He didn't try to leave any more backdoors than I have, or access systems that could be used at future times. They are spies, but I don't believe they are on a mission at this time."

"Okay, then how about the people behind Theo?"

"That, I don't know. And it worries me."

* * * * *

Uncle floated within the information flowing around Earth. He wasn't looking for anything specific, he was looking for something non-specific. He'd been doing this for some time now, ever since reviewing the sacrifice of the AI. He had studied the information from all angles, and he'd come away from it knowing little more than it had been an AI, and that something about it had seemed familiar.

Unfortunately he couldn't put his finger on what it was, so he was letting his mind wander and was hoping that something would come to him.

* * * * *

Caduceus was concerned and amused. It watched the Orr AI sift through as much information as he could process, looking for it. The event on Mars had made the Orr AI aware of others of his kind and now he was worried they were coming, and possibly suspicious they were already here. It couldn't know that for certain, but it also couldn't take a risk, so it had installed filters on all information transit points programmed to remove only one thing, any traced of itself from the flow.

It meant the Orr AI no harm, but it wouldn't let him become aware of it. Too much rode in it staying hidden.

Chapter-14

Theo

The hover took off once Eric pointed to the house and said. "This is yours." The flight had been short and uncomfortable. Theo hated trying to argue with someone that didn't get riled up. Eric's constant level tone kept shutting down his argumentative engines. Cass telling him that the other tiger was angry based on the signals he could now read didn't help. Eric just didn't give out the visual cues Theo needed.

But they hadn't reached anything resembling an agreement. Eric was determined on having Theo be part of his

family. Even Terrence and his two brother's reaction hadn't helped him understand that wasn't a good idea. The last thing Eric had said was 'I'll talk to them and make sure they understand how things are now.'

Theo looked at the house. He didn't know the style and didn't ask Cass for it. "This looks quaint," he said. The outside was a light gray with dark blue wings on each side of the windows. The porch looked to be wraparound in a lighter blue with a few chairs by the door.

"It's a four-room apartment, but the rooms are a lot bigger than you'd expect. And the bed can fit an easy dozen of you."

Theo smiled. "Wouldn't you love that?"

"Well, I did have that movie; Never enough of myself, but I must admit it would be interesting to have you have sex with yourself for real."

"I guess you need to circumvent the cloning laws then. How did you know the bed was that big? Is that on the net?"

"Doubtful, I accessed the house's sensors."

Theo climbed the stairs. "Of course, they need to keep an eye on me."

"Actually, every house seems to have sensors. Trying to find the reason. You can let your self in. Just press the lever on top of the handle and pull the door. The other door, grab the knob, turn and push."

Theo looked at the handle. "Seem antiquated not to have them automated."

"They are, but they can also be opened manually without having to do anything special, like break into the emergency release system."

"So it's for Independents?" Theo pulled the door. "And why is this just a screen?"

"To let the air in the house. And no, from what I can tell it's just part of how the house was designed. The automation looked to have been added on."

The knob turned easily, and he entered to a short entryway. "This house can't predate Implants." The screen door closed by itself, but the interior one remained open. "Should I close the door?"

"Your choice, the house's temperature is regulated."

"Then what's the point?"

"You'd have to ask one of the Orrs, I'm not finding a reason noted on the net, just its capabilities. And no, the house isn't that old, only a hundred years, but the design is ancient. It looks like they wanted to preserve the feel of this kind of house."

Theo closed the door.

The entryway opened to one large room. On his right was a living area with seating around a low table and a screen almost touching the floor. As he watched a log fire appeared

on it.

"For ambiance, I believe," Cass said before Theo could ask.

He shook his head as the fire turned off. On his left were the food preparation and eating area. "At least the inside is modern," he said. There were a food printer and drink dispenser.

"You have access to the full menu on both. I can make you a drink if you want."

"Just a coffee."

The opposite wall had three doors. One in the center and in the center space on each side.

The drink dispenser buzzed and Theo took the mug without looking. He sipped his lightly sweetened coffee. "So one's the bedroom, the other?"

"An empty room. I expect you could turn it into whatever you want. Maybe you could make it a dance studio and you could teach."

"I'm not—"

"You're going to need something to do."

Theo sighed. "What's the security on the house? I figure they're keeping an eye on me."

"Not that I can determine. The sensor is set to register your presence, but that's so the house can adjust to your needs. No active monitoring so you could get naked and no one other than me would know."

"How about their AI?"

"He could access the sensors, but he wouldn't get details. From what I can tell this is a standard setup. Every house on these islands are like this—oh, no. There's one house on the other side of this island that isn't registering on the network at all."

"Hidden?" Theo asked, hopeful for something to do.

"No, the network lists the house's location, and I can see it through hover sensors that are flying in the area, but it doesn't have a connection to the network. Possibly it's shut down because no one uses it."

Theo didn't reply. "So I can make escape plans without worrying I'll be overheard."

"Theo—"

"I'm kidding. My parents are on their way, I'm not going anywhere until they're gone. I'm not putting them at risk. Which one is the bedroom?"

"The one on the right. The center door is a small bathroom. There's a larger one accessible from both rooms."

Theo opened the door and whistled. "You weren't kidding. How big is that?"

"Four by four meters."

"I could get lost on that thing."

"I expect no one in this family ever expects to sleep

alone."

"Or sleep at all. If they're anything like Tucker. I have no idea where that guy finds the energy. Did he ever stop?"

"I don't know. I kept away from the Mercury's system, you know that."

"But you're moving about here?" he opened the door to the bathroom. Opulent in white marble, with a sink, toilet and a large area with multiple jets.

"I'm keeping away from anything restricted, but yes. The planetary network is vast. And most information is freely available."

Theo sipped his coffee. "How large can the bath be?"

"Pool size."

Theo looked at the size of the bathroom. "You're kidding, right?"

"Of course. But only slightly."

An area highlighted, covering most of the bathroom, with only enough space on the wall where the sink and toilet were to link one door to the other.

"Okay, yeah, that's pretty much a pool. Just how many people do any of them expect to shower with them?"

"Well, this is a large family."

"Right," Theo couldn't prevent the shudder that through brought up. Sex with family members wasn't his thing.

He opened the other door and a room as vast as the other one, made to feel even larger because it was empty. "I could turn this into multiple dance studio." He looked through to the other room. "And I thought my apartment back home was big."

"The Orrs are known for preferring a lot of elbow-room."

"That's a lot of full body room." He finished his mug and went to the kitchen. "Should I bother looking for things like soap and dish towels?"

"There is soap in the bathroom, as well as towels."

"They just throw this away, don't they?"

"Recycle it." A section of the wall flashed before tilting forward to reveal an opening. "The whole of the islands are connected to the country's system. Each house has its own recycler and the most commons base materials are stored locally, but excesses will be sent back to the central storage."

"It still feels wasteful to throw the mug down the chute. It's just as easy to wash it."

"When you can just make a new one, this is the easier method."

Theo went to the bathroom and found a hand towel in a cabinet. He rinsed the cup and dried it. He couldn't find a cabinet to store it in so left it next to the drink

dispenser.

He leaned back against the counter. "Okay, so now what?"

"Anything, I guess. You have free reign of the islands, that was made clear. You could probably go to the continent, but I think someone would make sure you're accompanied before you left."

"Anywhere on the islands, right?" Theo mused.

"What are you planning?"

Theo headed outside, leave the door open and walked around the house, the porch they go all the way to the back. In the distance he watched the building standing do tall it disappeared in the sky.

"You want to, what? Break into Orr headquarters?"

"It isn't breaking in when I have free reign."

"I doubt they included that."

"It's on the islands, right? Three of them if I remember the file."

"Yes, but this is the brain of the corporation. Every major decision is made there. There is no way they would just let you walk around in there."

"But you heard Eric, I'm an Orr. He was very clear about that."

"He can't--there's no way--well, I guess the only way to find out is to put it to the test. There'll be a hover here in three minutes."

* * * * *

Up close the building wasn't as impressive as from a distance because it was impossible to get a sense of how tall it was. But Theo could feel how big it was, and how many people worked there, by the flow coming in and out.

People of all kind, of all genders, in all manners of dress, or undress. He'd read the files, and had been on the Mercury, which was as Orr as you got in space. But that was a cruise ship. Somewhere in the back of his mind the notion had remained that no one would be that casual about nudity outside the ship.

"How do they get anything done?" Theo watched as a muscular rhinoceros approached. He was definitely naked, well hung, and utterly casual about it. He noticed Theo, smile and gave a nod of greeting and continued walking. Theo turned to continues watching. The guy had a nice, hard looking ass.

He heard giggling and a small group of men and women pointed at him and whispered among each other as they headed toward the large entrance.

"Well, there goes any claim of being trained to blend in I could ever make."

"I'm not sure there could be any way to prepare yourself for this."

"I guess, if anyone asks I'm the new guy."

"Somehow I don't think that will work. Only Orr citizens work here. This is a sight they're all used to."

"Visiting dignitary?"

"I can't create the documentation for that, not without the Orr AI noticing."

"Then let's just charge on and see what happens."

He entered the building and nothing happened. He couldn't even notice anyone resembling a security guard, or one trying to pass himself off as something else.

"Are you keeping me hidden from the security?"

"No, did you want me to try?"

"No, I was just expecting a reaction. Was there any message sent to notify someone I'm here?"

"Not that I can tell. I'm spreading forks around, getting a sense of the building. The AI is everywhere, but he doesn't seem to object to my presence."

"So he knows I'm here. He must have informed someone."

"Or he's just watching to see what you'll do. Just how many ways can he fork? I can't tell what level any of his forks are. It's eerie."

Theo studied the lobby. Vast didn't begin to describe it he couldn't see the back wall in the distance, or the ones on either side and the ceiling had to be a hundred feet up. He did his best not to appear impressed.

His best might not have been enough.

"Can I help you?" A woman asked. She was a giraffe, but her fur looked to be gold and bronze. She wore a sash over her midriff and nothing else.

"I'm a little overwhelmed." Theo was sure this he could be overwhelmed about. There was no way even Orr citizens could expect this on their first visit.

Her eyes glanced to his exposed left arm before coming back to his face. "Didn't you access the introduction movie on your way?"

'Introduction to Orr Corp headquarters Movie,' appeared on the top left. 'Three hours long,' Cass added.

"Can anything prepare anyone for this?"

She looked around. "I suppose not. You get used to it after a while. I'm Olive."

"Theo, and you're actually golden."

She smiled. "I've been feeling metallic lately. Do you like?" She posed. Her breasts weren't large, but the motion still gave them some bounce Theo expected would draw the eye of anyone female compatible.

"Very distinctive," he said as diplomatically as he could.

She grinned. "Where are you going?"

"Orientation," He said, following Cass' instructions.

"That's on the eighteenth floor. Do you know your

room?"

"The Velvet Couch room." As the words left his mouth, he wondered if Cass was playing a joke on him, but she nodded.

"Then you're in the right neighborhood. It's down the Hall of the Golden Leaves, and you'll make a left to take Silent Creek." The map appeared in Theo's sight. "It's actually 1243 Silent Creek, but everyone just called it the Velvet Couch."

Theo nodded. "I've located it on the map." He smiled at her. "You caught me before I accessed it." He motioned around them "Overwhelmed and all that."

"I'm always happy to help. Do you want me to accompany you?"

"That's generous, but I'll be good, unless the other floors are like this, I'll be good."

"No, this is the only you'll have to deal with something this large. If every floor was like this. We'd be able to take the lift to the moon."

"Thank you for the help."

"You're welcome. I hope I see you around." She waved at him as she walked away.

"And she gave you her contact info. Trash it?"

Theo waited until he was sure she was out of earshot. "No, store it. I think having a contact that isn't one of the Orrs would be good." He headed to the lifts. "Okay, since I doubt I need to go to Orientation, where do you recommend?"

"The sex club, of course."

"There's a sex club?"

"Well, it's just called a club, and there's eight of them, but this is Orr Corp so sex is implied."

"Not going there, but what is a corporate headquarter doing with clubs?"

"Theo, I don't think you fully comprehend the size of this building. It's bigger than France."

Theo chuckled. "Come on. No building's larger than the capital."

"You want me to give it to you in square meters or in population density? There are no houses or apartments, but there are eighty-six hotels. More recreations businesses than is worth mentioning, restaurants, stores. You name it, it's there?"

"Water park?"

"Okay, not that, although there are pools, spas, gyms."

"Alright, I get it. It's big."

Cass laughed. "No, you don't get it. Big doesn't even begin to define this building."

"Alright, alright, I don't need to understand how big it is. I just need a place to go."

"Do you want to talk to any of your family?"

"My family's not here yet." Theo paused. "No, I don't want to talk to any of them. You know what? One of the spas. I want to relax. Soaking would be nice."

"Seventh floor, down the—"

"Just map it, please."

* * * * *

The door opened as he approached. The path Cass showed him went to a locker. Theo felt the clothing melt away and into the belt. He placed it in the locker and followed the trail to an unoccupied hot tub.

"I'd expected more people," Theo said as he stepped in and lowered himself in the hot water.

"This is a less popular spa. The higher in the building the business, the more people frequent it."

"Did you have to pay anything?"

"No, but I expect that's because of who you are. You run the country, remember."

"I don't," Theo hissed. "They do."

"And Eric has decided you are one of them."

Theo grumbled his answer.

"I can try to locate where your position within the family is recorded in the system, but if I remove that I get the sense that moving about will become rather difficult."

"You're enjoying this way too much."

"Enjoying is such a strong word, but I do find it amusing that you have all this access to one of the most powerful corporations in the system and all you can think to do with it is complain."

"Can you just let me stew in my annoyance in peace for a while?"

"And with that I'm going to go edit a movie. Say hi when you need me again."

Theo closed his eyes and tried to forget where he was and who he was. He got his breathing under control quickly, but his mind wasn't as quick to follow his instructions, drifting to the question of what his parents thought they were doing. What Eric thought he was doing. What he stupid stunt he could expect Tucker to pull next. But eventually quiet fell there too.

* * * * *

Jostling of the water made him open an eye. A tigress was stepping into the hot tub. She nodded to him before sitting opposite him. Theo closed his eye again and went back to not thinking of anything.

He didn't last a minute. He could feel her eyes on him. He opened both, and she was indeed looking at him, appraising him.

"I'm male exclusive," he said.

"I wouldn't have expected otherwise."

Theo became more attentive. If she wasn't looking for sex, what was the look about? She was older, early to mid hundred, was his guess. With retyping it was almost impossible to know for sure, but her gaze wasn't just intelligent, it was experienced. Her fur was vibrant, a deep orange, almost red that reminded him of Terrence's fur. She had the musculature of someone who took care to exercise regularly and seriously, and her breast would make anyone stare, regardless of their compatibility.

"They're natural," she said.

"Sorry."

"Don't be," She offered her hand. "I'm Beatrice."

He shook it. "Theo."

"And I don't mind being stared at." She took her breasts in both hands and gave them a squeeze. "These are what first caught your grandfather's eyes."

"You knew my grandfather?" He barely knew anything about either of them, not even their names. His mom and dad had explained, once he was eighteen, that because they'd left that life behind, they hadn't wanted reminders and they hadn't want Theo to wonder about them, so they never brought them up. So how could this tigress—

"Oh you have got to be kidding me."

She smiled. "I was wondering how long it would take you to work it out."

"I'm not your grandson."

She waved it aside. "Don't worry. I'm not as invested in any of this as the others are."

"Really? You track me down and expect me to believe you aren't invested?"

"Uncle told me where you were."

"And?"

"And what?"

"Are you to bring me back to my cell? Are you to follow me around?"

She shook her head. "Terry went off on a rant on the family channel about you. I was curious what it was about and Uncle mentioned you were here, so I figured I'd come by and see what the big deal is all about."

"Ask Eric. He's the one making it."

She chuckled "for all his dampened emotions, he is extremely protective of his family. He's had to be."

"Why?"

"Aren't you worried this will make you invested in them?"

"I'm just curious. Which is why you mentioned it?"

She smiled. "Observant, I like that. There have been multiple attempts on his and his children's lives over the years. It's why he made sure they all spent one year in the army getting trained by the best they had."

"Wait, Tucker was in the army?" Theo burst out laughing. "Oh I would have loved to see that. Other than the size of every guys' cock, did he actually learn something?"

She looked at him curiously, then her gaze went distant, that accessing something look Implant users got. When she focused on him she nodded. "Yes, he did. That boy is capable of thinking about more than sex." She smiled. "Sometimes."

"I'll give you that. He somehow managed to learn engineering, or so he told me."

"That's true. He'd quite gifted, but then that's to be expected, every one of Eric's children is talented in what they chose to do. What about you? Are you successful in whatever it is you do?"

"They didn't tell you?"

"Uncle doesn't spill, not that I asked. I get there's something unusual about what you do. Terry referred to what you do as 'that,' but in such a way it made it clear he didn't like it."

"I'm a spy. Was a spy."

She tilted an ear. "You are forthcoming."

He shrugged. "Uncle might not say it, but someone else would have eventually, Eric knows, so he told his kids, you saw Terry's reaction, although I thought he hated me because of where I'm from."

"Vanguard, he did mention that. I hear your parents are on their way?"

"I hope not. I told them to turn around and go home."

"They must love you."

Theo smiled.

"Then I'm afraid they won't turn around. I didn't quite get all of it, but it sounded like they didn't live in vanguard."

"They broke their citizenship just before I turned eight. Mom didn't like the tests they were running on me. I don't know the details."

"That was courageous of them. Vanguard isn't forgiving to people who leave."

"Why do you think I don't want them here? If Vanguard gets their hands on them, I don't want to think how they'll make them pay."

"So, how successful are you in your career?"

It took Theo a moment to regain the trail of the conversation, then shrugged. "I did okay, until I was caught."

"On Mars, right? Something about the city going insane. The Independents, right?"

"Anarchists."

"Sorry, Anarchists."

"Did anyone give you the details?"

"I didn't ask. I'm not an Orr, so I'm not involved in running the corporation. All I got was what made the feeds. Everything going bonkers on Mars, you at the lead of it."

"You didn't ask? I mean when you found out who I was?"

"I don't need to know. Francis would tell me if I asked. I don't even have to wave these at him, we're still on good terms."

"Can I ask you a question?"

She laughed. "After all those I asked you, I think you're entitled to one."

"How did it happen?"

"I'm sorry?"

"You and Francis. I know you two had your kids the organic way, but why? With all the inherent risks, why bother?"

"You don't know Francis, of a file I read."

She smiled. "Francis is everything Eric isn't. I'm not saying that as a diss on your fa--"

"Please don't call him that."

"I'm sorry. On Eric. Eric's muted emotions are a reaction from Francis to his own overly excitable mind. He doesn't do anything halfway. If he likes someone he does so fully. He throws himself wholeheartedly in everything that catches his fancy. It makes it hard for him to stick with anything for very long, but while he's interested, nothing stops him."

Her gaze became distant, but this time it had nothing to do with her Implant. "Like I said, my breasts caught his attention, but he wasn't fixated on them. It was his introduction to me. And he liked me. He literally swept me off my feet. He painted my portrait, charmed me to poetry, well the energy he put into it was charming. Poetry isn't his forte. And the sex. Oh dear God the sex. That man knows things about sex that haven't been recorded anywhere."

"But doesn't your implant control your fertility?"

"It does. And I'd had been thinking about having kids. I could have gotten them made fully at the clinic, but I did want them to have something of me, so I was ovulating. And next thing we realize, I'm pregnant. I could have had the egg taken out, had it grow at a clinic. But the way Francis looked at me while I carried his son. I don't know if I can do it justice, but I think that was how the people who discovered God look at him."

She sighed and shuddered. "No other man has ever looked at me like that since. And giving birth isn't the horror story the history vid would want you to believe. There is plenty of information on how to proceed, and Uncle retrieved it all. We also have a lot of technology they didn't have back then. If they hadn't had it. I don't know if we would transition to artificial wombs."

Theo nodded. "That explains Elliot, but what about the others?"

"Theo, when a man looks at you like you are divinity incarnate, you don't want it to end. He didn't have to ask after Elliot I was more than willing to go again. And again. It was only after Edi that I had enough. And Francis understood, that wonderful man never made me feel like I was anything but amazing."

Theo looked at the water.

"Are you okay?"

"I know what you mean. Not looking at a guy like that. I've been looked at like that, but my job meant I had to take advantage of it. I never thought anything of it before, but listening to you talk about Francis, it makes me feel a little," he shrugged, "dirty."

"Sometimes work can get in the way."

"What do you do?"

"I'm an astrophysicist. I run Orr Corp's version of SolGov's Astro mapping department. We're looking for a planet to colonize."

"Aren't you going on the ship SolGov built? I thought the meeting on Mars was about that, finalizing the arrangements."

"Of course, but now that SolGov proved it can be done, why let them have the monopoly? And it isn't like the other corporations aren't doing the same. That ship SolGov is sending, our people on it, there's no telling who they'll be when they reach their destination, we're talking hundreds of year coexisting with other corporations. It's possible there won't be any Orr citizens when they get there. Building our own ship ensures we will continue."

Theo thought about that. It wouldn't be just two ships out there, but seven, at a minimum. "You're not going to stop at one, are you?"

"That won't be my decision, but I don't see why we should. There are a lot of planets out there. Why stop at just one?"

Theo nodded. Was that what the Colonies would do too? He hadn't heard of plans for a second ship, but he had never tried hard to keep up to date on that. Still, he thought he would have heard something about a second ship.

Was this something Anderson needed to know about? Should the Colonies make sure they'd be able to hold their own corner of the galaxy? What if one of those other ships went to the same planet?

He stood. "I hope you'll excuse me, I've been soaking for a long time already."

She looked him over with appreciation. "I understand. It was nice meeting you Theo."

"It was a pleasure meeting you too, Beatrice." He

headed out, trying to think of a way to send the information back home.

Chapter-15

Tucker

"Hey Tuck!"

Tucker looked over his shoulder. Tony was running to catch up to him.

"What are you doing here?"

"Heading to the executive lounge. I need to relax after the meeting I just had."

"Meeting?" Tony looked behind him and his eyes widened. "Oh. You want some help?"

Tucker slapped his brother's ass. "I'm always happy to fuck you. You want to start now?"

"I prefer the lounge. The couches here aren't all that comfortable. To be honest, I expected you to be in orbit. The Mercury's leaving in a few days."

"Dad's not going on this one. He wants to stay down here until Theo's parents are here and all that's resolved."

"Okay, but with Will as acting captain, the ship needs a chief engineer. You're the second on command in engineering."

Tucker shrugged. "The nice thing about being the captain's son, not to say owning part of the corporation, is that I get to decide if I want to go or not."

"Will's going to be pissed."

Another shrug. "I'll make it up to him when he gets back with a full weekend of sex."

"Who's going to run engineering?" Tony asked as they entered the lounge. The sound of moaning welcomed them in, as did the smell of sex.

"Don't know, Don't care." Tucker pushed Tony on the first available couch. He pulled his brother's legs over his shoulder to his yelp of surprise.

"Damn it Tuck," Tony chuckled, "give me a warning before you—ohhh." The tiger's voice dissolved into a moan as Tucker pressed his muzzle between his cheeks and rimmed him. "Oh Fuck, Tuck!" Tony loved being rimmed, Tucker had gotten a lot of his training at it on that ass, and one of the modifications he'd gotten meant he didn't have to worry about running out of air for a while.

"Tuck, please, fuck me."

Smiling he raised his head. "Are you tapping my readout?" he'd had a minute left. He grabbed the lube cloth that was on the table next to the couch and ran it over his cock. Tony's ass didn't need any more lube.

"Timed you a few times, ten minutes is about how long you can hold your breath." Tony was panting. "And I really

need a cock up my ass. Haven't had one since breakfast."

Tucker lifted himself, pulling his brother's ass to the edge of the couch with the motion. "That busy of a morning"

"Ye-ah." Tony's response turned into an expression of pleasure as Tucker pushed his cock inside him.

He didn't stop once he bottomed out, he pulled out and shoved himself back in and again. Tony wrapped his arms around Tucker's neck and pulled himself up until they were kissing.

Tucker moaned as Tony's tongue snaked in his muzzle, licking and pushing almost to the back of his throat. He brother had a long tongue, and he'd learned to do interesting things with it. Tony thrust his tongue in and out of Tucker's muzzle at the same speed Tucker was fucking him.

Tucker twisted, forcing his brother to lie sideways on the couch and he climbed on it and put more of his weight on Tony.

Tony threw his head back. "Oh Fuck!"

Tucker grinned as he plowed his ass. "If you want to cum while I fuck you, you better start jerking off. I'm not going to last too much longer."

Instead Tony went back to kissing his brother.

Tucker fucked him hard, but not for very long. He'd needed the release after the frustration of his meeting. He growled in Tony's muzzle and buries his cock as deep as he could, eliciting another moan from his brother, and then came hard.

Tony milked him and even once Tucker was done, he wrapped his legs around his waist and kept him in place.

"Fuck, I needed this."

Tony panted. "I'm surprised you didn't fuck one of them before you left the meeting."

Tucker chuckled and licked Tony's cheeks. "Not one of them will let me fuck them in public. 'It gives the wrong impression,' each of them said. As if it wasn't already public knowledge I've fucked them."

Tony sighed. "You've seen how Terry acts at times. People in power have to keep a certain image going, regardless of what is or isn't known. It's why I'm happy to just be handling the logistics for the generation ship and nothing vital."

Tucker patted Tony's leg and they loosened. "Some people would say that's pretty important work." He sat and positioned his brother's legs over his and stroked his leaking cock.

Tony rolled his eyes as he moaned. "It's just a ship going to the nothingness of space. I don't get what the big deal is-ohh yeah, like that."

Tucker twisted his hand over the crown and he stoked

up. "You want me to make you cum, or do we continue talking?"

"How's Theo?"

Tucker chuckled and went back to gentle stroking. "I haven't seen him in three weeks. I figured I'd give him space. After Mars and then being a prisoner and dealing with Dad on the mercury, I figure he could use time on his own." He licked the precum off his fingers and returned to jerking off his brother.

"The building," Tony paused to moan, "has him spending time in the spas, and the lounges. He's been having plenty of sex, just not with us."

"If you're keeping an eye on him you know I haven't been near."

"You could still talk—yeah, tighter. Oh fuck—I'm not Trev. I don't go looking at conversation records."

"I'm planning on taking him to the mainland once we're done. I figure he'd want to see an actual city. The little I've gathered is that he isn't from one of the Earth Independents."

"Going to take him to the clubs and try to get in his ass that way?"

"Trickery isn't going to work with him. I'm going to wear him down with my charms."

Tony laughed. "I hope you're not in any hurry then. You won't—" Tony stopped talking as Tucker stroked him faster, making sure to rub the sensitized crown. He repositioned himself as Tony began cursing and wrapped his lips around the head of his brother's cock as Tony tensed.

He bobbed up and down as Tony emptied his balls. He swallowed and continued sucking him even once Tony was dry, twitching in pleasure.

"You're an asshole," he said.

Tucker released the cock and grinned. "But a charming one."

"Fine, fine." Tony sighed. "You know Theo and Grandma talked?"

"Yeah, I heard she met him in one of the spas and had a couple of meals with him. She seems to like him. You think Sebastian will like him?"

"Are there any guys he doesn't like? When is he arriving anyway?"

"In a few months, with Grandma here, he had to way for his replacement to reach the observatory first." Tucker slipped a finger between his brother's cheeks.

"Stop that," Tony moaned, then looked around. "You are so lucky there's no dildo for me to hit you with."

"Just get on your feet and hit me with this." He stroked Tony's cock with his other hand again.

"Please don't get me going. I have to review the list

of criteria SolGov wants everyone to meet. I thought Tom had talked some sense into them?"

Tucker let go of the cock. "I don't think that's doable." He leaned over his brother and licked the cum off his stomach and chest. Once he was done, he kissed him again. "You have fun. I'm doing to see if I can get Theo to loosen up enough I can kiss him. You know, start small."

"Good luck with that." Tony stretched as Tucker stood.

Outside the lounge he headed down a dozen floors, where most of the people would be management, instead of executives. He found the closest public shower and joined an elephant under one of the showerheads. He washed his back, then offered him his ass, which the elephant took, fucking him slowly as he washed Tucker's chest and jerked him off until they both came.

Clean and more sated, Tucker dressed in loose gray pants and went to offer Theo a chance to get off the islands.

Chapter-16

Tucker

He pinged Theo as the hover landed, jumped out before it was fully settled and headed for the door, stopped just in time to avoid walking into it when it didn't open. He pinged Theo again, then sent him a quick message letting him know he was at the door.

No reply and no door opening.

The house confirmed that Theo was there, but by default it didn't provide any more details. Privacy and all that.

He accessed the sensors. Theo was in the living room, stretched out on the couch. His heartbeat and breathing were normal, relaxed. Maybe he was asleep? Then why wasn't Cass answering for him?

He almost overrode the door's control, but reminded this was Theo, who was already annoyed at him for all the sexual advances. Barging in might put him in a bad mood and that was the last thing he wanted after giving him his space for a while.

He messaged him again with the same result. He could access the house's voice system. But if he did that Theo might think he could access the other systems and spy on him.

At a loss for what else to do, he banged a fist on the door. "Theo? It's Tuck, are you okay?" He raised his fist to bang it again, but he saw him stand. He disconnected from sensors and waited.

The door opened a minute later to reveal a disheveled tiger looking at him with blearily.

"Did I wake you?"

"Do I look like I've been sleeping?" Theo replied with an

edge to his voice. "What do you want?"

"Can I come in?"

"If I say no will you leave me alone?"

Tucker grinned. Theo didn't look like someone who should be left alone.

Theo sighed and stepped out of the way.

"Do you mind if I make you a coffee?" Tucker headed for the kitchen. "You look like you could use one."

"What do you want Tuck?" The sharpness in the tone made Tucker stop and turn.

Tucker's wisecrack died on his lips as he looked the other tiger over. He fought the urge to access the house's records to find out if there had been a party here. He knew Theo hadn't been out for two days now.

"Have you gotten any sleep?" he asked.

Theo made a visible effort to give a civil answer. "No."

Tucker clamped his muzzle shut on the reflexive reply about offering to help him sleep. This wasn't a time for the impulsive, smart aleck, Tucker. As difficult as it might be he needed to be the understanding brother.

"Do you mind if I make myself a coffee?"

Theo clenched a fist, then relaxed it with a breath. "Go ahead."

"Do you want one? You look like you could use it." Tucker was amazed at how hard it was to keep himself from smirking. And the frown on Theo might indicate he hadn't completely succeeded. Fuck he was out of practice with being serious at home.

Theo rubbed his face. "Yeah, thanks. Yeah, I could use one."

He told the drink dispenser to make them, adding a stimulant boost to Theo's cup, as he walked to the counter. He grinned as he imagined Theo suddenly full of energy and bouncing all over the place.

No, no, no. He canceled the order. Serious Tucker, remember? Oh he hoped this wasn't going to take too long, he didn't think he could keep this up.

He brought the cups to the table where Theo sat. Tucker's coffee was black with four sugar, Theo's only had one cream in it and just the natural caffeine that was in coffee.

He gave Theo two long swallows of coffee to volunteer the information. When he didn't Tucker reminded himself he was the caring brother right now, set aside all the snarky way he could voice the question and asked.

"So, how come you didn't sleep?"

"Where's the snark?"

Tucker grinned. "In a box somewhere, bitching I'm not letting it out."

That earned him a small smile.

"Cass is having an existential crisis."

Tucker's ears pointed forward. "AIs can have that?"

"Hasn't Uncle ever had one?" was that anger? Resentment in the tone?

"If he did, it was way before my time. Don't tell him I said that, but he's an old geezer. I mean ancient." Another small smile. "What's wrong Cass?"

Theo raised an eyebrow.

"What? I figured you don't feel like acting as intermediary for the interminable questions I'm going to ask. You know I'm not leaving this alone. That goes for you too Cass, so speak up. Is this because you can't do the spy stuff anymore?"

Theo shook his head. "It's related, but that's not it."

"He really isn't talking? Or is he just not talking to me?"

"He's in a funk. He's been complaining for two days now and of course now that someone other than me wants to listen, he clams up."

Tucker was surprised at the bitterness in the voice. He'd gotten the feeling over the weeks that these two were the best of friends, not just co-workers.

"How about it, Cass?" Tucker said. "Give Theo a break and talk to me."

"Like you give a damn about me," came the bitter reply.

Tucker grinned. "There you are, and I do care. Not in the 'I want to get in your pants' kind of way, but you're a friend of Theo's so I'd like to think that I'm a friend of yours by association."

"Look, you don't care, and even if you did, you can't do a damn thing about it. Leave me alone."

Tucker raised an eyebrow. Theo shrugged.

"Cass," Tucker went for the as genuine a caring tone as he could. "You can't know if I'll be able to help until you tell me what's wrong."

"Fine. I have three movies no one's ever going to see."

"Movies?" Tucker asked, trying to understand those could cause Cass to be depressed.

"Cass makes movies as a hobby," Theo said, standing. "Can you tell it to make me another coffee? Cass isn't feeling up to doing it."

Tucker sent the order. "I hadn't realized AIs would have hobbies. I never thought about it. I guess Uncle has them too. But he shows them to you, right?"

"He doesn't count," Cass commented bitterly.

"Ouch, that's got to sting." Even in his most flippant, or angriest, Tucker would never say that about a friend.

"Not really." Theo sat down a steaming cup in hand. "I'm sort of the beta audience. So I've seen movies he never even intended to publish."

"He publishes the movies? How can he do that?"

"What?" Cass snapped. "AI's don't have right down here?" Tucker thought he heard grumbling after that.

"No, I mean you two are spies."

"Were," Cass said bitterly.

"Fine, so wouldn't that make putting your movies out there kind of difficult?"

They both waited. When Cass remained silent Theo took over.

"There's a system in place. I don't know the details, so don't bother asking. But Cass would transmit the finished movies somewhere, it would go through a bunch of intermediaries to give it a legitimate provenance." He shrugged at Tucker's quizzical expression. "Again, not my thing. But eventually it would reach a publisher and hit the general markets."

"And he's published some?"

"Some?" Cass asked, dismay in his voice. "What? Top of everything you—"

"Cass that's enough."

"He—"

"I said enough. As hard as it is to believe, I think Tucker is actually looking to help here. So let's leave the snark out of it." Theo smiled. "Anyway that's his department, not yours."

Cass sighed. "I am not apologizing."

"That's okay," Tucker said. "I'm not in the habit of doing that myself. Out of curiosity, if all this works goes into hiding where the movies come from, how do you get paid?"

"I don't. I don't need to, I'm an AI."

Tucker opened his mouth then noticed Theo's thoughtful expression and waited.

"The money goes to help fund the organization I worked for."

Tucker nodded. Theo probably hadn't meant to give details about the organization, but it wasn't much of a stretch. "So, you aren't the only one with an AI."

Theo's raised an eyebrow.

"I'm not a complete idiot." Tucker grinned. "No matter how successful a movie is, it can't bring in the kind of money needed. Yes, I do have an inkling of an idea as to how expensive it is to run a spy network. So I'm guessing that every one of the AI that works in it, like Cass does, makes something as a hobby and that's also distributed to the mass market. It's pretty clever."

Theo looked at Tucker suspiciously.

"Felix, he's one of Grandpa's brothers, is in charge of ours. He's really proud of it and loves to talk about everything involved. Money's a big part of it."

Theo nodded and relaxed. "Yeah. But now that we've been cut from the network because my face was plastered all over Mars by the Anarchists Cass can't send his movies out anymore."

"It wasn't because you were captured?"

Theo shook his head. "The moment they used my face I was done as a spy. If I'd been really lucky, I might have been able to make it back home, retire to a quiet life of dancing, sex and sculpting, but I never counted on it."

Tucker filed the sculpting part for a later discussion.

"Being captured," Theo continued, "and having to come up with plans to get out of that, then dealing with Uncle and trying to escape your custody." Theo raised a hand to silence Tucker's protest. "Come on Tucker, what else was it? You were always following me around."

"That was me trying to have sex with you," he answered honestly. "But I can see how you thought otherwise. You were a spy so I guess everything has to have hidden meanings." He indicated Theo's empty cup. "You want another one?"

"Yeah, thanks. I don't want to fall asleep until tonight."

"Want me to add a stimulant to it?"

"Yeah, a mild one would be good. I didn't know you could do that."

"It isn't a standard feature, but we have to work too, even when we spend the nights fucking, so we've all learned to appreciate a good stimulant." He returned with the cups and sat. "So, you were busy trying to plan for your escape from my ever subtle sexual advances. I'm guessing knowing your parents were coming is part of the problem?"

"Not really. They just became part of the plans Cass making. At that point it was mostly him. I'm not going to force my parents to go on the run, but one of the things Cass excels at is making plans. No the problem has been these last few weeks here, with free reign of the islands. It's been keeping me busy _"

"But not me," Cass finished. "It gave me ample time to finish the movies and editing them. I always wait until I have a few of them before sending them in. Theo gave me his thought of the last one, and I finished the tweaking a couple of days ago and went to send them in..."

"And you remembered you couldn't." Tucker bit his lower lips. "That must have hit hard."

"I've been a wreck about it," Cass admitted.

Tucker tried to find a way to ask what he wanted to without coming across as insensitive, and all he did was cause an uncomfortable silence, so he just did the best he could.

"Alright, but what's the big deal?"

Cass sighed. "I knew you wouldn't get it."

Theo opened his mouth but Tucker shook his head.

"You're right, I don't understand, you can still make movies, that hasn't been taken away from you. So something else is the problem."

"What's the point of making a movie if no one is ever going to see it? Yes, I love making them but I still want people to enjoy them."

"Oh." Tucker got it now. And "Oh!" as he got what the problem actually was and started coming up with ways to help, but first. "So, are any of your movies popular? Anything I might have heard about?" He couldn't recall ever hearing of Cass as

someone linked to movies, but it wasn't like he was a big movie watcher.

Theo chuckled. "Cass makes male to male porn. I'm sure you've heard of a few of them."

"Give me titles."

"Doctor Manhattan Love Connection, Love on high, The Good Father, Water Heat, All it--"

"Wait. The Good Father is one of yours?"

"Yes, you've seen it?"

"Are you kidding? I love the movies in the Good Family franchise. Grandpa's the big fan of Porn but when that one came out we made it a family thing, as per the theme. I mean father and sons, what's more Orr than that? That was a fun night." Tucker groped himself at the memory. Then a thought occurred to him and a quick check in the library archive confirmed it. "But that's Cassius Gold movie not--" he groaned. "Cassius, Cass. I am an idiot not to have seen it before."

"Just to be clear, I didn't pick the name," Cass said.

Tucker smiled. "Do you have any idea how popular Cassius Gold movies are around here?"

"I might have checked the ratings a time or two over the years," Cass admitted.

"He checked it every few months," Theo said.

Tucker grinned. "Okay, I have it. Give me a bit, I need to do something." He entered his lobby before Theo or Cass could reply and set it full private.

He stood in front of all the virtual screens. "Okay, where to start. A venue." He accessed the business section of the corporation and got a notification that access to it was only for authorized personnel. He waved it aside. He was an Orr, what did he care what its restrictions were.

He requested the list of theaters and got thousands of returns. Okay, he didn't want to disrupt someone's business so had the list ordered by revenue and went to the bottom. He figured the lower the revenue the less of a disruption he'd caused, and this might help them get back to up.

He accessed the "Everything Theater" and looked over the stats. It was large enough, able to host close to four hundred people. He brought up the camera and immediately shut it down. The place was filthy, no wonder they weren't making any money.

The next three ones were much the same. He moved to the middle of the list and there he had to deal with theaters that while not packed were still busy. How was he supposed to find a theater that people would want to go to, but wasn't already hosting performances?

How did Trev do his searches? Tucker was already getting a headache, and he'd barely started.

'Need help with something? Tyson.'

Tucker sighed. Instead of replying he opened a connection, made it a screen instead of giving his brother full access and

waited. He taped another option and closed it in disgust.

"Of course you'd know," Tucker said when his brother accepted the connection.

"You brute force your way into my department, you should expect I'll be informed. What are you looking for? This can't be because you're bored."

Tucker snorted. "I'm looking for a place I can host a party."

"I stand corrected, you are bored. What criteria are you looking for? The way you're going at it you'll still be here next century."

Tucker faced the screen. "Before we continue, you need to know I'm doing this for Theo."

"Still trying to get in his pants? I don't see the appeal."

Tucker just smiled and let his brother reach his own conclusion, that was always easier than trying to nudge them in the direction he needed, especially with his family.

"I just need to know if the offer to help still stands, considering you don't like Theo."

Tyson shrugged. "I don't care about him one way or another. And Dad made sure I knew he considers him family so yes, I'll help."

"Good. I need a venue I'm not going to disrupt by taking over it."

"When?"

"Now."

Tyson tilted an ear. "You ever heard of scheduling things ahead of time?"

Tucker thought about it. "I think I've heard it mentioned a time or two. Never saw the point myself. I know what I want now, not what I'll want tomorrow or the day after."

"How you managed to succeed at anything is beyond me Bro."

"A lot of hard work and perseverance."

"I want to say hard cock and stamina, but I have seen your scores, and those tests are administered by the computer and I know you haven't figured out how to fuck those yet."

"And how do you know that?"

"For one thing, the day you manage it you'll be bragging about it to every news outlet we have contracts with."

"Point." Tucker grinned.

"And Uncle wouldn't let you go for at least a year, because if you can fuck a computer, you can definitely fuck him."

"Done that already."

Tyson rolled his eyes. "We've all fucked him in our lobbies, but what was his response?"

"He understands the appeal we have with it, but doesn't see why he should have to do it too."

"Right. He doesn't have a frame of reference for it so it holds no appeal. Have you given his new body a try?"

Tucker shuddered. "That thing gives me the creep. It's real

looking and feeling enough, but it's just not him. It's an imitation at best. So, no I haven't."

"Notice he hasn't asked anyone to have sex with him piloting it either? I don't think he cares for it himself. I think it was more of an experiment, to see if a fully functional artificial body could be built for him to manipulate. Okay, I have one for you."

"Send."

A new screen appeared. The Allegorium. The camera feed showed a clean room, the information indicated a capacity of five hundred, full bar and food prep available. No showing on the schedule.

"Okay, what's the catch? Everything looks good, so why aren't they booked?"

"Best I can figure the owner is being blocked. Two new theater opened up in Denveraura not so close to him as to be suspicious, and owned by different people, but anytime someone looks to put on a show he gets underbid by one of them. They opened up while he closed for renovations and looks like they're intent on keeping him from picking up any business."

"That can't be legal."

"I'm not seeing any overt indication of collusion. From the outside it just looks like he's having a run of bad luck."

"But your gut's saying something else."

"My gut's saying it's time for me to go eat something. My business instincts are telling me that someone is being careful not to trip any of the flags."

"Okay, you can still do something right? I mean you know as much as you can they're colluding to bring it under. That's illegal."

"I can't legally do anything until the systems send up a flag or the owner of the Allegorium lodges a complaint."

"Why hasn't he? Or is the owner a woman?"

"A man. And I'm guessing he hasn't for the same reasons I can't legally intervene. He can't find any evidence the law is being broken."

"Fine. So fuck legal. That's unfair. There has to be something you can do."

Tyson smiled. "Well, as it so happens, I'm thinking that if someone sort of famous were to have a party there. Something big, that no one really saw coming, so didn't give any competitor time to even try to underbid the Allegorium..."

Tucker grinned. "So they wouldn't even know I'm not going to haggle with him on price. The money if nothing else could be just the boosts he needs. Thank, I knew there was a reason you were my favorite brother." He dismissed the screen on Tyson's surprised expression. And contacted the Allegorium.

"Welcome to the Allegorium," the digital gorilla said, "your first choice in venue to host an entertainment event. Now featuring actual vid and sound projection systems so you can

entertain even your Independent friends or clients. We are—

“Look, I’m not interested in the pitch, just put me in contact with someone I can book the place with.”

The program froze as it went through its decision tree. “Just one moment please.”

“Thank you.”

A brown and black ermine appeared before him and looked him up and down before smiling. “Hello. I’m Hubert Hale, how can I help you.”

He wore a sharp black suit with a white shirt and a bow tie. Very dapper, Tucker thought. “First off, can you make decisions, or do I need to go up the chain to make things happen? No offense, but I’m not interested in talking with a booking program, no matter how real and sexy he looks.”

“I’m the owner of the Allegorium. I handle all call myself. That’s the kind of service I aim for.”

Easy to do when you have no business, Tucker thought, but he still appreciated that the ermine behaved as if everything was going well.

“I’m looking to book your place. Full thing, for a party open bar and food. I’ll provide the lube.”

The ermine’s eyes lit up and Tucker could see him calculating. “Of course, when would that be for?”

Tucker thought about it, he still had a few things to do, and convincing Cass might take a bit. “Say two hours?”

“To—Today?”

“Yeah, and for the rest of the day, probably the night too. Make it all of tomorrow too, just in case.”

“Yes, of course, that’s.” The ermine took a breath and Tucker saw some of his enthusiasm diminish. Fear of scaring him away, working out how low of a profit he could take to ensure he didn’t scare him away. “That isn’t going to be—”

“Money isn’t a problem.” Tucker let his connection identify him. His family was set for private by default to avoid being tagged and then spammed to the point they couldn’t function. Most people did the same he’d been told.

Hubert’s eyes grew wide again, in surprise this time. He did something on the side. Tucker expected he was having the connection traced. It would end at the corporation node, and he’d have to send a request for further confirmation. It was a measure put in place to keep people from pretending to be one of them. Trevor told him it could be done, which he had to know, since his brother had himself set up to be someone who wasn’t an Orr so he could work in peace.

“Mister Orr, it’s an honor.”

“It’s Tucker, better yet, Tuck. So just send the bill to the corporation, someone there will take care of it.”

“Of course. You said two hours?”

“Thereabouts. People might start showing up before that once I let the news know about it.”

"You are opening it to the public?"

Tucker grinned. "Oh yeah, there's no way I'm closing this off to anyone. So you might need to put someone at the doors to make sure you don't break occupancy limits."

"Sir,"

"Tuck."

The casualness of the conversation was throwing the ermine off.

"Mister Tucker," seemed that was a casual as Hubert would get. "Do you understand that having you here, hosting a public party. There's no way I can keep it from spilling out on the streets. I'm in a traffic zone, hovers come and go."

"I'm afraid that's something you'll have to set up yourself, bill me for it."

"I-bill you?"

"Sure, unless you're telling me that because you think I should find a different venue, you'll have to handle it, but I'll pay." Tucker wasn't going to do all the work about this. Mainly because it would mean talking to Eddy, and he'd have to explain to his uncle why he needed a neighborhood closed off and then he'd have to listen to him complaining about all the disruption it would cause. Eddy was no fun at all in times like this.

"So, unless there's something else you need me to add, I have to keep getting this thing ready." Tucker looked at the ermine expectantly. Hubert just shook his head, still looking shocked.

Tucker ended the connection and opened one with supplies.

"Supplies," a distracted giraffe said. "What can I do for you," she glanced at him, which on her side would include his identifier since this was within the company. "Mi-Tucker" she caught herself.

Tucker smiled, happy that the memo had made the rounds. He had purposely gone overboard the last time someone within the corporation had called him 'Mister'. Tucker wasn't the head of anything in there and he wouldn't be treated as if he was. Even on the day when he wouldn't have a choice but to take charge of a department.

"Hey, Milicent. I need you to send five, no make it a thousand, lube rags to the Allegorium in Denveraura."

She stared at him. "Is this a joke Mi-Tucker?"

Tucker almost launched in his 'would I ever?' routine, realized this was actually something he'd do as a joke and tried to be more serious about it. "No. I'm setting up a public party for a friend. So I'm going to need that delivered within an hour and a half."

"Are you serious?"

"Already said I was." He couldn't keep from grinning. He did love through people off like this.

"That's going to—"

"Sure, whatever. Just get it done, okay? And let them know when to expect the delivery."

"Yes," the stunned giraffe replied, "I'll see to it Mister Orr."

He decided to let that one pass, he'd kind of asked for it. Next he brought up the list of news networks under contract and called one at random.

"You've reach Amanda's message—"

He disconnected. "If you're too busy to take to me, I'm not dealing with you."

He called another one.

"Mister Argoyle's assistant how can I help you?"

Tucker checked the entry for the news channel. They were supposed to have direct contact with the personnel none of that going through multiple people crap. The entry did indicate the number went directly to Joshua Argoyle.

"I think the system glitched. I was supposed to be put in direct contact with him."

"Oh no, it's no glitch. Mister Argoyle is too important now, so he has all his calls redirected to me so I can screen them."

Tucker looked at her. "He's too important to take my call?"

"Of course, he can't have just anyone talk to him?"

Tucker was stunned, then he felt something raise he didn't feel often, at least not outside his house, anger. He clamped down on it.

"Alright, let Mister Argoyle know that his networks' contract with the Orrs is going to be looked over." His dismissed the screen on her panicked face. He took the entry in the list and sent it up the chain all the way to Terry. Not his department, but his brother could redirect it where he needed to go. Tucker was too pissed to trust himself with what he'd say. His order to have the contract looked at would be enough to get the process started. Maybe it would be enough for Argoyle to adjust his attitude, if not the network would find someone different as a contact.

Tucker could take being dismissed by people hit on. He didn't care one bit what other thought of him when he was just another guy out there making an ass of himself. But when he was in business mode and contacting someone who was under contract with them, he wasn't going to put up with it.

He gave himself two minutes to calm down, then contacted three more networks, only to his message centers. What was going on? Was this a busy news day or something?

On the fourth one he got a disheveled dog rottie he thought. She raised a finger as he opened his mouth

"Give me a minute."

He almost waved the screen away he was really getting tired with being dismissed by people who technically worked for him. But before he started the gesture, she focused on him.

"Sorry, Mister Orr. It's busy here. That Independent terrorist who almost took down Mars was sighted on the Philipian archipelagos. It's like any time someone sees him since his escape the world is about to end." She took a breath. "Do you have a comment about him?"

"Sorry, Denise. I'm not authorized to comment on anything corporate related." Tucker had memorized the phrase when he was twelve as a way of shutting down any questions he didn't want to answer. The shit storm he'd had to live with for a month because he'd made one offhand remark about SolGov. He was never apologizing to those assholes again.

She smiled. "Of course, still had to ask. How can I help you?"

"Actually. I can help your station's rating by giving you a quick interview, if you can promise me it's going to go out immediately, in spite of the world ending."

"Immediately is impossible, even for you. I have to run it through edits and that's five minutes."

Tucker grinned. "Five minutes qualifies as immediate for me today considering how hard it was to find someone able to talk to me. I hate end of the world things."

"We tend to love them. Do you want a studio setting for the interview?"

"No, let's do this as is. Off the cuff thing."

"Can I get an idea what it's about?"

"A party I'm organizing."

She raised an eyebrow. "Alright." Her image changed insomuch as she looked more professional and not like she'd run a marathon through a high wind. "We have just been contacted by Mister Tucker Orr. And anyone within the territory knows, Tucker is something of his family's wild boy so like you, we're curious as to the nature of the call. Tucker, what do you have to tell us?"

"Thanks Denise, a friend of mine's been having a bit of a tough time lately. So I'm throwing him a party."

"What kind of party is it going to be?"

Tucker grinned. "Come on, Denise, what kind of party do any of the Orrs throw? It's going to be an orgy."

She smiled. "And you're calling us about why?"

"Because I'm opening it to the public. It's taking place at the Allegorium in Denveraura. I'm going to head there the moment we finish the interview."

"Will anyone else in your family be there?"

"Not officially. They won't even know I'm doing this until they see the news, so I have no idea if any of them will show up."

"Then I won't keep you too long, but is there anything you can tell up about your friend?"

Tucker hadn't thought in that direction. Of course he'd have to say something, especially if he wanted the right kind of

guys to show up.

"His name is Cassius Gold. He—"

"The Cassius Gold? You know the reclusive movie maker?"

Tucker smiled. "I do."

"Is he going to be there?"

"Maybe, maybe not. Regardless, he will know about it and I'm hoping it will help raise his spirits."

"This is an Orr party, I expect it will raise at least one part of his anatomy."

"What can I say. I know how to get cocks up."

"Is the party male exclusives?"

"No way. I know plenty of women enjoy his movies, so they are welcome to join in. Like I said, it's a public party. The only restriction is a bad mood. If you can have one of those at a party like this, I definitely don't want you there."

"Well, you've heard it here exclusively. Tucker Orr is throwing a party in honor of Cassius Gold, and he's making it a public affair. Any last word?"

Tucker grinned. "It's going to be a fucking good time."

"And it's saved." She was back to looking disheveled. "I'm going to add an intro and outro, network ID and all that. As well as some background on Cassius. Is there any chance he'd be willing to give an interview?"

"I can pass along the message, but I doubt it."

"Oh I forgot to ask. When is the party ending?"

"I paid for the venue until tomorrow night. I don't expect to be there past tonight, but I want everyone to have a chance to enjoy themselves. I'm pretty sure that if it's still going on the venue owner will be happy to extend the rental."

"I'll just say that it's going on until tomorrow night. I don't want to force the owner into anything he hasn't previously agree to."

"Smart. I'm going to call it done and get going. You going to be there?"

"No choice. With this scoop you've given me I have to cover it. Hopefully I'll find the time to enjoy someone there too."

Tucker ended the call and left his lobby.

Chapter-17

Tucker

He looked around at the empty kitchen, took a sip of his coffee and winced, it was cold. It hadn't taken that long, had it?

He threw the cup away. He was about to query the house when he noticed the sound of the shower. He smiled. Maybe Theo needed him to wash his back? He sauntered to the door, his clothing melting away and barely stopped in time when it didn't open.

It was odd enough someone closed the door, but lock it? Tucker was just slightly offended. What did Theo think? That

he'd sneak in and murder him? No, more likely he hadn't meant to lock the door the settings on this house were old, it hadn't been occupied anytime he was alive, and with Cass to open it for him, he wouldn't have noticed the auto-lock setting. Cass probably hadn't cared.

He'd just let himself in and make himself useful.

The shower shut off.

Really? You're finishing it as I'm ready to come in? Still it wasn't a complete loss just yet. Theo could use the help drying himself, and if they happen to get dirty again in the process, the shower would be right there.

He looked for the lock control, and common sense came sneaking in, unwanted as always, before he did anything more.

Hadn't he decided today would be about Cass? To cheer *him* up? Not to get in Theo's bed? One didn't preclude the other, did it? He could fuck Theo and still go through the plan for Cass.

Except they were best friends. If he fucked Theo, in his current mood Cass would take it as him being left out of things, it wasn't like Tucker could fuck the AI.

Tucker cursed silently. He hated it when he could work out how people would react. It always meant he wasn't getting to have his fun.

There'd be other days, he reminded himself. And who knew, it was possible Theo would be so grateful for Tucker's work he'd offer to have sex with him. Tucker smiled at that idea. How much more fun would it be if Theo initiated things.

He began stroking himself when he heard the steps approaching from the other side of the door. He cursed again and rushed to the table, remembering to put clothes on at the last moment.

The door opened and Theo stepped out, toweling his head, belt over his shoulder. Tucker sighed at the beautiful cock and balls. The rest of Theo was good looking too. Good muscle tone, although he was leaner than pretty much everyone else in the family.

Theo pushed the towel out of his face. "You're done? Sorry for leaving. After a few minutes I decided to have a shower. It's been a few days since I did more than lie on the couch. I hope you didn't wait long."

Tucker shook his head. "Just got back." He stood. "Put the belt on, we need to get going."

Theo eyed him. "Go where?"

Tucker put on his best smile. "It's a surprise."

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

Tucker was taken aback. "Why not?"

"Tucker, you have a one-track mind. The only reason you want me to go anywhere with you is because you're hoping that where ever we end up will make me say yes to having sex with you."

"That isn't true." Not a lie, Tucker told himself. He was

hoping Theo would initiate the sex. Completely different. "This isn't even for you."

Theo's eyes narrowed. "Then why do you need me to come along?"

"Because it's got Cass. You two are kind of a package deal."

"Me?" Cass' tone was warier than Theo.

"Yes, you. I arranged something to cheer you up."

"Why?"

"What do you mean why?"

"I mean you aren't the most altruistic person I know," Cass replied.

"Hey, I can altruistic." He was going to help a venue owner boost and possible restart his business. He'd given an up and comer newscaster a scoop. "Come on Cass, you can trust me, you know that."

"No, I don't. For me to trust you, I'd have to believe you've given up on having sex with Theo. Have you?"

Tucker looked the naked tiger over and licked his lips. "Oh most certainly not."

"Then—"

"But not today."

The silence was complete. The utter disbelief on Theo's face in contrast was loud.

"I give you both my word, as an Orr, that I will not make any moved on Theo today. Today is only about you Cass; and you have my word too that you will enjoy it."

"What would you even know about what I enjoy?"

"I'm not clueless, you know."

Theo looked like he might say something, but then got this distracted look that Tucker guess meant he was listening to Cass. Instead of vocalizing his answers, the fingers on his right hand twitched.

He tried not to give away he was watching, looking for the key that would let him decipher the code, but Theo stilled his hand and raised an eyebrow.

Tucker shrugged. "You're twitchy, I'm curious. Can't be helped." He grinned.

Theo sighed. "It's your decision Cass. I think I'm safe from his advances, if he says he won't do it."

"He won't respect the first line of their own constitution," Cass replied, "how can I expect him to keep his word?"

Tucker hadn't expected to feel his ears warm up in a blush at the indirect chastising. How many time had he had to explain this to his father?

"I do respect it."

"Really?" the disbelief in Cass' tone was palpable.

Tucker sighed. "Yes, I do. When Theo tells me to stop, I stop."

"Your constitution says you need to ask."

"No, it says to respect Consent. I do that."

Cass sighed. "It's implied in the wording. 'The Corporation holds that above all is Consent.'"

Tucker smiled. "You've known me for a while Cass, do I come across as someone to does 'implied?' I put it out there, in front of people so it's clear what I'm after. It's not my fault if I don't interpret it the same way you do. Look, Cass. You and Theo can stay here in this really nice house, lie on the couch and bemoan the fact that you'll never make another movie. Or you can come with me, have some fun, distract yourself from this and who knows. Maybe you'll find a reason to keep going."

Theo glanced at the couch and Tucker saw the disdain in his eyes. Theo, at least had had enough, but he didn't say anything.

"Fine," Cass said. "But to be clear. I'm not going this because I believe you. I'm doing this because Theo needs to go out. It's not fair to him that he has to be stuck in here just because I'm depressed."

Tucker clapped his hands. "Great. I have a hover waiting, come on."

* * * * *

"You ever flown over the continent before?" Tucker kept his tone conversational, but he'd noticed how Theo kept looking out the window.

"Not this one."

"Which one was it then?"

Theo smiled and settled back in the seat. "Not telling you."

Tucker snapped his fingers. "Darn, here got my plan to learn all your deepest secret."

"Can you at least tell me where we're going?"

"The city is Denveraura. Largest city after Vegas on the west side of the continent. If you want larger than either, you need to head to the east side. New Pitts is twice the size of Vegas. We have a lot of industries there."

"And where in Denveraura are we going?"

Tucker smiled. "Not telling you."

Theo snapped his fingers. "Darn and I thought I'd learn all your secrets."

They both laughed.

Five minutes later the hover landed on a crowded public pad. "It's a few blocks from here. If you see newscasters, that's where we're going."

Theo stopped halfway out of the hover. "The news? Tucker, I don't want to..."

"Theo, don't worry. No one is going to link you to what happened on Mars."

"Maybe you've forgotten, but they plastered my face everywhere when they unleashed their AI. The moment one of them records me, every recognition program is going to start flagging

me."

"No program is going to flag you as anything other than the hottest get I haven't done yet."

"Tucker, this isn't the time to be flippant. SolGov wants my head. You think they don't have every program out looking for me?"

Tucker pulled Theo out. "Uncle's already gone in and altered the parameter so you won't trigger them."

"Why?"

Tucker studied the other tiger. Hadn't he worked it out yet? "Because you are family. Uncle will not let anything happen to you."

"Are you telling me that anyone of you could just go on a rampage and that AI would cover your tracks?"

Tucker laughed. "No. If you tried to do anything major, Uncle will stop you. We're not above the laws." Tucker paused. "Well, no more above them than anyone with a lot of money is."

Theo didn't look convinced.

Tucker sighed. "Uncle made it his responsibility to protect us. To protect his family. And that means to protect us from ourselves if he has to."

"So if I decided to steal a bunch of your secrets and ran off, he'd chase me? He'd send your Black Ops after me?"

"He would stop you before you'd gotten anything."

Cass cleared his throat. "Not that this isn't riveting, but I thought this outing was about me?"

Tucker smiled. "Right. We got sidetracked. Follow me, don't worry and listen for the crowd."

"Crowd?" Theo and Cass said at the same time.

Tucker smiled and headed to the street.

* * * * *

The noise was already loud before someone pinged him and paid attention to the returned information, then they exploded in cheers.

Tucker smiled and waved and laughed as Theo tried to shrink in on himself.

'Relax,' he texted him. 'You're just the guy with me.'

'I hate this,' came the reply.

Tucker kissed a guy, groped another as he made his way through the crowd. 'Just have fun, you're a citizen now, not a spy. This isn't a movie, it's just a party.'

'Cass cutting in, but I don't see how I'm supposed to enjoy a party.'

'Trust me Cass. Just trust me.'

The progress was slow, men were throwing themselves at Tucker. Tucker wasn't in the habit of making public appearances. He was one of the more reserved brothers when it came to the public, but he did have a reputation for being fun-loving, he simply didn't spend a lot of time planetside usually.

All he had on by the time he and Theo reached the entrance

to the Allegorium was the belt and he already had cum stains in his fur. Some guys had been really excited to meet him. Theo still had his pants on, but his erection was visible as was the wet spot. He'd gotten swept into the excitement.

The doors were closed, with them broadcasting that the venue was reserved. Tucker contacted it, identified himself when through the steps needed so he'd be granted temporary control, and pushed the doors open.

The ermine waited for him but before he could say anything, the crowd forced their way inside, pushing Tucker and Theo past the man. Tucker only had time to grab two of the lube rags as they passed the pile and they were in the auditorium.

Tucker pulled Theo along toward one of the elevated platforms but didn't climb it yet. He looked through the Allegorium's list of provided music for a good dance selection and set it to blast through the large room. This wouldn't stop anyone from having sex, but it would encourage energy more than lying around fucking.

'Cass,' Tucker texted preemptively, 'I'm just giving time for the room to fill and people to get excited.'

'Excited over what?'

'You'll see.' Tucker was amazed Cass hadn't picked up the news broadcast about this party and the star of honor. He didn't know how Cass compared as an AI to Uncle, but Uncle had an ear on everything going on. Maybe this was a sign of Cass' depression that he'd turned in on himself.

The auditorium was darker, having just enough light so people could make out who they were making out with, and in such a crowd no one bothered pinging anyone. So the guys, and gals who hugged, kissed and groped Tucker, did so because he was there, not because of who he was.

Someone was sucking him off when the Allegorium told him it had reached capacity. He let whoever it was finish him off, caught his breath and heaved himself up. The platforms were off limits because they were intended for what he would do and because there was no way to control how many people would climb on otherwise.

He watched the motion of the crowd, the dancing, the sex, the sexual dancing. He could leave it at that and no one would complain, being able to brag they had been at an Orr party would make them stars in their own rights.

He slowly lowered the music and brought up a spotlight on him. The crowd didn't notice the change as it was happening, but it caught on.

"Is everyone having fun?" he asked. His voice connected to the Allegorium's broadcasting system. He even sent it outside, where more people were waiting for a chance to come in.

A cheer went up.

"I'm glad to hear it. Now, before we officially start this, I'd like to set down... I'm not going to call them rules, just

suggestions." He paused. "There's a lot of people who want to take part in this party, so don't be selfish. When you need a break, don't just fall asleep on the floor. You still count as a body for the room limit. Go outside and let someone else come in. This party is for everyone, so everyone should have a chance to be here. Right?"

A sound that could be approval went up.

"Lube rags are provided, use them. I don't know many people who enjoy a dry fuck. Don't take the chance. Beverages are provided, but not alcohol. I don't care if your Implant has a sobriety setting, not everyone has it and most cases of non-consent infractions happen when someone's drunk. This is for all of us to have fun, so be considerate and leave the alcohol outside. I can't make the rules on what happens outside. Terry won't let me."

Laughter.

"There are people here without Implants. Do not discriminate. And be careful of their interface. They need those to interact with the Allegorium."

More sounds that could be agreement or maybe a lot of orgasms.

"The only other suggestion I can think of should cover what I didn't think of. Don't be a moron. We're here to have fun so don't do anything that will get in the way of that. Got it?"

A cheer, definitely approval.

"Good. Now, I need to know, are there any fans of Cassius Gold movies here?"

The cheer was so loud Tucker felt his bones vibrate with it.

"Wow," he said when it quieted. "Wow," he repeated. He hadn't expected that. He was going to have to find a way to repay Denise.

"I'm glad there's so many of you. As you'll know from the news broadcast, I happen to know Mister Gold. No, I haven't known him long, unlike the rumors that fly on the net, we Orrs aren't on a first name basis with everyone in the sex industries. Especially not with those people who claim it's us in those movies they've put out. There's only three authorized Orr sex movies, the Centennial party, Sam's tour of the animal husbandry farm, and the still infamous Caleb recordings. Anything else is fraud and we take removing them from circulation seriously, so don't fall for them."

He cleared his throat. "Sorry, got sidetracked. Mister Gold has recently been let go by his distribution company." There was a gasp. "It isn't because of anything he's done. The decision was made without giving him a chance to appeal. He wasn't even told. He found out when he went to send them his newest movies. Needless to say, it hit him hard. Now, I actually didn't know he was that Cassius Gold when I started talking with him. No, I haven't physically met him. Mister Gold likes his privacy. When

I asked him why he didn't do any appearances, he told me he didn't want to be a distraction from the movies."

Tucker took a breath. "I'll be honest with you, I didn't really get why it hit him so hard. I mean, no one is stopping him from making more movies. What I didn't get is that he doesn't make the movies for himself. He makes them for you. All of you. I'm not sure I've ever met someone as selfless as he is."

Tucker noticed the room was silent.

"Come on, cheer up people, this is a party, not a funeral. I didn't gather you all here because I want us to Mourn, but because I want you to show Cassius how much you appreciate his work."

The cheer was tentative.

"Come on people, I thought you were fans of his movies."

The cheer almost rocked him off the platform.

"That's better. Now, this is in his honor, so Mister Gold may, or may not be among us. I don't know. But I am in contact with him. Cassius?" Tucker made a show of looking the crowd over. When he looked at Theo, he raised an eyebrow.

"Cassius, are you there?"

"I—" Cass' voice broke. He cleared his throat. "I'm here."

A hush fell over the room.

"Have you been listening?"

"I have. I didn't know you could be quite this long-winded."

Tucker grinned. "I'm full of hidden talents. How does it feel to know so many people are here to celebrate you?"

"It's—it's humbling. I know the numbers. But to see so many people here... I'm not sure I have to words."

"You see them? Does that mean you're here, among us?"

"The news is live broadcasting the party, Tuck, so maybe not."

Tucker smiled. "Maybe not. Everyone, say hi to Cassius Gold."

The cheer reverberated for a long time.

"I think we might have triggered some of the old seismic sensors back in Vegas with that," Tucker said. "Alright, so I got a lot of your fans here, and I'm thinking they are owed something, don't you?"

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Well, they're all here, so maybe they would like to see one of your movies?"

"I suppose they would, they're all available, so you can play one."

"They're not all available, are they?"

"Of course, none of them were removed from—oh."

"Right." Tucker smiled. "There's three of them only one person has seen at this point." Tucker eyed the crowd. "No, it isn't me. Come on, you think someone like Cassius Gold would

trust me with his new work? Everyone knows I'd start blabbing them as soon as I saw them. So, Cassius, what do you say?"

"I-I can't."

The crowd booed.

Tucker waited for it to die down. "Why not? You're not dead, are you? I mean you might be dead to them, but you're not actually dead and they know it, right?"

"Well, yes, but it could cause problems."

"So, it's a contract thing?" texts after texts were popping up in Tucker's sight he had them auto file in a folder. He wasn't doing this behind the scene. He caught Theo's worried expression, so he sent back one text. 'Trust me.'

"I guess you could say that." Cass replied.

"So it's some bullshit to the effect of not having the rights to get another distributor to publish your movies?"

"Something like that." Cass' tone was cautious. So much so Tucker wanted to laugh.

"Cassius, this is a private venue. It's just me and a few of my friends." A cheer went up. "How can they complain about giving a private showing? Especially since they aren't even going to look at your movies?"

There was silence, and the crowd held its collective breath.

"Oh," Cass said. "Oh! I hadn't considered that!" Life was coming back in the voice. "I mean, you're right, it isn't like they can do anything to me."

"And if they try, Orr Corp happens to have some very good lawyers."

"I'm not an Orr citizen."

Tucker waved that aside. "You're a friend of mine, that's almost as good. So? What do you say?"

"I say yes!" another bone-rattling cheer. "Can I address them?" Cass asked once it quieted.

"Believe me Cassius, they are all ears."

Cass cleared his throat. "Hello."

The crowd answered with a near synchronized 'hi!'

"I don't think you know what this means to me. I'm not a people person, but—there was a hitch in his voice—fuck this. I am not getting choked up."

Tucker chuckled along with everyone.

"Before I start, I have no choice but to this. By contract law, I can not authorize you to make a recording of the movies I will be showing, and you are certainly not allowed to show them to your friends, or make them available over the net. Doing so would really piss off my distributor, understand?"

A cheer went up.

"Okay, so this first movie I started working a few years ago. It's called 'The Lone Miner.' It's the story of this lone miner who lives alone except for the guys he sees when selling the ore he found and how he releases his pent up sexual need

during those visits. I hope you enjoy it."

Tucker received a file. He sent it to the Allegorium to play, making sure it showed on the screens as well as being available to be accessed by Implant. He jumped down from the platform to be pressed against it and kissed hard.

Tucker melted in the kiss. Moaned as he put a hand on that ass and squeezed it, grinding against a hard cock. Fuck Theo was a good kisser.

The tiger broke the kiss and whispered. "Don't get any ideas, the kiss is from Cass. You have no idea how much this helped."

Tucker grinned and placed his other hand on Theo's other cheeks and pulled him tight. "You know, I'm sure there's more you could do for Cass as a way of thanking me."

Theo laughed and pushed away. Tucker let him go. One of these days, he told himself. One of these days he was going to have that ass.

Tucker turned to find a pair of breasts pressed against him. He smiled at the tigress. 'I want your babies,' she texted him.

Tucker smiled and shook his head. He turned her toward another guy and they kissed. Tucker used the lube rag to grope the next cock his hand reached, got a nod, turned and pressed his ass against the cock, sighing as it entered him. Strong arms help him as he was slowly fucked to the sound of moaning coming from the sound system.

* * * * *

Tucker pulled out of the guy he'd just finished fucking. The only thing he knew about him was that he wasn't Theo. And he only knew that because he was certain that even in this environment Theo wouldn't let him.

He stretched, and a cock fell in his hand. He grinned. It was a thick and heavy cock. He brought it to his mouth without even looking at who it was attached to. He grabbed the ass cheeks and got the guy to fuck his mouth hard and deep.

He held him there as he came, the 'rimming protocol' engaging when he started running out of breath. The man was done cumming long before he had to worry about air. He moved away and grinned at the bull, licking his lips.

He stood and felt a cock press between his cheeks. He pushed back and the next ten minutes were spent being fucked. After that he fucked someone, was sucked off, sucked someone off, fucked a few times, all the while trying to locate Theo.

He found him pressed between a cheetah pounding his ass and a dog of some kind moving on his cock. The tiger didn't look entirely awake.

Tucker crouched by his head and shook him. "Theo?"

Theo looked up, his eyes going over the hard cock and balls to Tucker's face. "I told you—"

"I just wanted to check if you wanted to head out. We've been here for almost fourteen hours. I know marathon orgies

aren't something you're used to. So I figured you might have enough."

"Give me a bit." He motioned to the two guys with him.

Tucker found himself a cock to bounce on while he waited, adding to the Sheppard's cum covered chest by the time Theo joined him. The two of them were just as cum covered at the canine.

Tucker knew, from having tried when he was younger, that it was a lot of work to go through an orgy and not end up covered in cum.

"How's Cass?" Tucker asked as they threaded through the moving bodies.

"I think you managed to give him an orgasm of his own with this. It's quiet now, but he was gushing for the first hour. I think he's archiving all the footage he recorded."

Tucker tilted an ear before someone turned his head and kissed him. He gave the man a grope then excused himself.

Theo chuckled and answered Tucker's question. "Cass is wired into my body so I serve as the template for a lot of the characters in the movies, and he records the guys I have sex with for the motion and general body shape."

"So are all the movies basically you?"

Theo shook his head. "No. He cuts everything around changes the scenes. Pieces of me are in all of them, but you wouldn't be able to get any recognition programs to identify me."

They pushed out of the auditorium and into the Allegorium's lobby and two more people were let in. The sounds of partying outside the building reached them each time the doors opened.

Tucker was pinged with an urgent flag he stepped out of the travel path, pulling Theo with him and looked it over, reading it as he saw the ermine hurrying his way. The message simply said 'please wait.'

They ermine looked like he'd enjoyed the party as much as everyone else. Fur matted with cum and smelling of women as he got closer.

"Mister Orr, thank you for waiting."

"Not a problem Hubert, but I hope this is going to be quick."

"Yes, of course. It's just that at the start of all this you said that Mister Gold didn't have a distributor anymore."

"Yes, and if you remember he mentioned that his contract prevents him from seeking another one."

"Yes, yes, I understand, but I'm wondering if he'd be interested in entering into a deal with me for private showings of his new movies. I'd only show them here for a limited amount of time, it would allow his fans to see his work. I would be willing to pay him at least—"

Tucker grabbed the man's shoulders. "Tell you what. I'll pass the message along and if it's something he's interested in, he'll contact you directly, how does that sound?"

The man reigned in his excitement. "It sounds more than fair, Mister Tucker, thank you."

Tucker leaned in, licked the fresh cum on the man's muzzle and kissed him. "You're welcome."

Outside they had to push their way and decline more invitations to sex. The party had spread three blocks away from the building. This was a lot more people than he'd expected.

He was pinged and sighed as the news broadcasting company logo accompanied it. He looked around for anyone looking out-of-place like any news person did as he tried to decide if he'd get into more trouble running from them, or talking to them.

He saw the rottweiler and decided she'd be worth talking to. He motioned for a quieter area of the park across the road and she headed there.

"You want to be on the news?" he asked Theo.

"Absolutely not!"

Tucker grinned. "Then give me a few minutes, I need to talk to her. We're sort of under contract to give an interview with someone anytime one of us does something newsworthy." He looked at the crowd. "I think this qualifies. Go fuck someone."

He headed for where Denise was waiting for him. He went to hug her, but she stepped away.

"Sorry, Sir, these are my work clothes. The company frowns on me getting stains on them."

Tucker looked down at himself. "I tend to forget I'm matted with cum. I take it you didn't get a chance to enjoy the party?"

"I couldn't make it inside, but I spent a few hours having sex after recording the first segment."

"You should have pinged me, I'd have let you in. It's the least I owe you."

She smiled. "I'd take an introduction to Cassius Gold instead."

Tucker chewed his lips. "That isn't something I can promise. All I can do is pass the message along. It would be his decision."

"Fair enough. Mind if I start recording?"

"Go ahead, I can give you ten minutes."

"It won't take that long." She released a handful of drones and they took position around the two of them. "This is Denise Galliant for the Inquisitor, I managed to corner Tucker Orr, who organized this impromptu party. How do you think it went?"

Tucker smiled. "It went splendidly."

"Do you think Cassius Gold will be making more movies after this?"

"I have it on good authority that he's already working on something."

"How does it feel to use your position of authority to encourage people to break the law?"

Tucker grinned. "Now, now Denise. Nothing of the sort happened here tonight and you know it."

"Mister Gold just released three movies against the rules of his contract."

"No, this was a private showing. And he specifically told everyone here they couldn't distribute it."

"Mister Orr, can you expect anyone to believe this was anything other than an attack against his distributor? They never gave consent for—"

"Let me stop you right here Denise." Tucker had trouble keeping the smile from broadening. He liked this woman. "Companies are not people. Only people are covered by the constitution. If Mister Gold's old distributor wishes to file grievances, they're welcome to do so. And I'll make sure Cassius had the very best lawyers I can find. Now, I'm not much for laws." He grinned now. "But I think they're going to have trouble proving this is going to impact their bottom line since they weren't going to distribute the movies. As far as I'm concerned, that clause keeping him from seeking another distributor was pure maliciousness on their part. If they aren't interested in his movies, they have no business in keeping him from finding another way of reaching his fans."

"Are you planning on putting on another party like this?"

"No." He paused. "But then again, I wasn't planning on putting this one on until twenty minutes before I contacted you. So, who knows."

"Rumors are that you're not going to be on the Mercury when it takes off in a few hours, are they true? Or is that where you're heading now?"

"I'm heading for a shower and then home. No Orrs on this run. We have family matters to take care of."

"Care to elaborate?"

"Sorry Denise. I'm not authorized to comment on company businesses."

"Alright. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me, Mister Orr."

"It was a pleasure Denise, hopefully we can do this again." She blinked, and the drones came to her hand.

"Thank you for giving me a chance to remind everyone that companies aren't covered by the corporation."

"There's a push to have them recognized, so I thought you'd want to comment on that. Now, off the record, is that Cassi—"

Tucker blocked her sight with a hand as she turned to look toward where he'd left Theo. "He's just a friend," he answered firmly. "And I would appreciate it if you didn't bring him into this, Denise."

"He's a tiger."

"I have plenty of friends who are tigers."

She nodded. "Most of them are your family."

"Denise. We got off to a nice start here. Please don't ruin it because you think there's a story here. My friends shouldn't have to have their lives upended just because my family has to

be in the media's sights. I'm asking you nicely to forget you saw him."

She fixed Tucker. "The fact you are asking like that confirms there's something there. If I don't look into it, someone else will."

"And when I find out about it, I'll deal with them. They won't get the benefit of a friendly warning. Feel free to pass that message along and remind them what happened to Mister Gunther when he decided not to heed a friendly warning."

"Gunther broke the law. Looking into your friend isn't illegal. What you're doing here is coming very close to impeding on the news freedom rights."

"I'm not stopping you from doing anything Denise. I'm simply asking, nicely, that you leave him out of this. All of this."

"Will you contact me first, whenever you decide to go public with whatever he is about?"

"I can do that, yes."

She smiled. "In that case, I look forward to our next interview." She turned and headed out.

Tucker sighed. Not how he'd expected this to go. This was why he stayed out of the news light when he could. But he trusted her to keep to her word. If she didn't Uncle would find out, and Tucker had warned her.

He found Theo sucking off a badger who was being fucked by a ram. Tucker declined the offers and helped Theo to his feet once he was done. He wiped the cum off Theo's muzzle with a finger and licked it off.

"How did it go?" Theo asked.

"As well as any interview ever goes. She's going to go far if she's careful not to step on powerful toes. She had a good eye for stories. Don't worry, I made it clear to her you were not a story."

"Isn't that going to make her want to dig? Can Uncle protect me from the news?"

"This is our country, Theo. If Uncle doesn't want something to happen, it doesn't." Tucker took a breath. That was not the direction he wanted the evening to go into. "Come on, let's find a public shower away from here and wash off. Then we can head back."

The first one they found that wasn't full, people leaving the party were also looking to clean up. Was a dozen block away, in a quiet neighborhood, which might account for it being empty when they reached it.

"Where do I hang up the belt?" Theo asked. "This thing's valuable, right?"

"Keep it on, it's waterproof. It's just about anything proof. You need specialized nanites to get through it." Tucker stepped under a shower head and the water began flowing.

Theo stepped under the one next to him, looked at Tucker,

then moved one away. Considered the separation and stepped over the next one over.

"Should I be offended?" Tucker asked, trying to decide if he should be.

"Fourteen hours of sex," Theo said. "I'm thinking that if there's any time when you're going to take a chance to molest me, it's going to be now." Theo was smiling as he raised his head to the water.

Tucker laughed. "Maybe it's more than you're worried your own self-control is going to slip. You ever had that much sex in your life before?"

"Can't say that I ever had. I'm amazed I lasted the whole thing, that I'm not exhausted right now. I mean you guys are made to be able to do that, I wasn't."

"That part didn't come from the clinic, it's pure O—"

"I swear," a man said from outside the showers, "if the foreman doesn't stop riding my ass. I'm going to bend him over and fuck him."

"He's just doing his job, if you want to complain tell it to—" he fell silent on noticing they weren't alone.

They were muscular with their clothing clinging to them with sweat. They looked at each other, shrugged and began undressing.

Tucker went back to washing himself. Public showers could handle more than a dozen people at the same time. One of the men took the jet next to Tucker and for a few minutes it was simply the sound of the water and of guys washing up.

"You want help with your back?" the guy said, his soapy hands already massaging Tucker's shoulder.

Tucker grinned. That had taken longer than he'd expected. "I always do." He opened his eyes and the other man was rubbing Theo's back. Theo was erect too. Tucker noticed the other man wasn't as the arm went around his neck and tightened.

Tucker grabbed for the arm and tried to pry it away but he didn't have the leverage and then a kick to his knees made him drop, keeping him from even pushing back until they hit something.

He kept fighting as he cursed himself for letting his guard down. But damn it, this was home. He shouldn't have to worry about something like this when he was home.

"Help!" Call yelled. "Tuck, Theo's running out of air! I called the police but they won't be here in time!"

'Rimjob protocol activated.' The timer began rolling down. Tucker kept fighting, and after a minute he became sluggish, his hands slipped from the arm. He tried to raise them, but they didn't even make it halfway. His head lolled to the side.

The arm didn't let off.

"Don't kill him," someone hissed. The other man.

"What do you fucking care?"

"You know that is? You do any damage to him and we're going

to have the whole fucking country after us. Just put him down. He isn't who we want, anyway. Don't drop him, idiot!"

"Bitch bitch bitch. I swear working with you is like working with my mother." Tucker was lowered to the ground.

"Yeah? Does your mother let you fuck her too?"

"Ah, she wishes. No one wants to touch her anymore. She's ugly."

Tucker cracked an eye open. Both men had their back to him. He unclipped the belt and reached down for it.

"Aren't you supporting her?"

"You kidding? Do you have any idea how much money it cost keeping you pretty? I've got nothing left for her."

"You say the sweetest things. Jerk."

Tucker closed his hand on the buckle. Cass was silent. Maybe he was trying to find a way to alert someone else? He'd told uncle by now, even if Tucker hadn't bothered. But there was nothing he could do legally. Any of the tricks he'd pull in space would be noticed.

And it wasn't like Tucker needed help.

He stood, making the belt straight and hard, and crossed the space. The man holding Theo cursed, pulling Theo away and unbalancing his partner, but Tucker adjusted and hit the man square on the head. Fuck bodily damage, he knew Theo hadn't given consent to any of this. Tucker certainly hadn't. The man went down.

The other man looked at the clothes hanging by the entrance. Naked he had no weapons. He dropped Theo and lunged at Tucker. Tucker sidestepped, punched the side of the man's face and then over the head with the belt. Down he went too.

Tucker went to Theo. "How is he?"

"Alive," Cass replied. "Unconscious due to being suffocated, but as far as I can tell he's going to be okay. Who are they? Why are they after Theo?"

Tucker breathed easier. "I don't know, but the police can ask them. I hear footsteps approaching."

"That can't be the police," Cass said. "I'm monitoring their frequencies. They're still three minutes away."

'Uncle?' Tucker texted.

'None of mine either.'

Tucker sighed and unclipped Theo's belt and pulled it off. He ignored Cass' protest and made it straight and hard as he moved next to the door.

He listened, four people, possibly five, no more than six. The first two entered and headed for Theo. They paused when they notice the other two unconscious men. Tucker had already hit one. The other went down in the return swing, muzzle broken and bleeding.

Tucker dodged the punch, used both belts to hit the attacker in the stomach. She went off her feet with an exhale of breath and fell face first. Tucker kicked her in the face as he

blocked another arm. He swung hard at the man's face and he spun off balance, dropping to the ground and allowing another to run at Tucker.

The impact made Tucker drop a belt, and he saw stars as they hit a wall. When his vision cleared, the man was still keeping him in place while punching Tucker in the side.

Tucker changed his grip in the belt so the end extended an inch past his closed fist as he brought it down as hard as he could on the man's back. There was a crack at the impact and the man dropped.

He whimpered. "My legs. I can't feel my legs."

Tucker snorted. The man should be happy he was still alive. If he'd hit any higher, he could have killed him. He looked at the people on the ground. Unconscious or moaning in pain.

Sirens were approaching, but still far. Theo was looking at him, rubbing his neck.

Tucker grabbed the belt he dropped and sat next to the other tiger, handing him his belt.

"Where did you learn to do that?" Theo's voice was rough maybe his throat had been damaged?

"When I was twenty, this stick expert was giving demonstrations. Otter, beautiful brown fur, thick like only otter fur can be. Strong, agile, and this thick cock. I was in lust the moment I saw him. He also taught, so I enrolled."

"You two fucked?" Theo sounded a little better.

"Oh yeah. The guy was a master at that too."

"Okay, so why stick with it if you got to fuck?"

"He wouldn't let me top him unless I could beat him with the sticks."

Theo smiled. "Of course that would be sex driven too."

"I'm an easy guy to figure out."

"So you beat him?"

Tucker shook his head. "After a year and a half he got an offer to take his performance through the system."

"So you saw him again?"

"No. When he came back this way he didn't reply to my messages. I wasn't that important to him."

"I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"You did all that, and he just forgot about you."

Tucker laughed. "I did all that so I'd get a chance to fuck him. He didn't mean that much to me either."

Theo rested his head against the wall. "I will never understand you."

"What's there to understand, I told you. It's just sex. There are plenty of guys out there. There are plenty of better guys than him out there.

"You said he was good."

"He was, but I've had better since. I've had bigger, thicker." Tucker shrugged. "You name it, I've had it better. And

I'm sure I'll have better than them, eventually. It's just sex. Are you telling me you remember all the guys you've had sex with?"

"No, but I remember those I put a lot of effort into having sex with."

Tucker shrugged. "When it ended, did it ruin your life?"

"No, but I knew it was going to end. In my job, when I go after a guy it isn't going to last."

"Can I ask something?" Cass asked.

"Shoot."

"I thought the belt was mine, well Theo's. Aren't I supposed to be the only one who can access it?"

"Sorry, I have an override."

"Let me guess, everyone in your family does. For emergencies and such."

Tucker didn't miss the way he said the word, but ignored it. "Something like that. Please don't go altering any of it. There's a reason they're designed that way."

"I'm willing to bet your belt doesn't have that."

"It does. You have the exact same design as everyone else. You're not being treated differently. Well, other than not sleeping with any of us."

Theo's reply was cut up by a man in police uniform stepping in the shower building. They looked at the people on the ground, then at Tucker and Theo.

Theo pointed to Tucker. "Don't look at me, he did all this."

The officer looked at Tucker, then the seven people on the ground. "You did this?"

Tucker smiled. "Hey, they touched me without my consent. I had to remind them how things are done in this country."

Chapter-18

Theo

Theo ran the last kilometer as hard as he could, which left him barely able to breathe by the time he reached the house. The orgy, which had happened two weeks before, and the attack afterward, had been a reminder that since his rescue by the Orrs, the extent of his exercise regiment had been sex. It might be recognized as a valid regiment, but Theo had decided to get back into running.

He'd been surprised to find multiple running paths on the islands, even one that went over all of them, with a force field path marked where he could run over the water between islands.

Of course, this being an Orr property, the path was lined with many places for people to rest, relax and have sex, and Theo enjoyed some of them every day.

He waited until he could breathe before stepping up the porch and to the door. "Any updates on the attack?" He headed

for the drink dispenser and took the steaming cup of coffee waiting for him there.

"Yes, but nothing helpful," Cass answered. "Where do you want it?"

Theo sat at the table. "Here works." Files and documents appeared on the table. "I'm, surprised it took this long. I'd have expected the Orrs to go at this hard."

"As far as I can tell, they didn't get involved. Even Uncle only stayed at the periphery. My guess is that it's because you were the target and not one of the known family member."

"I'd have expected Eric to go to war because of this."

"He might have wanted to, but that would mean making who you are public knowledge. It looks like they aren't ready for that."

"Good. Maybe this will reinforce that I'm just one of Tucker's friend." Tucker had stayed away since the attack and since the others didn't bother informing Theo of what was happening, he didn't know why.

The document Cass had copied from the police department only dealt with the seven attackers. All of which worked for the same construction company. Were the construction company actually. Two of them had served in the Orr Corp army until they were discharged for reasons not stated in the forms. Black Ops? If what had caused them to be kicked out hadn't officially happened, it would be tough to explain it.

Three had served and left the moment their first term was done. The other two didn't have any indication of being part of the military, but they had arrest records. Obtaining goods without consent; theft.

"Did they find any link between them?"

"Nothing that connects them all before the construction company. Some knew each other, and it's possible to connect them that way, but it's indirect at best."

Theo nodded. "Black ops get kicked out, but they liked it too much. Civilian life didn't work for them. They form the construction company and recruit people they knew, and they bring in a friend or two. Where are the financial records?"

A document flashed, and he picked it up, looking at the scrolling text.

"The individual's finances are unremarkable. Within the median for construction workers."

"The company's a different story," Theo said, still reading. "According to this it brings in twenty percent more money on each job than other companies. Where does it go?"

"Reinvested into equipment."

"Except they aren't hiring more people, they aren't taking on larger jobs. Always the same kind of jobs. House renovations. Have any of the jobs noted her happened? Or is this just code for whatever else they did?"

"Permits were filed, purchase orders for materials are on

records. Customers signed off on the work, signed it was all done properly."

"Has anyone gone and talk to those people?"

"Not yet. It's on the list of things still needing to be done."

"Can you access any historical records? Did anyone see the work being done?"

"Not without breaking privacy laws. Do you really need the confirmation?"

Theo shook his head. "No. This is good work, but we've set up enough cover stories to be able to recognize one. The question is who hired them."

"If it wasn't for Uncle's assurance he changed the records enough, you can't be recognized as the person involved in what happened on Mars, I'd say it could be any of the corporations."

"But if we take Mars out of the equation, that only leaves one."

"Vanguard does have a history of going to great lengths to repatriate citizens. As a corporation it is rather possessive."

"And considering mom and dad broke their contract when they took me away, it would make them want me back pretty hard."

"And you are proof they stole genetic material from Eric. Your existence links them links Vanguard to Eric's kidnapping thirty years ago. So long as you're walking around, that little incident can come back and cause them a lot of trouble."

"Can you link the attackers to Vanguard?"

"No, as far as I can tell, the payments are always local."

"That's easy enough to make happen."

"Yes, the police is looking into that angle, not Vanguard directly, but in trying to work out who paid them. They—"

"Cass?"

"Sorry, Trevor contacted you, he found something."

"How? I thought he did analytics, or something like that."

"He doesn't say, but he wants to meet. Tell you in person."

"Where? And can you confirm it came from him?"

"It's routed through the corporate building and it has his messaging identifying. I can try to untangle the provenance within the building, but with the number of people there it's going to take a while. As for where, in the building, Room 7628."

"Did he give any details as to what it's about?"

"No. I've asked on your behalf. He replied that it's too sensitive to discuss in any way that could be intercepted."

Theo stood. "That would mesh with Vanguard being behind this. Tell him I'll be there in an hour. I need a shower and food first."

* * * * *

The seventy-sixth floor was still low enough to deal mainly with the day-to-day life of the corporation. The people here had the haggard expression of people who had to put in long hours,

or deal with customer service. Many of them had the wild eye expression Theo knew he'd worn his first time here.

No, the large hallway with walls and ceiling projecting outside scenes no longer registered, neither did the occasional couples having sex. By the number of people gawking at those, Theo guessed that even for a country as sexual as the Orrs, people through there were places that should be respected, and the corporate headquarters was one of those.

"It's the room at the end of the corridor, but I can't read anything inside the room."

"Empty, or shielded?"

"Shielded. No signal in or out. No scanners in it. None of the scanners outside can see through the walls."

Theo slowed. "Where's Trevor?"

"I can't find him. If I try to message him it comes back as unreachable."

"As if he was inside a shielded room?"

"Yes, or if he blocked all communication."

"The shielded room is more likely." He reached the door, and it opened. He looked in. Four meters square room with a table and chairs in the middle. No one in the room, but there was a door opposite him. "What's through the door?"

"No idea. Could be a bathroom, or another room. It's part of the shielded section. Even with the door open, I can't scan through the walls."

Theo looked around. No one was paying him undue attention. "If this is Vanguard trying to catch me, you have to admire their boldness." He stepped in and the door closed behind him.

"I don't think you're going to say when you wake up in one of their cells."

The opposing door opened, and the mongoose's eyes went wild.

Theo was speechless.

The mongoose had his arms around him before Theo could react.

"Theo, thank God you're okay. They told me they'd captured you. I tried to explain to them you weren't the bad guy. I was so worried about you."

Theo shook himself. This was so fucking worse than Vanguard. He grabbed Marcus by the shoulders and pushed him away. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here for the job."

"What job?"

"The managerial one. Can you imagine it? Orr Corp wants to hire me. I don't think they've ever had someone from SolGov work in this building."

"What are you talking about?" This made no sense. Tensions were as high between Orr and SolGov as with Vanguard, but hiring a SolGov citizen to work in the headquarter? They'd never do that. And Marcus? There was no way this was a coincidence.

"I got the offer two days ago. They even paid to fly me here. It was on a public hover, an Orr one, so you can imagine what they were doing, but still they paid to bring me here. I can't believe they have sex even here. In this building. It's their headquarter for God's sake, you'd think they'd have more decorum here."

And Marcus actually believed they wanted to hire him?

The mongoose smiled at him. "Do you work here too? Did they finally believe me and release you?" He motioned to the room. "This is really private, we can celebrate our reunion."

Theo just stared at the man. What did he think this was? One of Cass' porn movies? He should get out of here. Walk out and not look back, but he needed to know what this was. Who was behind this? Why would Orr Corp do this?

He turned Marcus toward the table. "Sit."

The mongoose sat on the table, facing Theo and spread his legs. How he could be hard in this situation was beyond Theo's understanding.

"On the chair. Damn it Marcus, this isn't a game."

Marcus' face fell. "I'm sorry." He sat, looking meek and broken. Theo cursed himself to snapping, but this was serious. He took the chair opposite Marcus.

"Start from the beginning, Marcus."

With a grin, the mongoose said, "well, in the beginning I was born—" the words and grin ended when he noticed the hard look Theo was giving him. "Sorry," he whispered.

"Marcus, You need to take this seriously, okay?"

Marcus nodded. "They found me tied up where you left me. I played the victim, like your message said to, but then they started saying really horrible things about you, and I had to set them straight. You're not a bag guy Theo, I know it here." He placed a hand over his heart. "It didn't go over well. The more I tried to convince them you were a victim too, the more they tried to get me to admit I was in league with what you were doing."

He threw his hands up. "I didn't even know what was going on. I mean I heard about it, but by the time I woke up it was over. You were gone, and all I had left of you was your message. Then they told me they had caught you and you'd given me up to save your tail. Well, I knew that was a lie. You'd never give me up, what we have it's special. They said I'd go to one of the work camps on Luna if I didn't tell them everything." He shuddered. "I heard rumors about those. Not pretty." He smiled. "So I told them how we were lovers and how much you loved me and that once all that was cleared up we were going to spend the rest of our days together. It didn't go over all that well."

"Marcus, I'm not—"

"But then things did clear up. I was released, put on a SolGov ship and send back to Luna. I didn't hear from you. I guess they wouldn't let you talk to me while you were a

prisoner. I never heard you'd been released. The last thing I did hear was that you'd been taken in for intensive questioning. It was all over the news. I guess it's after that they released you."

Marcus gave him a small smile. "I lost my job. Seems there was some confusion with whoever it was who took over my identity on Mars. Did this my job pretty well from what I was able to find out, but I won't be allowed anywhere near the government after that."

His smile broadened, and he grabbed Theo's hand. "But it's for the best, now we're together again, and we're both working here. It's going to be amazing."

Theo fought the urge to pull his hand away. "What about this job you got offered?"

"There were no details. This was supposed to be where I'd find out. I guess you found out I was here and couldn't wait to see me either."

How someone could be so deluded, Theo had no idea. Carefully he extricated his hand from Marcus'. He didn't want to be here. Fuck he didn't want to see Marcus' broken heart, again. Every seduction was based on the idea he wouldn't have to be there when the breakup happened. He wouldn't have to see the pain he'd cause in the pursuit of his job.

Maybe that made him a coward.

"Marcus." He thought about walking out, but if nothing else, he owed him this. He owed him a clean break, the opportunity to move on with his life. "There is no us."

"Of course there is. Our time on the Mercury was wonderful. I've never been with anyone who got me as much as you did who didn't push me, let me—"

"Marcus, I researched you. I know you better than you probably know yourself. I made—" he swallowed eyed the door. No, not this time. Someone had orchestrated this, and when he found them, he would tell them how little he appreciated it, but Marcus was a victim here. Through all of this he'd been a victim. Victims deserved closure even if it was the painful kind.

"I made you fall in love with me."

Marcus scoffed. "You can't do that. Love isn't something you—"

"Marcus, I gave you what you wanted. Someone you could be yourself around, insecurities and all."

"I'm not insecure."

Theo didn't comment on that. "I watched the Bondo movies days before we met because of your last name and because you enjoy them."

"But you know so much about them, you liked talking about them."

"Come on Marcus. You have access to the net just like I do, it's all there. And to be honest, I can't stand those movies."

They're all poor excuses for action scenes and sex. I'm not even going to comment on the spy stuff because I could spend hours tearing each movie apart."

"But we watched the movie together. We had..."

"You initiated that."

"You liked it." Marcus forced a smile, but he fell when Theo didn't echo it.

"Of course I did. I like sex, but I didn't like it because I was in love with you. I just like sex. I used it to help make you fall in love with me."

"But you held me. We made plans. We were going to be together."

Theo found he had trouble speaking. "I lied. I'm sorry."

"No." Marcus' broke. "No. I don't believe you. What we had was real. Why are you saying this?"

Theo took a breath. "Because it's the truth. I'm a spy, Marcus. My job was to replace you on Mars, use your position to infiltrate a building and acquire information. They have to have shown you the recordings of my passing myself off as you in the government center."

"They did, but it could have been any tiger."

"You know that isn't true. You know me intimately. Why do you think I was so surprised when you were in your apartment?"

"You let me help you do whatever you were doing, rescue your friend."

"I used you, Marcus. You have to see that."

The mongoose shook his head. "I helped you. You needed my help, and I was there for you."

"You weren't supposed to be there. You were supposed to be on your way to Luna, remember? I arranged that too."

"No. I don't believe you."

Theo wanted to scream. The man was dense.

"Believe it. Marcus, whatever you think is between us, it's in your imagination. You need to move on and forget about me."

"No, I can't do that." Marcus' voice was weak, broken. He looked at Theo, tears falling. "You mean everything to me."

"Not to me," Theo replied flatly.

"Please, there has to be something about me you like. I tried so hard. You said you liked my painting, was that a lie too?"

Theo began to say yes. A reflex of course he'd lied, it was all Theo when with a mark. "No, I do like your paintings. You're very talented. You should do that instead of working for SolGov, or Or Corp."

Marcus snorted. "Like anyone'd care about my art. But you do, we can build on that, can't we?"

Theo shook his head. He couldn't win here. Marcus would find a way to turn everything around so it would reinforce the idea they have or can have a relationship.

"Forget me, Marcus. Try to forget I was even in your life."

Use a Psychologist program, you need it if you ever want to have a healthy relationship."

"Theo, please, I'll do whatever I have to, just stay with me."

Theo stood. "There is nothing you can do. You need to move on Marcus. I did. The moment I abandoned you tied to that chair."

Theo left the room to Marcus' whimpering.

He closed his eyes and leaned back against the closed door. Maybe it was for the best he was a spy anymore. He wouldn't have to ruin any more lives.

"Looks like the reunion went well."

Theo's eyes snapped open. A tiger was leaning against the opposite wall. Before he could ask, Terrence's name appeared next to him. Like the all the Orrs, he wore the belt, and the clothing was loose and comfortable, although on him it was cut more like what Theo was used to seeing on corporate types.

It was the smug expression that made Theo cross the hall and punch him. "You set this up." He told the tiger on the floor.

Terry glared up at him, wiped his mouth and snarled at the blood on his hand. "I could have you arrested for this."

"Go ahead. I'm surprised you haven't done it before. Oh wait, you tried. Daddy stopped you."

Theo took a step back, giving Terrence the space to stand. "Dad's got a blind spot the size of the moon's shadow when it comes to you. I know what you are, even if he can't see it." He pointed to the door. "That's what you do. It's what you're going to do to us if you're allowed to be free."

"You think I wanted that? It was my job!"

"Right, your job is to use people and throw them away broken."

"You think I aimed for it to happen this way? I was supposed to die on Mars."

"Excuse me?" Terrence stiffened.

"Not me, me. Theo Laramie. My cover. Marcus was going to reach Earth and when he tried to contact me again, he was going to find out the Laramie died in an accident while doing a repair. He would have been broken-hearted, but he'd have a few month's worths of good memory, of being in love with a guy who loved him back enough to make plans for the future. Trust me that guy needs that kind of memories, but instead his fucking ship breaks down and he gets dragged into the mess I'm stuck in. Every time I try to convince him I'm no good, he goes and twists the memory around."

Theo rubbed his face. "He's so fucking desperate for a relationship he told me he'd do anything to stay with me."

"So?"

Theo glared at the other tiger. "So fucking what?"

"Are you going to take him back? Honor your promise to

him?"

"Are you fucking kidding me? He doesn't need me in his life. He needs to get counseling. Which you're going to see to it he gets."

Terrence smiled. "Excuse me?"

"I was out of his life. He was going to have to move on even if he didn't like it, but because of what you just arrange, he knows I'm here. He's going to obsess about getting back with me."

"My, quite the opinion of yourself you have, don't you?"

"Did you fucking look at his personality profile? He has obsessed about one person after another. Being so clingy they had to kick him out of their lives and block him on all front. He's convinced himself he was the one who broke it up with them because they were too possessive. If you'd bothered looking you would have known just how momentarily stupid this was."

Terrence shrugged. "I'm just going to send him back to SolGov, so he'll be out of your hair."

"Excuse me? Were you born this stupid, or do you just work really hard at it?"

"Watch how you speak to me, Theodore. I run this country, so you're going to show me the respect I'm due."

"Then act like you're fucking smart enough to hold the job and weren't put there because no one else wanted it. Fuck, do you really want your kids to know you treated someone the way you're treating Marcus? What kind of role model are you planning on being?"

"Leave my kids out of this. I didn't destroy this man, you did."

"And I was in there telling him it was all a lie. I looked him in the eyes and admitted what I did. Are you going to go there and tell him he was just a pawn in whatever your problem with me is? Or are you going to do what every corporate head does? Move pieces on a board and let other people do their dirty job?"

Terrence simply glared at him.

"That's what I thought. So, not this time. You got him here with the promise of a job. You're going to deliver on that promise."

"Do you seriously think I'm going to let SolGov into this building?"

"Then find him a position elsewhere. I don't care, just do it."

Terrence crossed his arms over his chest. "You seem to be under the misconception that you have some kind of say in what happens in this country."

Theo took a step toward the other tiger and Terrence stiffened, prepared to fight. Theo adjusted Terrence's collar, which had come turned over in his fall.

"Terry, I was taught a set of skills that make me very good

at making things happen that other people don't want happening. I'm going to guess that AI of yours is good enough he's been able to work out some of thing things I've done. If not, let me say that there are people out there who used to be quite powerful, and aren't anymore, because of me. Don't force me to turn those skills toward you."

"You're bluffing. Uncle would have found something."

Theo smiled. "Test me, Terry, just remember that this corporation is built around your family. I'm just going to target you, but there's no way any of this won't splash on them, and your kids, Terry, imagine them having to grow up without the stable structure your corporation currently enjoys."

"If you do anything to—"

"Just you, Terry. No one else. So why don't you make it easy on both of us and just make sure Marcus has the kind of job his skills entitle him to? And access to a good shrink program. If you don't want him here, I'm sure there's plenty of Orr operations in space that could use a good manager."

Terrence glared at him silently. Theo brushed his shoulder then turned and walked away.

"You—" Cass began.

"Theo," Terrence called after him, "if you ever threaten my children or my family again, I will kill you."

"Then don't give me a reason to, Terry. We're both going to be happier that way."

"You didn't make a friend," Cass said.

"It was bound to happen."

"Doing that in the open wasn't smart, what if someone walked in on the two of you?"

"The moment I knew it was Terry, I knew no one would interrupt us. He probably set the whole floor off limit. He wouldn't want witnesses to whatever was going to happen."

"So, about the threat? You want me to let something slip to Uncle? I'm thinking that if I point him toward Carmichael Harigan, it would be enough to—"

"No. This is more effective if Terry has no idea how far I can go if pushed. Can you reserve me a hover? I want to be as far from this place as I can while Terry cools down."

"Where to?"

"New Pitts is supposed to have plenty of stuff to do, and not just sex."

"Alright, Hover reserved and flight plan filed. You want me to find you a place to stay or is this a day thing?"

"Get me a place. Nice, but not too ostentatious. Do we need to pay for this ourselves? That might limit the possibility."

"No, we're on a corporate account, listed as Free Agent."

Theo chuckled. "Was that on purpose, or just irony?"

"Uncle was involved in setting it up, so I'm going to guess he was being purposely ironic."

Chapter-19

Theo

"Finally," Theo whispered when the city came into view, and Cass identified it as New Pitts. It had taken almost an hour to get there, and after the trip to Denveraura, watching the ground fly by wasn't quite as interesting.

"There is a reason most Orr citizens travel with other people," Cass said.

"I'll keep that in mind for the return trip."

"There's going to be a return trip?" Cass sounded mildly surprised.

"Of course there is. I'm not running, I just need space, after what the guy pulled."

"I thought that had been enough to push you to leave."

"Not with my parents on their way here. I don't think they'd be hurt if I ran, but I'm not risking it."

"Do you have any idea what you want to do while here in that case? All my projections were based on your planning to leave."

"You really thought that was what I wanted to do?"

"It's standard protocol, exit, reassess, rebuilt, restart. It's what we've done anytime a mission has gone wrong. New Pitts has an elevator, and embassies to the other Corporations, as well as three of the largest Independents groups. It makes for a good destination if running is the plan."

Theo chuckled. "I didn't know that. It's just the furthest city away from the Orrs."

"Alright, I'll keep that in mind for the next time. What do you want to do? Like in Denveraura, private vehicles are not permitted to fly freely through the city."

"I'm going to need food, lodging, a club and someplace quiet." Theo sighed. "Do we have even have money? Have we been locked you of the hidden funds? There has to be some, I know we're had agents operate on Earth."

"There are funds set up for operations here. I haven't been barred from them, but I expect that will happen the instant I access one of them, so I should set you up an account with—huh, that's interesting. You already have an account with this institution, with that one too, as with this one."

Theo straightened. "Anderson arranged for me to have funds?"

"No. This wasn't her. The accounts are in the name of Theodore Orr Paso. They link to a central account at Orr Corporate Headquarter."

"Eric," Theo grumbled. He was tempted to contact him and let him know what he thought of that. He wasn't an Orr, how could he go and just give him the fucking name. "What kind of funds do we have access to?"

"Let me put it this way. Don't try to buy your way into one

of the other corporation's Board of Control. Anything else should be good."

"You're kidding."

"I wish I was. I'm trying to decide if I should be impressed they think this is the kind of money needed to buy your cooperation, or pissed they think you can be bought."

"Don't go for pissed just yet," Theo considered the implication. He hadn't thought they'd leave him moneyless, but he didn't think he'd be given access to that kind of money. Still, even if it had his name on it right now, it wasn't actually is.

"Please tell me you are not actually considering defecting. If you do, I am going to be really pissed."

"No, but this will make life easier, at least until they realize I'm not cooperating any more with the money than I was without it. Can you siphon off some to accounts they don't know about? It'll be good to have hidden funds for the moment they cut us off."

"It's... going to be difficult."

"How? You can do that stuff turned off."

"Yes, well, that's in places where Uncle isn't all over the systems."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean Uncle is embedded in just about every system of importance here."

"That isn't possible, is it?" Theo cursed himself for not paying any more attention in his AI classes. "I mean, that's why we have Casanova, Angel, Mirror, and the others, because one AI can't handle everything, they're specialized."

"Well, Uncle definitely isn't like us. I can't see any significant loss of processes in any of his forks. They're not all like the Alpha, but it seems to be intentional, tailored to what they have to do, rather than because they are diminished. I mean just looking at New Pitts, there's three of him there I can't distinguish from the Alpha who has to reside at the corporate building."

"Okay, but there have to be places he isn't. He can't have an interest in all of them."

"You'd be surprised. Some of them are incorporated in the information kiosks at the base of the elevator."

"One of the Alpha-like version?"

"No, those are tailored down versions. Observe, record, report, as far as I can tell. An Epsilon fork, if I were doing it."

"Okay, but he can't be actively watching you. You're not that important. You should be able to just sip in and out of systems and hide some funds."

"I—"

"Cass?"

"I can do it. I've just never gone up against someone quite

that pervasive. Every exercise I've run before becoming a detached Beta were against adversaries whose forks diminished. I'm going to have to come up with new ways of thinking to get around him."

"It can't be that difficult."

"Theo, let me put it this way. You remember that Christian engineer you slept with a few years ago? And how he tried to explain how it was that God watches everyone and kept a list of who was good or bad?"

Theo rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I do. It was a good thing he liked to suck my cock because that was just about the only way to shut him up."

"Yes, well, I finally understand how he felt."

"Cass, you're not that important in the grand scheme of things. No one is."

"Theo, when someone has unlimited processing power, keeping an eye on little old me, or you for that matter, isn't a problem, no matter how insignificant we are."

"No one has that kind of processing power."

"I'd have agreed with you, until now. If Uncle has a limit, I'm not seeing it. I've peeked at Bursar and I thought his power was vast, even if he's kind of a slowpoke. I'm not sure he could do anything against Uncle. If they were pitted against each other system to system."

Theo tried to imagine what that meant. "Cass, I can't even imagine that. It just seems like it shouldn't be possible."

"I know. How do you think I feel?"

"But you can do it? If you can't it's fine, we'll come up with a different way to get funds when we need them. But you said we had stashes already there so someone managed it."

"Yes, now I wish they'd left the instruction manual on how they did it. Don't worry, I'll get it done. Unless you decide to leave tomorrow, you'll have access to funds they can't cut off."

"Just be careful. I don't think Uncle will do anything too bad to you if he catches you, but I'd rather not risk it."

"Don't worry. I have no intention of testing his temper. By the by, we're about to land."

Theo looked outside. The landing pad highlighted, as did a tower two blocks away with the name Hotel Howard beside it. As he looked around, clubs were highlighted, as well as restaurants and a large wilderness area.

"Can you remove anything that makes a point of being 'Orr centric?' I don't feel like dealing with reminders of them."

"I'm going to need your definition for 'Orr Centric.' This is their country. Pretty much everything is."

"Naked servers, orgy clubs, basically anything that puts sex high on their list of priority."

"You are going to have sex, right? This isn't going to turn into you abstaining because you don't want to be like them, right? It's bad enough when you feel you have to do it because

you're working a mark, at least then I know there's an end in—"

"Calm down. I'm not going to deny myself sex. I just... I'd just prefer to be reminded of home for a bit, that's all." All but two clubs stopped flashing and only three restaurants were left.

"I can't do anything about the wilderness area. This is—"

"Their country, so people are going to have sex there. I know. I'll just have to watch where I step."

The hover landed, and the door opened. He stepped out and stretched. Yes, he was getting company for the trip back.

"Highlight the way to the hotel. I'll check in and then figure out what I feel like doing."

"Food," Cass said, a line appearing on the ground. "You haven't eaten since getting up. You're brooding, so you won't feel how hungry you are, but you should eat."

"I am not brooding." Theo began walking, heading for the edge of the landing pad.

"No, of course not," Cass replied with a chuckle

Theo found himself looking around the other hovers waiting there to be called away. Not nervous, but quite aware this was an ideal place for an ambush. Anyone could jump from behind one of them, grab him and throw him in a hover and fly away.

"Cass, how good is the heat sensor in this environment?"

"Not very good."

"Any cameras?"

"Not really. Why?"

"Paranoia. Any Implant hiding among the hovers?" As he spoke two men exited a hover ahead of him.

"No, nothing hiding."

"Really?" that hover had been there before he'd landed. There hadn't been any hovers ahead of him as far as he'd seen. So it had been here a while, with them in it. "How about those two?" one was a moose, the other a bear. Big men, with a serious expression that told him they weren't here to chat him up. Theo stopped and readied himself.

"They aren't hiding, they're walking toward you."

"Cass, there are days I think you try really hard to be literally minded." They weren't in the hover because they were fucking. It had been a small model and with the size of them they wouldn't have had much room to move, and in this country, it was simpler to just get out and fuck against the hover than in it.

"Well, Theo, to be honest, there are days you deserve it."

The two men stopped before him. Pure muscle the two of them, wearing pants and nothing else. The moose inclined his head. "Mister Paso." His voice was a deep rumble.

Theo narrowed his eyes. They knew him. Not a good sign. The balls. That was their only vulnerable spot, but he could only kick one of them before the other reacted.

"Theo," Cass said, "relax."

The bear eyed Theo, looked at the moose and deliberately took a relaxed step back. "Mister Paso," he said, his voice was deep, but not quite as deep as the moose. "We don't mean you any harm."

"Right, and I'm just supposed to believe you?"

"I'm Pete," the bear said. "Peter, that's Frank. We've been instructed to accompany you while you visit the city."

"Inst-? You guys are bodyguards?"

The two looked at one another.

"No," the moose said. "We're military, we got orders to come here and wait, in case you showed up, and if you do to—" he looked bashful. "Yeah, I guess that makes us bodyguards."

"I don't fucking believe this." Theo turned and the two walls of muscles took a step to follow him. "Don't move. I'm just calling someone. Cass, put me in touch with Eric."

"Just voice?"

"No, let him see what's around me."

The older tiger appeared in his field of vision. Mid chest and up. He had a slightly glazed look that told Theo he was having sex, or just had, Theo didn't care.

"Theodore, it's a pleasure to see you, how are you doing?"

Theo pointed to the two men. "What the fuck is that?"

Eric's eyes focused a little. He licked his lips. "That is two very delectable specimen of men. You are quite lucky to have found them."

"Fuck off with your 'lucky.' Don't even try to convince me you're not behind them."

Eric gave Theo a smile that made him realize what he'd just said and he scowled hard enough the other tiger didn't make the obvious comment. Instead he became serious.

"Theodore, I promise, I don't know what you are talking about."

"You expect me to believe that you, who goes bonkers anytime someone looks at me funny, didn't arrange to have people from your military to shadow me?"

"What?" Eric tapped someone just out of view before him. The top of a head passed the bottom of the field and the tiger straightened. "Where are you? Why didn't I know you'd left the island?"

The tiger's even tone made it impossible for Theo to tell how Eric felt, but 'concerned' appeared next to the man. Cass' evaluation. He really didn't know? Somehow he'd expected that man to have whatever security system in place keeping track of him.

If not him, then who had...?

"Eric, I'm sorry to have disturbed you. I need to talk to someone else."

"Wait, what are you doing in NP? Theo, please tell me you aren't arranging to leave."

Theo sighed. "No. I'm not leaving. I told the lot of you,

my parents are on their way here, so I'm not going anywhere. I just needed some time to myself."

"Why?"

"Talk to that son of yours running the place. I don't feel like going over it." He coded 'disconnect,' and Eric vanished. "Tucker," he said, his mood darkening. It was one thing for the man who thought himself his father to do this, but for—

"Hey Theo!" Tucker craned his neck and licked his lips in a way that was almost identical to his father. "We do have nice looking men, don't we?"

"What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm making sure you're safe," He smiled, "and that you are entertained too. They're both male compatible." He looked over Theo's shoulder again. "I may have to get them here so I can give them a try."

Theo was so glad the two of them couldn't hear Tucker. "How did you even know I'd land here?"

"I didn't. Cass filed a flight plan to New Pitts, so I had guys posted at every landing pad with your description and yes they're all as yummy as those two. Most of them are naturally that way, if you don't take into account all the exercise and combat training, but those who aren't can be retyped if they want to. And yes, everyone waiting for you is male compatible."

Theo had been trying to get his mouth working while the other tiger spoke. In the silence he finally found his voice. "You disrupted the whole of the army just to put people on me? Are you fucking insane?"

"Who's asking? My brother, or the spy? Come on Theo, who do you think I am?"

"I think you're some entitled rich kid too fucking used to get his way."

Tucker grinned. "Wow, you know me so well."

"Fine. I'm sending them back."

Tucker lost all his mirth. "No, you're not."

"I don't need any fucking bodyguards."

"Then don't fuck them."

"Tucker," Theo warned.

"Theo," Tucker replied in the same tone. "We were attacked, you were rendered unconscious, and it was mostly luck that they didn't manage to take you. I am not taking a chance with losing you."

"Damn it, I'm not your responsibility!"

"Theo. You are my brother."

"Are you telling me you pull this kind of stunts with everyone in your family?"

"Of course not. They'd kill me. But they also haven't been the target of kidnapping attempts. No one would dare, it would start a war. But you refuse to take our name, so you are at risk. If you don't believe me, ask Cass what those thugs said while you were unconscious."

Theo knew what he was referring to. Cass had already played it back to him. "You're not going to budge on this, are you?"

"On keeping you safe? No, I'm not. If you'd check in with me before running off like that we could have discussed the kind of guys you wanted watching your ass, and your cock."

"I was in no mood to talk."

Tucker canted his head. "What happened?" he made out the concern under the casual tone.

"Ask Terry." Theo smiled. "Or better yet, stand back and watch the detonation when your father asks him. I don't think he's going to be happy with Terry's responses."

Tucker sighed. "What did Terry do this time?"

"I'm in no mood to tell you. I have two walls of muscle to deal with."

"Get them naked and hard before you dismiss them so casually, I think you'll be pl—" Cass disconnected on Theo's signal.

He spun to face his guards. "I am not fucking either one of you."

"Sir?" the moose said, taking a step back

"It's Theo. I don't do the sir crap. So get used to it."

"S—Theo, we're not here to have sex with you."

Theo snorted. "Right, like Tucker didn't tell you to get me in bed and fuck my brains out. That's all that bunch seems to think about."

The moose and bear exchanged a look. "Tucker Orr?" the bear asked.

"Of course, Tucker Orr. Who do else do you think I was talking to?"

"You know Tucker Orr?" the bear asked in disbelief.

"You spoke to Tucker Orr in that tone?" asked the moose an edge of terror in his voice.

"Look. I didn't grow up with all the stories of how amazing and powerful they all are okay? As far as I'm concerned they're just a bunch of guys with too much power. I mean, come on, Tucker giving the army orders? What idiot lets that happen?"

"Err, he—" the moose began. But the bear raised a hand.

"Alright, I understand this isn't what you want, s—Theo, but we have our orders. We're to follow you and make sure nothing happens to you."

"Do you even know why?"

"Not something we need to know to do our job," the moose said.

Theo sighed. "I just wanted to be alone for a while."

"We can stay out of sight. No one will notice us."

Theo snickered. "Really? How? I'm not trying to be hurtful, but you two will be ogled by every male compatible person out there with even a hint of a thing for muscles. I know people with decades of training in making someone invisible, and they couldn't make it happen with you." He sighed again. "Come on. I

want to check in my hotel and have a meal. Do either have any training in how to keep someone safe?"

"I've had to escort officers a time or two through battlefields," the bear said.

"Peter, right?"

"Pete."

"Pete. How do you still have wars down here? I get some of the independents are militant and out to disrupt this system, but with all the tech you guys have, why aren't you just bombing them from orbit or something?"

"You weren't kidding when you said you didn't grow up here, were you?" Frank asked.

The section of the Cataclysmic Act relevant to Theo's question began scrolling, but he dismissed them with a flick of the fingers. He didn't want to read about them, he wanted to have someone living them explain.

"I grew up in space."

"But every citizen still gets instructed in-oh."

"Which corpo-?" Frank began.

"None of our business," Pete cut him off.

"Right. Sorry, S-Theo."

"Don't worry about it. Unless I'm supposed to have this big sign over my head that says 'not an Orr citizen,' you had no way of knowing."

"So about your questions," Pete said. "We're not allowed. It's one of the first Act the corporations agreed to after the Cataclysms no weapon that can disrupt an ecosystem can be used during an altercation."

"Altercation?"

"It's the working in the Act," Frank answered. "We're also not allowed to use any weapon at more than a hundred kilometer of range."

"They're talking of reducing that to fifty," Pete added.

"Why? What's the point?"

"They want wars to hurt."

Theo stopped and turned. "Excuse me?"

Frank sighed. "Tell me you know your history, Pete, because I never was good at that."

The bear shrugged. "What we know of before the cataclysm indicates that wars were basically fought at a distance, remote everything. So, if I went to war with Frank I didn't have to send anyone, just machines piloted remotely or with computers. I wouldn't feel the pain of inflicting him damage. A lot of historians agree that's one of the things that led to the cataclysm, all the wars. So after that, the corporation in their infinite wisdom," Pete said that with a hint of derision, "decided that if someone wanted to go to war, they were going to have to feel the pain of it. So now we have to send people there to get hurt and die."

"And to be fair," Frank said, "There haven't been many wars

since the Act."

"But the Anarchists don't care about the pain, in fact, that's what they want, to inflict pain to the corporations, so isn't doing things that way playing into their hands?"

"I don't know who the Anarchists are," Pete said, "but we can't make exceptions. If we do, where does it stop? If it's okay to drop a rock from orbit on those guys, then how do we not do it when Ameritech pisses us off or something?"

"Who are the Anarchists?" Frank asked.

"It's my name for the Independent troublemakers."

"Ah." Frank replied.

"That makes a lot of sense," Pete said. "I don't know why no one did that before?"

Theo looked at the bear, but he was thoughtful, not mocking. Theo didn't reply. He'd already accidentally given enough away. He was supposed to be better than this.

They reached the hotel without anything more notable than the ogling Theo had said would happen. Even in a society where naked was normal, prime specimen of men attracted the attention. Maybe it was even because of it.

Theo modified his reservation for a suite, so his bodyguard could have a room with access to him. He might as well play the part and avoid getting Tucker show up unexpectedly.

The attached suite only had one bed, but Pete and Frank said they were fine sharing it. Theo had a shower, then went down for food. The restaurant in the hotel was definitely Orr centric, so they walked to the one a few blocks away. There he had Pete and Frank sit with him. And made it clear he was paying, so they could get whatever they wanted.

As they ate, Theo found out Frank was from an Army family, going back six generations. His wife was a sergeant, handling logistics, and they had three kids, all of them in basic training.

Pete was a first-generation soldier and his husband was a sex instructor. They didn't have kids and weren't sure if they ever would. They both had difficult childhoods and were concerned they'd pass along the problems they'd acquired.

Theo found he liked them. Pete was serious, with an understated sense of humor, bright, but not forward with it. Frank wasn't as smart, but he had an easy smile and attentive expression and helped anyone he could. As demonstrated when he took the platter off a server's arm before she dropped it, and carried it for her.

After the meal they walked around the city, spending most of it following the path along the recreated Allegheny River, each listening to the history of the river and commenting on parts of interest to them.

Theo had been surprised to learn the river had run dry before the cataclysm. As with pretty much anything to go wrong on Earth, he'd thought that had been the cause, but as far as

records showed, it predated it by almost a hundred years, running dry around the middle of the twenty-first century, and it was recreated after the cataclysm as part of rebuilding the city which had stood by it.

When evening came, Theo found a dance club, clothing mandatory, and they danced and drank for a few hours before heading back to the hotel.

He looked at the large bed for a moment. "Okay, if either of you are interested, you're welcome to share my bed."

"I thought you weren't having sex with us?" Pete asked.

"I wasn't going to have sex with the walls of muscles that had been forced on me. But I made the mistake of talking to both of you and you turn out to be pretty much nice guys. Nice guys I can have sex with. You're both married, so I will understand if you don't want to."

Franks snorted. "If you'd grown up here, you'd know that sex and marriage aren't linked." The moose rubbed Theo's shoulders. "I'll be more than happy to have sex with you. Pete?"

"I'm good." The bear was undressing. Tucker had been right, he was hung. Pete looked down at himself. "Had myself retyped as soon as I could afford it. I was nowhere near this big as a kid." The bear shrugged at Theo's tilted ear. "I was the runt of the family cock wise, and everyone made sure I knew it." He smiled. "I might have overcompensated slightly."

The moose looked him over. "I'm not going to complain."

"You two haven't had sex before?"

Frank shook his head, taking off his pants. "First time I worked with him. We've talked, but I usually go home every night unless I'm deployed."

"Don't you want to go home then?"

"Can't. This is a deployment. My wife knows."

"Natural?" Pete pointed to Frank's large cock.

"Yep."

The two of them turned their gaze on Theo.

"Seems to me," Pete said, "that you're a little overdressed."

Theo looked down at himself. "I suppose I am." He reached for the belt as the cloth melted away.

"Shit," Frank said. "I didn't know anyone outside them had one of those."

"You guys don't have access to them?" He unhooked it and hung it over the back of a chair.

"We're only allowed them when we go in combat," Pete answered. "I know one girl who snuck hers out after, to go to a party. She spent three months in the brig for it."

"That seems excessive."

"Those are corporate property. They are very serious about it. If you'd stolen that one, you wouldn't have made it to the landing pad."

Theo nodded. He'd known how serious the Orrs were about

protecting them from outside acquisitions, but hadn't realized it was the same internally.

"Now," Theo said. "I'm fully versatile, I have a lot of endurance, but I could go for something nice and slow to start with. Does that work for both of you?"

"Versatile here," Frank said. "I'm good with just about anything, I got military nanites so I can repair pretty much anything you can inflict during sex."

"Vers here too," Pete said. "Same package, but I'm not keen on pain. So I'd rather nothing rough."

"Not a fan of pain, and in the army?" Theo asked.

"Military upgrade to our Implant include pain blocking, but it's more like full sensation blocking, so it isn't useful during sex."

Theo nodded. "Well, I don't have either of those, so we'll take it nice and easy to start with and get rougher as we go. Now you guys randomize for it, but one of you is going to fuck me now."

Chapter-20

Theo tried to get out of bed without waking either of his... what were they? Did bodyguard still qualified after three days spent together visiting the city, having sex when they felt like it, sleeping in the same bed? They weren't lovers, that was certain. Friends? Still early.

He placed a foot on the floor when he felt the bed shift. Frank was getting out of bed on the other side. Theo cursed silently. He'd hoped for some peace and quiet.

"What's the plan?" The moose asked, stretching, making his morning wood point higher.

"I'm going to grab a quick shower, then have breakfast. Place your order. I'm doing it now." This wasn't what he'd wanted to do, but a long soak wasn't going to be as relaxing with them up and about and waiting to use the bathroom. Theo definitely drew the line at being around when guys did their business.

"After that?"

"Not sure. Maybe visit the preserve. I haven't been in nature in a while now."

The moose tilted an ear.

"Been in space for more than two years now. Had a couple of stops at Titan, but the park there isn't the same, at least I hope not." He indicated the hard cock. "You need to go?"

"I'm good. Military package. I can hold it until after your shower."

"I don't mind waiting."

"Neither do I. Go take it."

Theo didn't argue anymore. The water was running by the time he entered the room. He closed the door and stepped under the water. He let it fall over him, soak in his fur, melt his

tension away.

"Cass, tell me you have a way to render me invisible."

"I... That isn't something included in any of the parts I can control. What's wrong?"

Theo sighed. "I just want to be alone for a while. That's what I came out here for."

"I thought you were enjoying you the two studs."

"I am, but they're always there. This is as far as I've been about to get from them. And they're waiting to use the bathroom too. I should have gotten them their own room, at least then I could be alone."

"You can still do that."

"Not exactly the kind of message I want to send. 'Hey, I've had my fun, now get out.'"

"It would be easier than looking for a way to outright vanish."

"Anything we can do to make something like that happen?"

"Well, I can pull out of the net. That way they won't be able to track us that way, but there're cameras everywhere."

"How about the preserve? How much surveillance there?"

"The paths are monitored, but that's about it."

"So if I get off the path, they won't have anything to track me with. Except their eyes and other senses. I have no idea what kind of upgrades they'd gotten. Can they track the belt?"

"No. I've convinced it not to broadcast anymore."

* * * * *

The Pittsburgh Nature Preserve was roughly two hundred square miles of mountainous recreated nature north of the city, crisscrossed with thousands of miles worth of walking paths peppered with camps and small hotel for those who wanted to remain within the preserve for more than a day. For those willing to brave the wilderness, to abandon any contact with civilization, they could step off the path and brave the wild with all its animals, benign and savage.

The preserve had been reconstructed for the animals and only adapted for people to spend time in it after the fact. Warnings everywhere, both broadcasted along the path and physically written on posts warned there was no guaranty of safety for anyone braving the wilderness.

Of course, with implants and instant communication around the world, no one was ever truly cut off, and the preserve had rescue drone stations throughout. No one died in the preserve, but the numbers of people who'd gotten injured in the last year alone was in the thousands. Mostly animal attacks which a brave soul thought they were tame and got too close for either's comfort. The few other injuries were from falls from tree or cliffs.

Cass informed Theo of all that as he ran off the path, leaving his two bodyguards behind after telling them to run a

search for a place they could enjoy lunch.

Theo grinned, jumping over fallen logs and ducking under low branches. Within three hundred feet of leaving the path, the underbrush was tight enough the chase resembled more one within the underbelly of a ship than a forest.

Theo grabbed onto a branch and pulled himself up, climbing twenty feet in second and stopping.

"Where is he?" Frank cursed.

"I don't know," Pete answered. "I lost the tracking the instant he left the path."

"What the fuck is he doing?"

They didn't try for stealth.

"Theo, come on!" Pete yelled. "I thought you were okay with this."

"Fuck. The preserve won't reallocate any of their drones to look for him." They were under his tree.

"Maybe we could call it in, they can let *him* know and he can pull his weight to get us—"

"Oh, and you really want to deal with *him* afterward?" Pete asked. "You know how much of a hardass he is, right? You've heard the stories same as I did. I'm not calling this in until I am certain it's worth getting wrecked over it."

The two men kept calling Theo and cursing him as they continued on. He gave them five minutes, then moved to a wider branch and stretched on it.

"How long do you want to give them to get lost in the forest?"

'One hour,' he coded. Theo didn't risk speaking, he didn't know the details of what military upgrades were, but he expected enhanced hearing was one of them. 'Keep track.' He closed his eyes and drifted off.

"Hour's up," Cass said. "Pete and Frank moved out of range of my sensors ten minutes after you fell asleep. I haven't heard anything off the path except animals since then."

Theo stretched. "Good, finally alone." He took a deep breath of the leave scented air. "I can't believe how much like home this feels. I might as well be in the Berlouis Park."

"I won't point out all the ways in which this is nothing like Berlouis."

"Thanks for leaving me my delusions."

"What are friends for?"

Theo watched the leaves move in the breeze, caught glimpses of the blue sky through them. "So, how are you to keep me safe from all the wild animals?"

"Oh no. You don't get to be fucked and keep your virginity. If you want to be invisible, that means I stay off the net. That means I don't have access to the sensor drones patrolling the preserve. The best I can do is use the sensors in your hand to keep an ear out for any predators."

Theo sat. "Won't those drones detect me?"

"They need to be retasked to pay attention to any non-quads in the preserve. The system counts on implants to track the people, or interface, for the rare Independent visitors. We're the exception who has the capability not to talk to the network."

"Can't you connect with the closest drone?" Theo asked, climbing down.

"They're connected to the network. That Uncle of theirs could notice me in the microseconds it takes to get an area map and erase my presence."

"That powerful?"

"He's an Alpha level AI who thinks in a completely different way than ours do. You need to remember; back home Casanova, Mirror, Angel and the others permeated our network. They know everything we do, but they don't interfere because it isn't their roles. Uncle has no issue interfering. The odds are he knows we've gone silent, and might even have secretly retasked the drones. For all we know, there's already an army on their way here to bring you back."

"Then I better make the best of this quiet time. I might end up back in a cell."

"On the plus side, you would be alone."

"Not with Tucker around. He'd spent his free time bothering me. I expect Terrence would also show up to gloat."

Cass highlighted Pete and Frank's trail of broken branches, and Theo walked at an angle to that and the trail, getting away from both.

He watched a family of quad deers bounce through a clearing, amazed at their grace. Later Cass warned him barely in time to keep away from a quad cougar on the prowl and this was one animal whose grace inspired fear instead.

"Any idea when you want to head back?" Cass asked. The clock read five, but the sun was still high, Theo guessed he had three hours of full daylight still.

"Any reason we have to go back?" Theo asked, spotting a clearing through the trees.

"It's a guaranty that if you're missing overnight, they will send their army after you. Eric is the overly possessive kind. And there has been one kidnapping attempt against you. I'm surprise they aren't hunting you down already."

"Let's enjoy it while it lasts. I should have brought something to eat." Theo stepped into the clearing and turned his face to the sun, soaking in its heat.

Crashing and cursing from the other side of the clearing put Theo on alert. A silver fox and gopher stepped out of the trees, picking burrs out of their fur.

"I told you this was a bad idea." The gopher said, pulling a clump from his chest. "I'm just happy I didn't go along with taking off my shorts. How are you enjoying pulling those things out of your balls?"

"Fine, this was a mistake," The fox replied, wincing as he pulled a burr from his ball fur. He was semi erect, so he didn't mind the discomfort too much. "Next time I will be sure to—" he stopped, noticing Theo. "Oh, hello."

"Hi," Theo answered cautiously. Cass gave him a scan of their packs content. Food, clothing, medical kit. The kit contained the standard things, medical nanites, topological sealant and disinfectant, and an analgesic injector. "You two look like you had an adventure."

The gopher glared at the fox. "Mister 'let's live a little' never considered that the preserve didn't keep track of the vegetation like it does the animals and walked us straight through a bosh of these things."

"They're called Xanthium," the fox said, pulling another burr off his ball sack.

"You knowing what they're called doesn't make this any more enjoyable."

The fox smirked. "Speak for yourself."

"Why did I marry you again?"

"For my grand sense of adventure, of course."

The gopher sighed. "I am seriously considering getting it annulled." He looked at Theo. "You looking for a well-behaved husband? I think a tiger would be a better match for me than this fox."

"Hey!" the fox said.

"Anyone, would be at this point," the gopher said in exasperation.

Theo hid the smile behind a hand while he tried to figure out if this was a game between the two or the fox had pushed his husband to his limits.

"If it helps," Cass volunteered, "voice analysis registers the annoyance as real. If you're looking to get married, it could be serious."

'Funny,' Theo coded.

"Ignore him," the fox said, "he gets like that anytime I drag him out of the house."

"The house is a perfectly fine place to be," The gopher huffed.

"You don't get this in the house," the fox indicated around them.

The gopher pulled a burr of his arm and flicked it at the fox's face. "No, I certainly don't."

"There's no need for that," the fox said, pulling the burr out of his cheek he offered his back to the gopher, "now be a dear and pulls those out."

"Absolutely not, this is your mess, you deal with it."

The fox looked at Theo with a sigh. "Any chance you're willing to help, since mister 'I've forgotten about our vows' over there won't?"

"I haven't forgotten anything."

"What about the 'for better or for worse' Then?"

"Oh this is definitely for the worse."

"See what I mean?"

Theo chuckled. "Sure, I can help." He headed toward them. "I can do your back too," he told the gopher.

"See," the fox said. "He's a stranger and a gentleman. What's your excuse?"

"I'm married to you," the gopher replied. He offered his hand to Theo. "I'm Mogo, this is Kayse."

"Theo," he said, shaking it, then shaking the fox's. "Why don't you two lie down. I'll start with you Kayse."

"Oh goodie." The fox lied down, and the gopher stretched next to him.

"Your legs are pretty much free of them," Theo said, picking the two he found out of them.

"My legs, I could reach. It's my back I was counting on my husband to help with."

"Maybe that's who's helping you now," the gopher said, grinning at the fox.

Theo straddled the fox's firm ass.

"What do you say?" the fox asked. "You interested in joining our family?"

"I appreciate the offer, but I'm not the marrying type." He pulled one of the burr, making the fox wince. "Sorry. Actually, I noticed your reaction when you pulled them out of your ball fur. How gentle do you want me to be?"

The fox placed his hands under his muzzle. "That depends on what you're willing to do afterward. If you turn me on that much, I'm going to expect a solid fucking."

"I can certainly accommodate that." He grabbed one of the burr and yanked it out.

Kayse yelped and moaned.

"What about you?" Theo asked the gopher, yanking another burr out of the fox's back.

"I am not into pain," he stated. He looked Theo up and down, "But I'd definitely fuck you." He rolled on his back and took off his pants. "How about I do that right now?" Mogo was already hard, and thick. The evening was going to be fun.

"We should wait until I'm done both your backs," Theo said, gently teasing one out.

"No way," the fox said. "Once you are done with my ba—" his voice rose to a high pitch as Theo yanked another burr, and he shuddered. "Oh, you are so fucking me once my back's done. You can fuck him then, Hun."

Theo ground against Kayse's ass as he continued removing burrs. The fox trembled, moaned and whimpered, alternating between asking to stop, and begging him to go harder.

Theo wasn't one to get off on inflicting pain, his job forced him to do that often enough, but feeling the fox react under him, beg and whimper was something of a turn on.

When he only had a handful of burrs left, he felt a hand against his back.

"Hurry up," Mogo said, the gopher pressing himself against Theo's back. "I fucking want your ass."

Kayse was a whimpering puddle under Theo. He could probably forget about him and the fox wouldn't even notice. The gopher reached around and placed a hand on Theo's chest, his fingers searching for an opening. Theo rubbed a hand over the gopher's, moaning slightly, and wondered how he was going to get out of what he was wearing without revealing what it was.

His hand closed on the gopher's making him scream as Cass cursed.

"Theo, snap out of it. It's a trap."

Theo shouldered the gopher off him, regaining control of his hand and backed away. By the gopher's other hand was an injector, the analgesic one, but the chemical composition appeared beside it. A knockout drug.

"How did they fool you?" Theo asked, considering his options. He could run, but he didn't know the area, and they might have reinforcement. Taking them on was risky, he had no idea how skilled they were.

"Really," The foxed moaned. "You couldn't wait until after he fucked me?" He shook as he got to his feet. "I am fucking going to drain you when this is over," he told the gopher.

"They were really into it," Cass said, "so I'm going to guess compartmentalization. The gopher's heart rate skipped as he brought the injector to your neck."

The fox's going and cock was covered with leaves and dirt from the precum he leaked. He gave the whimpering gopher a shove with his foot. "Get up, wimp. It's just bruised, he didn't break anything." He smiled at Theo. "You surrender now, and I'll sit on your cock before taking you to them. After how you treated me, you definitely deserve to cum, and I still want your ass in me."

"You and your fucking need to get fucked." The gopher stood picking up the pack with his uninjured hand and cradling the other against his chest.

"If you could do a decent job, I wouldn't have to look for other guys."

"I fuck you plenty, I fucked you three times today."

"Yes, but why do you have to be so gentle about it?"

Theo took a step back, maybe if they got distracted by their-

"Don't run," The fox said, looking at him. "I really don't like having to run after my quarries. Let's table the discussion until after he delivered him, okay? The counseling program did say to avoid talking about our problems when we work."

The gopher moved around Theo. "Okay, but the moment we've handed him over, we're talking about this."

The fox didn't look happy.

"Cass, ideas?"

"Recommend a better counseling program?"

"I mean about surviving this."

"I'm not worried about that. You have Orr technology as clothing. This can take having a hover dropped on you."

"Even if I believe that, I wouldn't be comforted. I'd still be pinned down, unless it can make me able to lift said hover."

"I'm afraid not."

The gopher reached in the pack and Theo tensed.

"There's nothing in it that can hurt you," Cass said. "In fact, he's grabbing, nothing?"

The gopher withdrew a box the size of his palm. The fox's smile broadened.

"What is it?" Theo asked.

"Nothing," Cass replied, perplexed. "I can see what you see, but the sensors are not registering it."

The gopher flicked it open.

"It's a broadcaster of some sort," Cass warned.

The gopher pressed what was in the box and as Theo looked around for whatever support they'd called, he felt his clothing melt away.

"I lost control of the belt," Cass said as Theo looked down. His shirt and pants were melting, not into the belt, just down, there was a click and the belt fell off him.

The fox whistled. "I wish you'd cooperated, because we would have both enjoyed it. Now you're going to have to be unconscious when I take my pleasure."

They now stood on each side of him, a dozen steps away. The three of them naked, the fox hard, Theo's losing his erection and the gopher fully soft.

"Now do you have any idea?" he asked Cass.

"I've called for help."

"So remaining conscious until Frank and Pete reach us. That should be fun." He ran at the gopher, coding the stunner in his hand active.

The gopher dodged, then used the pack to block, insulating himself from the shock. Theo kicked at the leg, but only grazed it. He took the pack's impact on the shoulder and staggered back. Either the pack was heavier than its content suggested, or the gopher much stronger.

Cass warned him of the approaching fox in time to avoid the punch, but that left him open to the gopher who punched him in the stomach. Reeling from that, the fox stuck him in the side of the head and Theo's vision blurred.

"Compensating," Cass said, and while the focus wasn't perfect, he saw well enough to avoid the kick coming at his head.

He returned a kick of his own, in the fox's crotch. Theo back away while the fox was bent, hands on knees. The gopher ran at Theo, swinging the pack. If not for the fact that each swing

hit, Theo would think the gopher was panicking, instead the pack was a bludgeon.

"That was an exquisite kick," the fox said. The gopher stopped hitting Theo, how had trouble standing. "Now you are really going to regret not being conscious."

Theo blocked the punch, but the kick struck him in the side. Before he could regain his balance a kick hit him in the stomach and he was on his back. As he tried to regain his breath, the fox dropped to his knee, one on his arm, just above where the prosthetic began.

"Before you lose consciousness, I want you to know I really enjoyed how you treated me." He wound back. "If they let you go, look me up and we'll have a fun day."

A light flashed, and the fox flew backward.

"Kayse," the gopher yelled. Another flash of light, the sound of a body dropping to the ground. Stepped approached and Theo did his best to crane his neck, but it wasn't until the moose was over him he made him out.

"Great timing," Theo said, blacking out.

* * * * *

Theo did his best not to wince as he stood. His guards, they were no longer pretending of being anything else, had treated him during the flight back to the Cisco Islands, but short of lying on a medical bed for a few hours, he'd be sore for a while.

The door opened, and Tucker waited for Theo, tapping a foot. Next to him, the bear and moose stiffened and Theo glanced at them. If there was one Orr these two didn't have to worry about, it was the family clown.

"What was the big idea?" Tucker asked.

"Don't start," Theo replied, limping by him; his guards stayed by the hover.

"I make sure you have two hunks of men to keep you company and you ditch them?" Tucker fell in step with him. "What is wrong with you?"

Theo rounded on him. "With me? After what your brother pulled on me and Marcus? I didn't want them, I told you that. I wanted to be alone."

"You can't be alone, there are people after you."

"I noticed!"

"Then maybe—"

"How about you give me some fucking space! Someone just tried to kidnap me! Fuck Tucker, can you ever stop thinking about shoving your cock into someone!"

"I think about getting on shoved into me too."

Theo yelled and walked faster. As he reached the door to his assigned house, he heard Tucker saw, "Now, about the two of you."

He was in and the door closed before anything. He didn't want to listen to whatever proposition he had for them. He sat

at the table and put his head in his hands.

"Is this a good time to point out he's just trying to keep you safe?" Cass asked.

"Not now, Cass. I just..." Theo didn't know what he needed. In years of work for the colonies, he'd never been kidnapped, or even attempted so. He'd been chased often enough, even actively hunted a time or two, but he was forcefully retired now. Boredom should be his primary worry.

"Not that I'll ever get bored with Tucker chasing after my ass all the time."

"Letting him catch you will also not be boring."

"Maybe if he learns to think with something other than his cock. Until then, he's grinding against the wrong guy."

"The nice thing about where you are is that even if they never let you leave the Cisco Islands, you have an endless possibility of men to have sex with."

"I suppose that's a nice ray of light in all this darkness." Theo stood. "I'm going to sleep, don't wake me unless Tucker starts spouting astrophysics."

"Just astrophysics or any related subjects?"

"I'm not going to ask too much of the guy, just astrophysics."

"Alright, sleep well."

"I fucking hope so."

Chapter-21

"Hurry!" Tucker yelled over his shoulder. "If we're late grandma is going to take him away!"

Trevor grumbled something, trailing after his brother, then raised his voice. "I'm missing a team quest, Tucker."

Tuck turned, running backward, "Lands of Farr isn't going anywhere, digi-balls and neither are your 'friends'." He turned to face where he ran again. The Hover lot was now visible in the distance.

"They are my friends!"

"Yeah? Which one of them have you fucked?"

"All of—"

"Not in the game, in life?"

"What's the difference?"

"It's real."

"The game's real too."

"It's a game." Tucker adjusted his implant responses, getting this leg muscles to relax, he wasn't going to get time to stretch.

"That's narrow-minded of—"

"You know what?" Tucker cut off his brother, "I'm not having this argument with you again." He picked up speed, watching the readout on his muscles, altering the oxygen distribution and increasing the removal of lactic acids until the readout approached the red line, where he leveled his speed.

"Tucker, slow down you loose ass."

Tucker grinned. His brother's yelling becoming indistinct with the distance. His saw a over approached the landing pad and zoomed on it until he made out the distinctive shape of a reentry hover. He grinned, he'd be there just in time.

The door to the hover opened as he set foot on the pad. The kangaroo stepped onto the ramp as Tucker reached the bottom, slowing only enough he wouldn't cause damage when he-

"Tucker, No!" His grandmother yelled as He threw himself at the Kangaroo.

"Seb! Catch me!"

The kangaroo reacted, eyes wide in surprise and fear, but it wasn't until Tucker was in his arm, kissing him hard, and they were falling back into the hover that he considered he might have miscalculated.

The impact with the floor broke the kiss. But caused Sebastien's going to press into Tuckers and he smiled as he felt the large cock against his.

"Tucker Orr," his grandmother called, "get off my boyfriend this instant."

Tucker ground against the kangaroo and grinned as he felt him get hard.

Sebastien rubbed his head. "It's okay Bea. Tuck's just being enthusiastic. I'd just forgotten how enthusiastic he gets."

"Sebastien," Beatrice said, her tone stern, "Tucker was ten years old the last time he threw himself at you like that! He's a full-grown man now."

Tucker grinned, "That's a lot we need to catch up on, isn't it?" He reached between them, groping the kangaroo's large cock. "I need that in me, right now."

"Not before I get it," His grandmother said.

Sebastien kissed Tucker. "You should do what she says, you know how terrifying she can be when angry."

"Nah, Grandma, incapable of doing anything horrible to me."

"Good on you, Tuck," the kangaroo patted his ass. "I'm not her grandson, she is quite capable of going Leader of SolGov decency laws on me. Get off."

"I'm trying," Tucker said, opening Sebastian's pants and slipping his cock in to rub against the kangaroo's. He yelped as Sebastien shoved him off none too gently.

"This obsession with sex doesn't suit you as much now that you're an adult."

"Growing up is so overrated." Tucker stretched on the floor, making his cock wobble. "Growing hard, now that's fun."

Sebastien gave tucked cock a light slap. "No argument on that one." He stood and left Tucker in the hover. "Bea, I have missed you."

"Me too, lover boy."

Tucker exited the hover to his grandmother and Sebastien

kissing and grinding against one another. "Grandma, that works better if you take off your clothing. Trev!" he waved at his brother.

Trevor stopped and put his hands on his knees. "I am so killing you the next time I see you in the Lands," He said between pants. "You are so fucking dead."

"Until then, how about you suck me off? Seb got me all hard, and your head's at the right level, bent over like that." He waved his cock in his brothers face.

Trevor slapped it away hard enough Tucker winced. "You're not getting off with my help after you left me staring at your vanishing ass."

"I was just in a hurry to see Seb again."

Trevor straightened. "He's here for at least a year, you have ample time to get your ass wrecked by him."

"Eighteen month is my replacement doesn't blow up the observatory before then." Sebastien had an arm over their grandmother's shoulder. He was still hard and leaking, the front of her pants were wet.

"Can I hug him?" Trevor asked.

Beatrice smiled. "Of course dear. Sebastian survived your brother's tackle, a hug from you won't break him." He gave Trevor space. "I must say I'm surprised you came to meet him."

"Tuck didn't give me a choice," Trevor said, burying his face the Sebastien's neck. "He threaten to get a full squadron to pull me out of my lobby if I didn't come. I'm missing a team raid because of him." He breathed in. "You still smell so nice."

The kangaroo smiled. "Thanks. And how about I make it up to you and join you in the Lands after Bea is done with me? It's been a long time, since I've played, and the last time I saw Gaia was when I visited last."

Trevor took a step back, shocked. "Don't you play at the observatory?"

Sebastien laughed. "The communication lag in the Kuiper Belt makes playing impossible. Even Ceril is too far to be Playable."

"How do you survive?"

"When Bea was present, she kept me busy, in the years she's been here, friends kept my mind off missing her and the Lands."

"And your cock busy?" Tucker asked, smiling innocently.

"Tucker, don't you have other things to do?" Beatrice asked.

"No, The Mercury left months ago. This is my well-deserved vacation." He snapped his fingers. "Oh! Seb, did you hear. I have a new brother!"

"Bea might have mentioned something about that in her last message."

"You have got to meet him. He's really nice, and since you're not family, he might fuck you, or let you fuck him. You need to tell me how good he is. And maybe you can put in a good

word for me?"

"You weren't kidding," Sebastian told the tigress, "he is obsessed with this new guy."

"Theo won't let Tuck in his bed," Trevor said, "so of course my brother has to convince him of the error of his ways."

"If I happen to run into this Theo, I'll make sure to tell him just how amazing you are of a lover."

Trevor snorted.

"But until then, you'll have to excuse me. It's been a few years since I've been with my gorgeous girlfriend, and I have to make it up to her." The kangaroo led the tigress to an atmospheric hover.

"What was that snort for. I am a wonderful lover, as you well know."

Trevor turned and headed toward the headquarter building. "And how would Sebastien know that? The last time he saw you, you were this over-eager kid who's implant had just fully formed and was shoving his cock into any willing guy."

Tucker caught up to his brother. "Where are you going? And Seb knows, because I've been sending him recordings over the years. I wasn't going to leave him hanging. He saw me develop just like the rest of you."

"He saw you body develop. Your mind's still that ten year old looking to poke guys with his cock. And I'm going to work. Since you made me miss my team quest, I might as well get something productive out of the day."

"Don't be like that," Tucker put an arm over his brother's shoulder. "It's a beautiful day. And hugging Seb left you hard and horny. I know it dead me." He diverted Trevor toward the path leading to the park. "Enjoy the real world for a while."

"I'm still not having sex with you. I'm still angry at you for running off."

"Did you really want to spend the rest of the walk arguing? And there's plenty of other guys in the park, just have some real-world fun, for a change."

Trevor sighed. "You are such a bad influence on me."

Tucker grinned. "Someone in our family has to pull your head out of that digital ass of yours once in a while."

* * * * *

It checked the readings. The ship with its improvised agent was now close enough it could send the information undetected, it would be forwarded to the agent already in place as per the instructions, but was this the wisest course?

How would the board change is it acted now? It needed to keep in mind that the living were not only rational being, emotions came into play, which made them more efficient at these types of tasks, but also less predictable.

It looked at its calculations. Caduceus still had time, although even that was not a fix variable. The acting factor in that was also part of the living, therefore emotional. Still, it

was confident in it's calculated window. It had time, and giving its agent the emotional stability improved the chances of success.

It felt the other AI approach, Nanoseconds ahead of its calculated schedule, and folded the information around itself, leaving nothing for him to find.

* * * * *

Uncle cursed.

The AI had been here, he was certain of it. The ripple within the planetary sensors had been faint, but unmistakably that of an intruder accessing them.

Why?

He couldn't tell what it had been looking at. What would an AI within the Earth system want with the rest of the solar system? Was it looking to send itself elsewhere?

That Uncle knew it couldn't do without him noticing. The amount of data any functioning AI was made of meant it was impossible to hide that transmission; It could only be camouflage. Uncle had employed the method often enough to investigate incidents through the system that he knew what to look for.

Mars was free of it, and for the time being, he was confident it was contained within the Earth system.

But its interest into space worried Uncle.

Chapter-22

The knock on the door came and went. Theo didn't look up from his work. If there was one thing these last few months had given him, it was time to practice his sculpting. He'd let that lapse over the last few years of near-constant work.

The knock came again.

"You going to let them in?" Theo asked.

"Do you want me to?" Cass replied.

"What do they want?"

"No idea."

Theo paused. "How do you not know?"

"They haven't contacted us."

The knock came again.

Theo raised his voice. "Come in, it's not locked." He'd stopped bothering since Tucker had the overrides.

Unsurprisingly, a tiger stepped into the kitchen, but not Tucker. Information appeared in his vision next to the man. Francis Orr, Eric's father. Other public details followed, which Theo ignored, except to notice the man had had a lot of careers.

"Hi," Francis said, "I'm Francis, I'm—"

"My grandfather," Theo said with a sigh. "I wish you'd all stop reminding me I'm related to you."

"I was going to say, Eric's father."

"Sorry. Tucker's over every few days to try to get me to

'join the family'. It get exhausting."

"My grandson can be persistent. Can I make myself something to drink?"

"Go ahead, and obsessive is a better to describe him."

"Tucker likes to have fun and believes everyone else should too." Francis picked up the small figurine Theo left on the counter once he was finished with it. "This is very good. Your work?"

"Yeah." Theo looked around; he'd left the results of his work all over the place. Counters, shelves, table.

"It's Doctor Long Dong, isn't?" Francis asked, sitting, cup in one hand, the figuring in the other. "The one from the third moving in the original Bondo series."

"You're a fan?"

"No, I ran a recognition algorithm. You work is good enough it was the top result, with Hole Deep as a distant second. But you have him dressed, so I doubt you were basing him on the actors adult movie. I take it you are a fan?" Francis indicated the other figurings Theo sculpted. Too many of them were Bondo characters.

"Not particularly, but I had to familiarize myself with the franchise, so the characters are in my head these days."

"For your work?"

Theo sighed. "You know about that."

Francis smiled. "Very little of interest remains private without our family."

"Great," Theo said, dejected. "So you know what I did."

"You saved Mars, possible the whole of the solar system, of course I know."

Theo studied the man. "I mean more what happened with Marcus. I expect Terrence made sure you all knew what I did to him."

"Ah, that. Yes, I know. I'm afraid Terry is rather dogmatic in his belief that our enemies can not be trusted. He's made sure everyone knows what he thinks of you. Out of curiosity, what do you intend to do about Marcus?"

"What the fuck am I supposed to do? Marry him? He was a job, I'm sorry for—" Francis raise a hand and Theo stopped.

"I'm not implying or judging. Unlike Terry, I have the luxury of never having had to run the corporation. So I'm less invested in any belief of who is right and who is wrong. And unlike him, I don't have a need to pretend we devoid of bad decisions or difficult ones. Things were less difficult when I was your age, but we were still in a conflict with Vanguard, SolGov was trying to find ways to pressure the corporation to bend to their will. There are a lot of things Uncle has done to keep us safe. Terry is simply unwilling to look at them. I wasn't. You were a spy, and spies have to make hard choices."

"I didn't expect you to this understanding. The information I have on you says you're rather emotional."

Francis chuckled. "I had my breakdown over the grayness of the world in my forties, and a lot of years to come to terms with it. If you're interested, I'll show you my art form that era. It isn't particularly pretty, but as another artist, you might find it interesting."

"I'm not an artist."

Francis placed Doctor Long Dong on the table. "This seems to claim that you are."

"It's just a hobby I picked up." Theo moved his artificial fingers. "I have tools and a lot of time on my hands between assignments."

"And I expect a need to keep the nerve connection to your arm active."

"You know about artificial limb conditioning?"

"When Eric studied medicine, I took a few courses with him, to help out where I could. I don't have the making of a doctor, that was clear when he had to spend more time helping me keep up with him, but I did read a fair bit on it. You don't have an implant to regulate it, or does Cass do that?"

"I keep a minimal functional level for it, yes," Cass answered

"Hello Cass, it's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise, Mister Orr."

"Francis, please. Mister Orr is Terry these days."

"Very well, Francis."

"Could you keep it fully functional?" Francis asked, "as an implant does for the rest of us?"

"I could, but..." Cass trailed off.

Theo picked up. "Our training discourage it. Because of the work we do, there will be situations where I'll have to operate without Cass."

"As happened on Mars."

"Yes. If my arm depended on Cass to function, it would have been useless. As it was, I barely noticed his absence when it came to using it."

"Forgive me if this is too intrusive, but doesn't it get tiresome to have someone constantly in your head that you can't get away from?"

"Doesn't it get tiresome having the whole world in yours?" Theo asked.

"I can shut it out, filter what part I let in. Cass is a full person, unless I misunderstood Uncle's report."

"I am," Cass said, "to the same effect that your sons are and grandson."

"But they aren't attached to my hip."

"But they can contact you at any time," Cass said. "They can intrude on your life as much as they want regardless of where they are."

"I can set up 'do not disturb' filters if I need privacy."

"Me and Cass can to the equivalent," Theo said. "He doesn't

reside in my head. He can't access my mind, and I can't access his. For any communication purpose, it's the same as with you and your family, except that there's no way for an outside person to keep us from talking short of physically removing him. If one of us needs privacy, the other respects it."

Francis sipped his cup. "I hadn't thought about it that way. For me it's so natural to connect with the world that as Cass said, it's basically in my head. Under my control, but there."

"And that's what I couldn't deal with," Theo said. "What if someone uses that connection to get in your head? Infiltrates your implant, alters what you see. That's what the rogue AI on Mars did. Took over everyone with an implant, turned them into puppets."

Francis looked into his cup, uncomfortable. "That was a special circumstance. We have programs to prevent that from happening. The AI could bypass all of that because it's a program. People don't have those kinds of abilities."

Theo didn't push the issue. This wasn't about convincing Francis which of their ways was the better one. Which raised the question. What was this about?

"Did you visit just to meet me and discuss art and philosophy, or is there another reason?"

Francis snapped his finger. "Right, I came to pick you up, your parents are landing within the hour."

"They're here?" Theo stood and began making plans. He'd working out a few escape routes that should work, if Cass could keep Uncle from interfering, but how large was the window?

"I have no information about their arrival," Cass told him. Which mean it had been kept from him specifically so he couldn't

"Calm down Theo," Francis said. "I'm not sure what's got you panicking, but you're not in danger."

"Of course you'd say that. How come I wasn't informed they were this close? Cass hadn't gotten any information on their eta since I answered their message, back on the Mercury."

Francis frowned. "That would have been Uncle's doing. He's refusing to answer me, definitely his doing." He stood. "Come on, let's go welcome them and I'll try to get answers from Uncle on the way."

"I'm not reading any deception from him," Cass said privately.

"What if I want to go there on my own?" Theo challenged.

"Of course, you can," Francis said, "I just thought you'd want company. You look like you're about to pull a Tucker and do something not warranted."

"He means stupid," Cass said and Francis winced.

Theo tried to calm himself. He had meditation classes and breathing exercises to help, but all he could think about was that his family was about to be here, where Uncle could do

anything he wanted to them. Where Vanguard could get to them.

Why hadn't they gone back home?

Arms enveloped him, and instead of bolting, Theo melted against the body.

"It's okay," Francis said. "They aren't in danger. I give you my word, no one will put them at risk."

"So you read minds too?" Theo said in the shirt.

"No, but being as emotional as I am, I've gotten to know what can make others lose it. There aren't a lot of possibilities here."

Theo nodded. "Can you really keep them safe?"

"You have my word."

Theo pulled out of the embrace, using all his training to hide how comfortable Francis had felt. "Okay, let's go."

* * * * *

Theo ran past Eric and Tucker the moment the fox stepped onto the ramp. "Dad!" He embraced his father.

"Theo. Dear God, are you okay?" His father said in his fur, holding him tightly.

"I told you to go home," Theo replied. "Why, why didn't you listen?"

"I couldn't leave you here, son. What kind of father would I be if I didn't do everything I could to bring you home?"

He took a step back to tell his father what he thought of that stupid idea, but saw his mother and he hugged it.

"Oh Theodore, I've missed you so much. When I saw that report about Mars and how they said you were involved I was terrified of what would happen to you, but then we—"

"It's okay mom. This isn't the place to talk about it" He wasn't sure there was such a place on this island.

"No, of course not." She pulled away, studying his face.

"You look good, are—are they treating you well?"

"As well as can be expected, all things considered."

She looked around him and whispered. "I expected there to be more guards."

Theo smiled. "They own the entire norther continent, they don't need guards when they have an entire army they can call on."

Her nose paled.

"I'm joking, mom." He took her and his father's hand. "Come on, let's get this started so we can figure out how to get out of it."

She squeezed his hand. "Don't worry, Theo, we'll take care of that."

Theo didn't like the sound of that, but this was another thing they couldn't discuss here. He stopped before the others and sound he didn't know how to proceed.

"Hello," his father said, "I'm Darius..." he trailed off and bit his lower lip.

"Paso," Eric finished. "And this is your wife, Maria Paso."

We know who you are. I'm Eric, this is Tucker, one of my sons, and Francis, my father. I figured a smaller welcoming comity would be more comfortable. Tucker is only here because he appointed himself Theo's guardian and there is no talking him out of idiotic ideas."

"Dad," Tucker whined. "Way to make an impression on them."

"The day you decide to be a reasonable adult, Tucker, I will introduce you as such."

Francis grins between them, rolling his eyes.

"Since the introduction have been made," Theo's mother said, "I'd like to say that--"

"If you don't mind," Tucker said, more serious than Theo had ever seen him. "We should take this inside."

"I suppose we should," Eric said.

"Uncle wants in on this, I expect," Cass said privately.

The walk to the building was peppers by gasped from his parents, and quiet curses and 'how can they?' or 'that can't be legal'. Vanguard was nowhere near as free with nudity as the Orrs were, neither were the Colonies. Theo suspected nowhere in the universe could be as comfortable with people being nude as the Orrs. He'd become desensitized to it at this point.

Instead of taking a lift, Eric guided them through a door in the lobby, then one that opened onto a meeting room. The door closed and Uncle appeared.

"Oh," his mother said. "Hello."

"Mister and Misses Paso, welcome to the Orr corporate territory," Uncle said. "I want to assure you that your past association with Vanguard is being disregarded. Anything that happens here will be based solely on your being Theodore's parent. I will also not take into account whatever citizenship you currently hold, whoever has been hiding you since you fled Vanguard is--"

Theo's father snorted. "Like you'll ever find them."

"Excuse me?" Uncle asked.

"Dad," Theo warned, closing his eyes.

"Let me guess, you've scoured Earth and the Moon for us. Had any luck?"

"Dad," Theo warned again, his voice harder.

"Like we'd ever live anywhere this close to the people who'd harm my son. Go ahead, keep searching, go as far as Mars, hell, go as far as Titan. I'm not--"

Theo clamped his hand over his father's muzzle. "Stop."

His father looked hurt as he mumbles something through his closed muzzle. "What's wrong?" he said when Theo released him, I was just--

"Gloating," Theo scowled. "In the process you told him not to waste his time looking within the inner system."

"Oh," His father's ears folded back. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to."

"I know dad, but this is why you should have stayed home. I

had to go through six years of training before I was allowed in the field. I can't believe you were allowed to come."

"If it helps appease your conscience," Uncle said. "I had no interest in looking for where your parents came from."

Theo rolled his eyes. "Of course, because you are so comfortable with a group of independents you know nothing about."

Uncle smiled and motioned to the table. "Shall we sit?"

"Forgive me to being blunt," Theo's mother said, "but is there a reason you aren't here in person? It's not like you haven't known when we'll be arriving for weeks."

"Let's say that I'm currently indis—"

"He's an AI," Theo said.

"Theo," Uncle sounded indignant.

"You know about Cass, it's only fair they know about you."

"An AI?" his father asked. "How? No one but."

"Dad," Theo warned, and this time Darius stopped.

"Yes," Uncle said, "I expect that it is as surprising to you as it was to me, to find you are not the only ones having AIs."

Theo motioned his parents one side of the table. Eric, Tucker and Francis sat opposing them with Uncle at the head. Theo wondered if the AI was sending a message about who was really in charge.

"Theo is my son," Eric state.

Darius bristled.

"I know," His mother said. Theo stared at her. She patted his hand. "I'm a geneticist, dear. When the corporation hands me a baby to look after, I run my own checks."

"How did you trace Theo's DNA to Eric?" Uncle asked. "We do not allow that kind of information to be distributed."

"Vanguard has a copy on file. I didn't know, but Theo's check came with a classified parental link. I paid a childhood friend to get me the information."

"And it didn't occur to you to return him to his rightful father?" Eric asked. The warning light Cass kept next to Eric turned yellow.

"No, it didn't," She answered. "We were entrusted with him."

"You stole from—"

"Stop, Eric," Theo said, and the light turned orange. "My parents—" the light turned a darker orange. "—didn't steam me. Whatever Vanguard did to you, they were not involved."

"That is irrelevant. They became complicit when they—"

"Do you have any idea how impossible it is to qualify to have a child?" Darius spat. "Not one of those fertility clinic babies where Vanguard controls each and every aspect of who come out. I mean a child of your own. Do you have any idea the kind of qualification you have to meet for them to say yes? I'm a top of my field micro-circuitry engineer. Maria was in the top point

one percent of her graduating year in bio-genetics. We were turned down year after year, because we didn't meet the requirement."

"What made Theo different?" Uncle asked. "Why accept him when you refused the fertility clinics? For all you knew he came from there, he actually did, since there's no other way Vanguard could ensure he had the characteristic then wanted."

His mother squeezed Theo's hand. She squirmed in her seat, but she still spoke before his father. "We were promised a reconsideration. We were told that once we were done with Theo, they would make an exception for us, as repayment for our duty."

"But it barely took a week that we both fell in love with Theo," Darius said. "It probably makes me a hypocrite for all the railing I did against the clinics that I no longer care where he came from. He was my son. He is my son." The fox fixed his gaze on Eric and the light turned red.

Francis placed a hand on Eric's arm. "You need to calm down, son. What was done to you was unforgivable, and Vanguard will pay, but his people are innocent, and they did an amazing job raising Theo, keeping him safe. You know the danger in breaking with Vanguard, yet they did that for him. Theo is here now because they sacrificed for him."

The light's color turned orange and settled at almost yellow.

"My son is very guarded emotionally," Francis said, "And very protective of his children, even the one he was unaware he had."

"I don't—" Theo began.

"Should I remind you of the two kidnapping attempts?" Uncle said.

His mother squeezed his hand hard enough Theo winced.

"Did you have to bring that up?"

"It seemed relevant," Uncle answered.

"Then it's even more important that we take our son home," his mother said. "Where he'll be safe from Vanguard."

"He's safe here," Eric state.

"There were two attempts," his father said.

"The first one happened before anyone understood the length Vanguard would go to," Uncle said. "The second because Theo decided to ditch his protection detail."

"His guards, you mean," Darius spat.

Theo sighed. "No, they were just there for my protection. I let an argument get to me and made a stupid decision."

"Regardless," his mother said, "we're here to negotiate for our son's release."

"Mom," Theo sighed, "It's not like—"

"I understand you have something of a genetic crisis," she said.

"What is she talking about?" Eric asked.

Theo wondered the same thing, and Uncle's staring told him

she was right.

"How do you know about that?" Uncle asked.

"I know my son's genetic code," she answered. "He came home twice with odd changes to his DNA, the first time I just fixed it, but when he returned with the same thing I looked into it and devised an immunity for him. Knowing his connection to your family, when I heard about the newest generation, I suspected Theo might not have caught a random virus, but might have been accidentally targeted because of your DNA. I am willing to give you the—"

"No," Theo said.

"Theo," she and Uncle said at the same time, dismay in her voice, anger in his.

"You are not going to hold a cure ransom for me. If they are afflicted with something and you have the cure, mom, you're going to give it to them."

"Theo, it's the only bargaining chip I have."

"And I'm telling you I will not let you bargain my freedom with it. Give it to them, Mom. Dad, how is your work on implants?"

"I—what? Theo, how is this relevant?"

"It is, trust me."

"Well, It's been years, but I have studied the full implant system, you know that, Theo. It was part of..." he looked around warily. "I'm not sure I should be saying more."

"Could you repair one?" Theo asked.

"I don't know. Theo, an implant isn't like most system. It grows with a child brain. In the two years after it's implanted, it goes from this point barely three microns across to a mesh interweaved with the brain tissue. Because of that no two implant is the same."

"Are you willing to try?"

"Theo, implants don't get damaged in a way that requires someone to fix them. Not unless someone deliberately disrupts the weave, so it won't... what?"

The looks Tucker and Eric gave his father were what Theo aimed for, although the hope in Tucker's eye outshined the, well, not-quite suspicion in Eric.

"Dad?" Tucker asked.

"Would you be willing to try?" Eric asked.

"Well, as I said, I can't promise what I would be able to do, but yes, I'd be willing to try in exchange—"

"Not in exchange for anything, Dad," Theo said.

Darius sighed. "Theo, are you looking to stay here? If you won't let us buy your freedom, what do you expect us to do?"

"I expect us all to be do the right thing."

Chapter-23

The restaurant was a casual place on the hundredth eighty-eighth floor on the Orr

corporate tower. The floor had a hotel and amusement park, attracting visiting families; it made for a less nude environment. Theo was pleased, if a little surprised by the consideration given to his parents' lodging.

"How are you doing?" he asked as he sat opposite them.

"We should ask you that, shouldn't we?" his mother replied.

"Me and Cass are keeping busy."

His father looked around furtively before leaning in and whispering. "Where are they?"

"Who?"

"Your guards."

"I'm not under guard."

The server arrived, placing plates and glasses.

"They let you go anywhere you want?" Maria asked.

"I expect plenty of doors in the tower won't open to me, but unless I leave the islands, I can go anywhere I want on my own. The men they assign me if I fly to the mainland are more for my protection than to guard me, the Orrs don't want Vanguard to get me."

"Eric seems rather overprotective of you," Darius said, cutting his steak.

"He's protective of all his sons, and he considers me one of them. I'm also proof of something he feared Vanguard did to him decades ago. And he has issues with me operating on his ships for months without his knowledge. He thinks that just because I share half his DNA, I should act the way his other sons do." He dug into his stew.

"And how do you feel about him?" His mother asked, she had yet to touch her salad.

"I don't think of him as my dad, if that's what you're worried about." Theo sighed at the look his parents exchanged. "Mom, Dad, you are my parents, nothing's ever going to change that."

"Then why do you seem intent on staying here?" Darius asked. "We came to take you home, your mother was fortunate enough to find the—" He closed his mouth as she squeezed his hand. "Why wouldn't you let her use the information to free you? Or my skills?"

"Mainly because I don't want us to be the kind of people who hold others hostage for what they want. That's what the Anarchists do."

"Who are the Anarchist?" His mother asked.

"Right." The people around had gotten so used to the term he'd coined, he forgot it wasn't common parlance. "It's what I call the Independents like those who unleashed the AI on Mars, to differentiate them from the— form those who just want to live their lives. It ranked to be included among them when people talk about the independent terrorists. The other reason, is that I can't go home. You knew it could happen. It 's always been a risk in my line of work."

"We knew they wouldn't do anything to bring you back," Darius said, "but we always thought you'd make your way back."

“When we heard the news about your capture...”

Theo smiled. “You decided to come rescue me. How did you even hear about it? I know it should have been kept from you, at best you should have been informed I died.”

His parents exchanged another look. “Someone set us the news report, we don’t know who.”

“Patricia?” Cass offered privately.

It made sense. She was new enough she might feel obligated to pass along. Angelica would remind her it wasn’t her place, but Patricia had a stubborn streak that would drive Anderson nuts in time.

“How are the two of you doing?” Theo asked. “Is the work comparable with home?”

“They haven’t let me access much,” Maria said. “The Uncle AI is wary of letting a geneticist close to anything related to the Orrs. Considering what Vanguard unleashed, his behavior is understandable.”

“And what the Ind—the Anarchists did to that poor man is deplorable,” Darius said. “His implant has been disrupted on a molecular level. The saving grace is that those work on a atomic level, so the odds are good I’ll be able to reconstruct it, but there’s no telling how much of who he was is left. Most of that his held within the organic components.”

“Long term memories should be intact,” Maria said.

“Maybe,” his father corrected. “We tend to forget that implants help maintain those, studies among Independents show that long term memories alter and degrade over time. They remain who they are mostly due to subtle daily reinforcement of those memories throughout their lives. Those holos for vacations they took that they look at when they have nothing else to do, conversation with friends about things they did years before. This man, Brack, hasn’t had anything like that to stimulate those memories. Some will be within the implant, but there’s no way to know what, or how much. His brother is... He doesn’t seem to understand what I’ve told him. It hurts to see that hope in his eyes.”

Maria squeezed his hand.

“He’ll be happy for anything you give him back, dad.”

“I hope so. Disappointment isn’t always easy to accept.” He leveled his gaze on Theo.

“Disappointment can be overcome, dad.” Theo’s gaze didn’t waver. “You just have to see what you got, even if it isn’t everything you wanted.”

“I don’t know if that’s going to be enough,” the fox said.

“It’s got to be, dad. You’re just an engineer, not a corporate head.”

* * * * *

“I love them,” Theo said. His voice echoed over the hot tub’s water.

“I don’t doubt that,” Cass replied.

“Then why do I not want to spend any more time with them?” The water was only one degree off from boiling his fur off his body. He’d needed to relax after an afternoon

walking through the Island's park.

"How deep do you want me to dig through the psychological texts for the answer?"

"Please don't. I just." He dunked his head under the water, resurfaced. "Why does dad have to look at me with such hope, he knows the situation I'm in. I wish mom would just scream at me instead of saying she understands. I know she doesn't. She's angry. Neither of them want to stay here. Fuck, I don't either, I want to go home, but it's not going to happen, they have to accept that."

"They'll get there, you need to give them time. Someone's approaching."

The hot tub was public, Theo hadn't felt like waiting until he was at his house after seeing his parents to their room in the hotel, but he'd had Cass find an isolated one in the hopes he'd be alone. It had worked, until now.

"Do you mind if I join you?"

Theo opened his eyes and masked his annoyance at the disruption of his solitude. "I'd rather—" the words vanished at the sight of that cock. Long, thick, large ball-sac framing it. He forced himself to look up from it and the kangaroo had a knowing smile. He winked.

"Don't worry about it, it has that effect on just about every male compatible guy." He turned.

"Don't," Theo said.

"Please," Cass said, his tone plaintive.

The kangaroo turned back to face Theo, ears canted questioningly.

He motioned for the opposing side of the hot tub. "Please, come on in."

"Don't tell me about him," he coded under the water.

The kangaroo stepped in with a hiss. "Wow, you do know there are easier ways to sterilize yourself than boiling your balls off, right?"

"Sorry, I needed to relax."

The kangaroo stepped into the deeper part. "Might I suggest a massage and a fuck?" he panted.

"You offering?"

"If it doesn't run off screaming when I sit down, I'll consider it."

Theo smiled. "I can lower the temperature." He offered his hand. "Theo Lar—Laramie." Should he even bother? With his parents here, he could use his last name again.

"Sebastien Hairston." He shook the hand. "No, it's okay, I always did like a challenge." He sat down, his eyes going wide. "Fuck." He pants for a few second, then slid down, stretching his legs across the tub onto Theo's lap. "Okay, this.... This might be what I actually needed."

"Stressful day?" Theo took a foot in hand and massaged the sole.

"I just spent it with my girlfriend and her family, her very large, very energetic family. It's been years since I'd seen them, and I forgot just how exhausting they can be." He let out a moan. "Oh, that's very nice." The kangaroo reached for Theo's legs and

put them on his lap.

Theo let out a deep moan as the kangaroo's fingers dug into his sole. "It's a good thing I have nothing to do. I want you to spend the rest of the year doing that."

The kangaroo moved to Theo's other foot, placing the massaged one against his hard cock. "I'm hoping massage isn't the only thing you're looking for. I did say a fuck was good to relax too. I'm male compatible," he said at Theo's tilted ear. "And so long as I'm available when my girlfriend wants me, she doesn't care who else I have sex with."

Theo rubbed the cock with his foot. It was longer than his foot. He swallowed. It might be the longest and thickest cock he'd ever seen in person. "Do you want us to move to a more convenient place?" He placed the kangaroo's foot against his own erection to show him he was definitely willing.

"After subjecting myself to this heat, I'm not interested in moving out of it, unless you prefer a bed."

Theo glided to Sebastien's side. "I prefer expediency over comfort." He wrapped his hand on the cock. His fingers not coming anywhere close to touching. His breath caught.

"Are you going to be okay with it? I'm rather big."

"Is this natural?" he stoked it, felt like his hand moved up it for feet.

"Very much so, or so my parents claim. Fortunately for them, fertility clinics have a policy against disclosing any genetic information, so I have to take their word for it."

Theo climbed on the kangaroo's lap. "How are you not a superstar with this thing? You should be putting on shows."

Sebastien laughed. "My jobs doesn't lend itself to sharing this."

"What do you do?" He rubbed the cock between his cheeks. Felt it push his tail aside as he sat on Sebastien's groin.

"I'm an astrophysicist. I work out of the Kuiper Belt. Communication lag means I can only broadcast what I do, not share a feed. And my girlfriend draws the line at sharing me with the entire solar system. Don't you want lube? There are rags by the entrance."

"I'm not getting out of this tub," Theo replied, moving up. "And I'm relaxed enough to take anything." He slid down, guiding the cock to his hole.

"Do you mind if I power up the jets? I like the massage while I fuck."

The tip slid in, stretching Theo's ass. "I don't fucking care," he said through the sigh. The noise level increased as the water became frothy. More of Sebastien's cock entered him. "Oh fuck."

"You can stop," Sebastien raised his voice to speak over the noise.

"No fucking way. I want this. Oh fuck I need this." More went in. How many feet already? He shuddered as his prostate was pressed, and pressed some more, each vein on the giant cock, tapping it and making Theo's cock tremble.

"You don't have—"

Theo kissed the Kangaroo. "Shut up." He kissed him again. "Just shut up." He pushed his tongue into the muzzle. Sebastien placed a hand on each of Theo's ass cheek

and massaged them with his fingers.

Theo tried to push his tongue all the way to the back to the kangaroo's muzzle and still more of his cock entered him. He panted. "Fuck, how much is left? At this rate you're going to be able to lick your tip out of my mouth."

"Not much. Your throat is safe until you decide to suck me off."

"Later," Theo said and kissed Sebastien again. He felt the kangaroo's going against his and figured the tip of the cock was somewhere just below his heart. He leaned against Sebastien. "Fuck, fuck. How did it fit?"

The kangaroo chuckles and leaned to his ear, "Feel to me like it fit perfectly." He nibbled the pavilion and then down to Theo's neck.

"You're going to have to do most of the work," Theo said. "I have no strength left."

"No worries there," He nipped through Theo's neck fur. "I'm use to causing that in guys." The fingers tightened on Theo's ass and the cock pulled out slowly. And kept pulling out and out. Theo shuddered the whole time. His cock jumped as the crown passed over his prostate, then he whined as he felt it stretching his hole.

Sebastian paused there, threatening to pull out completely.

Theo caught his breath. "How many guys do you end up blackmailing at this point? Give me all your riches or I pull out and you'll never feel this again?"

Sebastien laughed. "You are one devious guy." He pushed in, cutting off Theo's response. The kangaroo nuzzled Theo's ear "you ever had an orgasm without triggering it yourself?" he gave a quick thrust and Theo groaned.

He bit on the kangaroo's ear. "Only trigger I ever use of a hand, a mouth or an ass around my cock."

"Well, then, we're going to have to try for one with a cock inside your ass."

Sebastien picked up speed

Theo cursed, shuddered and then panted. The kangaroo bit is neck and Theo moaned. The cock shoved deep in him and he groaned, glaring at the kangaroo.

"Harder."

Sebastian smiled and pressed his arms against Theo's sides and lower back to hold him in place and thrust hard and deep. Theo had difficulty breathing, his cock strained. His was getting close simply from the friction of their fur against his cock, and the cock in his ass, he couldn't forget about that. Would never be able to forget about it.

Oh fuck, oh fuck. He was going to cum.

"I have a file for you from Anderson," Sebastien whispered in his ear. The words registered, as did their implications, but Theo was too deep in his sensation to react to them. He threw his head back and screamed as he came. He slumped on the kangaroo, still thrusting in him, but he was too dazed to react. Sebastien tightened his hold, thrust deep enough it Theo winced and tensed. The cock pulsed inside him, and even after the fucking he received he felt like he was being filled to the brim.

In the back of his mind it registered there was no way this guy had been born like this. How much of who he was had been fabricated by Anderson?

Sebastien panted, head back, eyes half-closed. Theo rested his head on the kangaroo's chest. An icon acknowledged receipt of a file. Cass would read it and one Theo had a semblance of strength again, they would discuss its content.

Theo shuddered and worried he'd have another orgasm as Sebastien pulled out. Even soft he stretched him. Not natural, but Theo didn't care. When he had time he was tracking the kangaroo again and putting himself through this treatment again.

Sebastien set Theo down next to him. "I needed that." The jets were down to minimal again, no need to shout anymore.

"I bet you say that to everyone you fuck."

"Just when I really needed it." Sebastien patted Theo's leg. "But I got to go, My girlfriend wants to have dinner, and I need to eat after this. I hope to see you again, Theo."

Theo wondered if the girlfriend was real, or just another part of the cover. He gave the kangaroo lazy wave. "Oh, I intend on tracking you down once I can walk again. You might just have ruined me for other guy."

Sebastien chuckled. "I doubt that. The bunch of you aren't exclusive to any guys."

By the time Theo thought to ask what he meant, the kangaroo was gone.

"Theo, don't fall asleep on me," Cass said. "We need to move."

"After a nap," he replied. "That took way more out of me than I expected." He closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry about this, Theo, but we don't have the time."

Theo felt his mind clear with the suddenness of a drug injection. Training kicked in with the clarity. Cass didn't use stimulant unless time was of the essence. 'Cass.' He coded, stepping out of the pool.

"We've been reactivated. We need to find a private place so we can talk. You're going to have questions."

He already had them. How could he be reactivated? He had been burned. What kind of emergency would cause Anderson to break all known protocols to give him orders? Who the fuck was Sebastien Hairston?

* * * * *

The hover's flight was erratic; the result of Cass flying it without assistance of the onboard computer or a connection to the network. He'd guided Theo as to which component to remove to ensure the hover didn't register on the network. They were heading west.

"The satellites?" Theo asked, straightening and putting the tools back into his arm.

"They're shared ownership, so I have to hope Uncle can't just get in and track us visually."

"We need to ditch the hover as soon as possible. Where are we going?"

"Hawaii, there's an Independent colony there with a mid-twenty-second century technological level, we'll be able to leave the hover there and the belt and find something

to take us to our final destination.”

“The belt? I thought you’d deactivated the tracker.”

“I did, but you can be sure there’s something else in there I haven’t found that going to start screaming the instant there’s a network connection in range.”

“This is earth, Cass, in range kind of means anywhere not actively shielded.”

“My point exactly.”

Theo sat. “Fuck. Mom and dad are going to freak.”

“I’m more worried about what Eric will do, he has the corporation behind him to hunt is down and the irrational need to protect his sons.”

“It’s kind of late, seeing as we’ve already fled Orr territory, but how certain are you this is real?”

“One hundred percent. All the identifiers are there. This is a message from Anderson sent via courier.”

“Sebastien.” Theo sighed. “You have to hand it to her, she knows how to pick them. Bring the file up.”

Images appeared in his sight, the picture of a man, maps, research papers, encrypted and decrypted communication.

Doctor Darren Dunn had arrived on Earth from Mars three months ago for an information conference in Ameritech, only there were no records of him registering with the conference center. That was because Doctor Dunn and really Reginal Bech, Eiffel Artificial Intelligence Researcher who had left the colony for a trip to Gaza, only when the ship docked there, Reginal was not there.

A dead AI was discovered within Eiffel’s travel registry, something made to look like Caprica[made up the name on the spot, if there’s a better one tell me], but nowhere near as complex and suicidal. It had done the work of hiding Reginal’s movement and ended itself.

Over the next two years, eight identities with his face showed up at Titan station, four on Mars, three on various research station between Mars and Saturn. And finally Dunn on Earth.

The decrypted communication were with some unidentified Independent about previous files sent, confirming receipt, explanation of how to work with them, how to unleash them within a closed system.

Like Mars.

Reginal Bech was involved in the deployment of the Rogue AI.

“One of us did this.”

“That doesn’t make all of us guilty, Theo.”

Theo snorted. “But it goes a fucking long way to supporting the corporates theories that no independent can be trusted with technology. We are supposed to be better, and this Beech goes and makes some sort of deal with the Anarchist to what? Destroy Mars?”

“I went over the research papers, Reginal Bech has been filing requests to hand over complete control of one of the colonies to prove his theories that any failure in the

overall system is caused by people. He advocates giving the AIs complete control.”

“They already run just about everything, what more does he want?”

“Any interaction with people removed. Cutting through the scientific bullshit, he basically wants them to become our overlords and you extensions of their will.”

“That’s insane.” Theo pulled one of the communications, Rodrick’s picture with a list of aliases as well as his and Patricia. “Well, not we know how they found Rodrick and how they knew to subdue me. I’m not seeing anything in there about making me the head of their rebellion.”

“Probably the local leader’s decision, a way for them to shift the focus.”

Theo looked over the information provided, there were a lot of it on earth, possible sightings, with accuracy rating. The suspiciously circular network dead zone in the South Atlantic Ocean, it came with associated failures as explanation, but a perfect circle was rarely a natural phenomena.

“Here’s my problem with all this,” Theo said. “If Anderson had agents on Earth who can provide her with all this. Why is she reactivating me? Why isn’t she sending one or all of them after Reginal Bech?”

“Maybe this is her sending everything she has to take him down? Even an agent she isn’t suppose to acknowledge still exist.”

“That’s actually scarier. What kind of threat does she think Bech poses that she needs everyone after him?”

A file highlighted. Scientific talk, algorithm; he recognized some as AI code.

“According to this, Bech build a fully functioning AI without anyone realizing it.”

“You mean create the theory behind the building of one.”

“No, He build one in his lab, and smuggled it out of Eiffel. In theory, it’s here on Earth, with him, right now.”

Theo stared at the file. “No wonder Anderson is deploying everyone. This...”

This was end of the world bad.

Chapter-24

“Why?” Tucker growled, looking at the hovers on the landing pads. “Why the fuck would he do this?”

“I don’t know,” Uncle replied. “I’ve gone over every interaction I’ve had with him, and there were no indications he was planning anything.”

“He fooled you?” Tucker turned, heading for the tower.

“I don’t believe so, even the most control person gives off clues as to their intentions. I have access to more processing power and anyone in the Solar system. I am saying this was not something he planned on doing until recently.”

“Any idea how recent?”

“Tucker, how are—”

“Answer the fucking question, Uncle.” People hurried to get out of his way.

“He had lunch with his parent, both are back to work and exhibit no change in their behavior.”

“You think he’d have told them?”

“No, but I believe they would have picked up on something being different if Theo had made his plans at that point. It would affect their behavior.”

“By the same reasoning, they aren’t in on it. Neither of them are great actors.”

“Agreed. Tucker, please slow down, people are beginning to notice.”

“Do you think I—”

“Tucker, you’re home, not on the battlefield.”

“If you think I’m just going to laugh this off and go fuck some guy, you—”

“You know very well how I dislike you playing the clown, it’s not you, but I agreed to let you do it, because it keeps you from going off the deep end. You are heading toward that right now. The people around you are becoming alarmed.”

Tucker stopped and closed his eyes. Tried to compartmentalize the pain away, but it was so raw, so close. He’d trusted Theo. “Was Terry right? Did he fool me?” He tried to recall their interactions, but all he had to work with was his regular memory. He couldn’t function with his combat memory constantly active; it didn’t differentiate between the now and back then, He’d constantly relive old fights looking for hints of incoming threats.

He was home, he shouldn’t in battle mode.

“Fuck, why?” his voice cracked. His eyes stung.

“I don’t believe he played you, or any of us. As I said, he showed no indications of working us. And Theo’s method of getting close to someone is seduction. If his intent was to manipulate us, you’d have gotten your wish and fucked him already.”

Tucker snorted. How often could he claim that a guy telling him no was a good thing in the long run? “Any luck locating him?” He was calmer, not happy, but not bordering on engaging battle mode anymore.

“No, there was a... glitch in the system, which didn’t register until the hover landing in New Vegas tripped the security sensor. Somehow the registry of the hover Theo took jumped to that hover.”

“A glitch? Cass’ doing?” he forced a smile at the people he crossed path, heading to the private elevator.

“No, I’m familiar with how he works, and I have sentries looking for him within the system. He hasn’t been within it since calling the hover.”

“Which get glitched,” Tucker said suspiciously.

“Yes.”

“Okay, since you know which hover he took, have you found him using the satellite system?”

“There are complications.”

“Uncle?”

“Call them glitches.” Uncle did not sound happy, and that put Tucker on edge. Glitches didn’t happen, not unless someone caused them, but Uncle was the system, he’d know. “Our surveillance network is undergoing maintenance, this area was shut down, with the backup satellite not getting the instructions to come online.”

“Someone got into our security net and you didn’t notice?” Only one group was this dedicated. Had Vanguard somehow gotten to Theo?

“No, the maintenance has been scheduled for two months.”

“Fine, when did SolGov’s spy network see?”

“I’m working on getting in there.”

“What do you mean, working on it?” Tucker entered the elevator and rested his head against the wall.

“SolGov upgraded their security, something surprisingly effective this time. I’ll get through, but it’ll take longer than usual.”

Tucker cursed. “Any indication Theo received a message?”

“I’ve gone over his communications. Only the normal conversations with you and the few people he’s gotten to know. I’m analyzing everything for encryptions the regular checks might have missed, but it all looks normal.”

“So whatever happened took place in the seven hours after he had lunch. Where was he?”

“Within the corporate tower. Which means you need to look into that part.”

“It’d be faster if you did it.”

“Yes, but Elliot had all those measures installed with the tower’s system to keep me from going “Evil Overlord” on all of you.”

“Like those will do anything to slow you down.”

“True, but I’d like to respect his wishes, and it will give you something to do rather than pace a circle in the floor. I also want to give those SolGov new security measures my full attention. The quicker I get through them, but faster I can locate Theo’s hover.”

“Alright, I’ll trace Theo’s movement within the tower after his lunch and see what happened, but you realize what it means if someone contacted him inside the tower.”

“Yes, it means our own security measures have been breached. Once we’ve dealt with this, I’ll do an audit on it.”

“Are you sure you want me to handle this? Trevor’s the investigator.”

“But you’re the one who needs to keep occupied right now. Bring him in if you need his help, just keep point on it. Stay busy, don’t let yourself spiral down.”

“Alright, I’m getting on this right now.”

“And I’ll get on SolGov, shout if you need my assistance.” Uncle ended the transmission.

Tucker exited the elevator on the hundredth eighty-eighth floor and used his family override to access the corridor’s sensor. At the restaurant he rewound the feed until Theo exited and followed him. He brought up information on everyone Theo encountered, employees and families of employees, visiting citizens, and on Halibury contractor here to discuss a shared project.

Theo shared an express public elevator with eight people going to the lobby, then he walked outside. Tucker didn’t bother leaving the tower. Sensor feed outside were spotty once people walked beyond a kilometer from the tower. He accessed the overview

map of the islands and tracked Theo as he walked around. He took a hover to the next island over, and spent a few hours walking and possibly having sex, by the delays between registering at different points within the park trails.

He returned to the tower for dinner time, and Tucker followed him to the fifty-third floor, not to a restaurant, but to an out of the way sauna. Theo was the only one there, and Tucker sped up the replay until someone joined Theo.

Tucker smiled; Sebastien was easy to recognize when naked. That huge cock of his made for a good calling card. Theo noticed him and appreciated the sight as much as Tucker always did. It was good to know that family trait was shared. He winced in sympathy as Theo took Sebastien's cock for the first time. It didn't matter how many times Sebastien fucked Tucker, each time it was quite the experience.

Tucker jerked off to the show and enjoyed the afterglow as Sebastien finished fucking Theo, then left him to in the hot tub to finish melting. Five minutes after Sebastien left, Theo got out of the tub and headed to shower.

Tucker straightened.

He wasn't an investigator like his brother, but he could tell the difference between a casual walk and one with intent. Theo walk with definite intent. He checked the time. Twenty minutes from this moment, Theo stepped into a hover and vanished.

He rewound the scene to just after Sebastien left and he crouched next to Theo, watching his face. Relaxed in the afterglow and then, eyes open and alert. Tucker paused the feed. Rewound it until a minute before.

"Give me access to the communication log for Theodore Paso."

"Access Denied. As per the privacy act of 2398, no communication logs can be access by the public. Please provide proper identification and access authorization."

"This is Corporal Tucker Orr, and don't you fucking dare ask me for my authorization again."

"Identification recognized."

Theo's incoming and outgoing call appeared as a list with timestamps. Because of how Cass interacted with Theo, Uncle had devised algorithms to mark calls is being on Theo's behalf and those Cass placed for himself, there were more since the party; Cassius Gold was becoming less of a recluse, at least through communications. But neither Theo nor Cass communicated received calls before exiting the tub, or the entire time in it.

Then how had it happened? Call logs could be hidden, but Uncle would have noticed that and mentioned it. The other option was to have the message camouflaged within another signal.

"Give me a full signal overlay based on my location, adjust to the time stamp I'm currently examining."

"Access Denied. System signals are proprietary to Orr Corporation. Please provide proper identification and access authorization."

Tucker sighed. "This is Corporal Tucker Orr, and don't you fucking dare ask me for my authorization again."

“Identification recognized.”

His vision filled with information to the point he couldn't see the replay. Closing his eyes didn't help. He touched the closest strand, identified the provenance and destination, temperature sensor for the room, adjusting to compensate for the rising temperature caused by the heat of the hot tub. He confirmed there had been no anomalous signals within it and dismissed it. He moved on to the next one, a passive signal waiting for a command to change the lights intensity. Also no anomalous signals, dismissed.

He went through each signal strand until he had nothing left. With them dismissed, he let the record play. When a new signal appeared, he identified it, checked it match every previous signal those systems exchanged and dismissed it. He was still left with nothing.

He crouched by the hot tub, watching the moment Theo's eyes opened. The alertness in them was disproportionate, to how tired he'd looked. Tucker didn't believe that had been an act, He'd been fucked by Sebastien, that was an exhausting experience when all he did was lie there to be fucked. Theo had sat on it and did a good part of the work until Sebastien started humping. In a hot tub? That would have taken a lot out of him. So stimulant. Cass hadn't confirmed it was something he could do, but scans of Theo's artificial arm had shown a chemical synthesizer in it.

Maybe he was going about it wrong.

Theo wouldn't have received the message, Cass would. Possible it had come in the middle of being fucked and Cass had waited until Theo was done to tell him, at which point he'd needed stimulants to get going.

He rewound to Sebastian's arrival. Anything before that, and Cass didn't have a reason to wait before telling Theo. Watching the kangaroo standing over Theo, the surprised expression on the tiger, the amusement on Sebastien's face, Tucker got hard. He was stroking himself when he realized he'd missed a signal. He cursed, rewound, identified it, confirmed nothing out of the ordinary about it and dismissed it.

His hand was back on his still hard cock when he cursed and paused the replay. He couldn't let himself be distracted. He instructed his implant to shut down his sex drive, then waiting for the chemicals to spread through his system. Another advantage of the military upgrade to his implant.

He restarted the replay; he was able to ignore the sex and look for any out-of-place signal. Which was how he saw the short flash of blue between Sebastien and Theo, as the tiger orgasmed. He paused and brought the signal up. Person to person. No detail. It only showed up because the light's passive sensors picked up the signal spill.

Sebastien had his ear to Theo's ear, a small smile on his lips. He let the record proceed. Sebastien putting Theo back in the water, pulling out, standing and leaving. This time, Tucker noticed the detail he'd missed in his own afterglow. Sebastian was still hard. He hadn't cum. Tucker hadn't known the kangaroo not to keep fucking until his own orgasm.

Fuck, he hoped he was wrong.

He rewound to the moment the exchange, pulled the blue flash out, search through the sensors in the room for any extra details, packaged them, added the time stamp, the location, Sebastien as the originator, but didn't add any details as to his own investigation.

He opened a window and tapped on Trevor's virtual shoulder.

"Tuck," his brother appeared, made of branches, with leaves for hair, green turning yellow. Behind him water as far as he could see, with creatures swimming toward his brother. A beam of light flashed over Trevor's shoulder, taking out the closest creature.

"Are you busy?"

"Not really, Longpine, Bonesword and me met up for a quick game." Trevor moved, remaining centered in the screen while the scene altered. He swam up and threw a vial at a vicious looking insect. It shattered and covered it in a webbing. A being saw around Trevor to cut it up. "Sorry, looks like we stepped into a guild's territory. What's up?"

"I have a file I need you to trace." Tucker handed it to his brother, who took it.

"What are you doing looking at Seb's communications?" A quick swim brought Trevor inside a grotto. "What's this about?"

"I'll tell you after you give me your report."

"Tuck, what's going on?"

"After, Trevor, I don't want to prejudice your investigation."

"I will find out what this is about, you realize that, right?"

"I've no doubt, but then you can't blame me." He ended the call.

He looked at the frozen replay of Theo, in the moment of afterglow, couldn't come up with anything else to investigate and brought his libido back to normal. He'd go fuck guys while he waited for Trevor's report.

* * * * *

The kangaroo's smile faltered as he entered the room. "He guys, Tucker said he wanted to talk."

Tucker had wanted to do this alone, but Trevor had withheld his report until after Tucker agreed he could participate, Tom noticed the two of them talking and barged in, he told Tony, who told Tyson, and now it was the five of them against one very well hung kangaroo.

The downside, this wasn't going to turn into sex; the upside, Terry was busy on the other side of the continent. As much as he didn't like Theo, when he found out what Trevor had pulled, there would be little left of the kangaroo.

"Have a seat," Tucker said.

Sebastien eyed the chair in the middle of the room, and the five tigers. "What's going on?"

"You're going to want to sit," Trevor said, his tone harsh. "You have some explaining to do."

"Okay, I'm not sure what's going on," the kangaroo said, turning for the door,

“but clearly, you guys need to work off some frustration.”

“You’re not going anywhere, Seb,” Tucker stated.

The door didn’t open for the kangaroo.

He turned to face the tigers. “Look, whatever you think’s going on, you can’t just lock me in here.”

“Actually, I can,” Tucker said. “Military statute 8-3-4 give me the power to conduct an interrogation on anyone where suspicion of actions against the corporation is supported by evidence.”

“You’re an engineer, Tucker.”

“Corporal in the Orr military,” Tucker stated.

The kangaroo snorted. “You, in the military? Come on. Fucking your way through the enlisted doesn’t give you any kind of rank.”

Tucker let the smile come; the nasty one. The one if usually reserved for the battlefield, when he maneuvered an opponent into a trap. Sebastien’s amusement vanished, and he took a step back, hitting the door.

“Once we’re done talking,” Tucker said, “You’re welcome to lodge a complaint against me. I will be more than happy to provide my credential in a court of law.”

“If there’s anything left of you,” Thomas said.

Tucker shot his brother an angry look and Thomas shrank away.

“Please sit,” Tucker ordered.

With a roll of the eyes, Sebastien sat. “You guy are family, but don’t think this means I’m not going to bring up charges, because I am not giving my consent to whatever this is.”

“Then feel free not to answer our questions,” Trevor said, “since we’re not a court of law, we can’t force you.”

“Then ask your questions,” the kangaroo said, annoyed.

Tucker brought a still of Theo on Sebastien’s cock in the hot tub. “Care to explain?”

“I fucked a guy,” the kangaroo said dismissively.

“Our brother,” Tyson said.

Sebastien looked at eh still, then the tigers. “I didn’t know there was a seventh of you.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” Tucker said, changing the still to the moment of Theo’s orgasm, with the communication flash between the two. “What’s that?”

The kangaroo shrugged. “I don’t know. Some sensor artifact?”

“It’s a communication file,” Trevor said. “Caught through passive sensor. It’s rough, but I was able to reconstruct enough information to run a trace on it. From you to ___”

“Whoa, that’s invasion of my privacy.”

“Are you admitting to transmitting the file?” Trevor asked.

“No, that’s just some artifact. I’m objecting to you using that to trample over my rights.”

“I’m a cyber investigator, unlike with Tuck, that’s known fact. I’m investigating a crime, the circumstantial evidence has been run through a judicial program, and I was given approval to continue investigating. The brief is public, feel free to access it.”

“This is starting to feel like corporate abuse,” Sebastien grumbled.

“We’re nowhere near any abuse yet,” Tony said.

Tucker sighed. “You three are only here as a courtesy, you don’t have any authority, so please shut up.”

“None of you have—” Sebastien raised his hand in defeat at Tucker’s glare.

“I traced the file back through a dozen encrypted transmission around earth and the moon; someone did not want this traced at all. From the moon it traces back to Mars, and from there, surprise surprise, it goes back to Titan station.”

“And then?” Sebastien asked, rolling his eyes.

“Nowhere. It just appeared in their system, like far too many such transmission in recent years.”

“So some joker plants a message on Titan, through a series of coincidence I’m in the vicinity when it shows up here and I’m guilty of what, exactly?”

The door opened, cutting off Tucker’s response. He turned to glare at the intruder, but the look on his father’s face shut him up.

“Oh, someone’s dead,” Tyson said.

“Dad?” Tucker asked cautiously, “What are you doing here?”

Someone behind his father cleared her throat, and he stepped aside. Beatrice stepped into the room. She gave the tigers a warm smile that turned glacial as her gaze fell on the kangaroo.

“I was enjoying coffee with my mother,” Eric said, “when Terry called her to say that somehow Sebastien was involved in Theo’s disappearance. Is there a reason I had to find out from her, and not you?”

“I wanted to ask him questions before you disemboweled him,” Tucker answered honestly. How had Terry heard? He looked his brothers over and Thomas looked away.

“Sebastien,” Beatrice said warmly, going to him. “Stay seated,” she added as the kangaroo hurried to stand, finally looking afraid. She straddled his lap once he was seated. “What is it about you and my missing grandson?”

“I don’t know what—”

She had a finger on his lips and leaned to his ear. “Please don’t lie to me, Sebastien,” She whispered. “We’ve been together for far too long, you know you can’t fool me.”

He swallowed hard. “Bea, please. You don’t know what—”

The kiss was gentle. “Love, did you use me to get close to my family?”

The kangaroo shook his head. “That wasn’t what—” he snapped his mouth shut.

She rested her forehead against his. “Do you work for Vanguard?”

“No! I’d never! Bea, you know me, I love—”

A finger on his lips. “Don’t say it. Right not it would feel too much like your trying to manipulate me.”

“I wouldn’t Bea, you have to—”

Another gentle kiss. “Sebastien, I believe you, you don’t work for Vanguard. So the question is who do you work for?”

“The Independents,” Trevor said. “They’re the ones who’ve been dumping transmissions into Titan.”

“Are you an independent?” She asked the kangaroo.

“No, I’m an Orr citizen, Bea. You met my mom, my brother and sister. Look, this isn’t what you think.”

“Then what is it, Sebastien?” she asked. “If this isn’t the kidnapping it looks like, what exactly have you gotten my grandson involved in?”

Sebastien bit his lip, tried to look Beatrice in the eyes, looked away. “I don’t know. I don’t know what the message was. I was just instructed to deliver it.”

He looked at her and she searched his face before kissing him again. “I believe you,” she said as she stood, turned her back to him and headed for the door.

“Grandma?” Tucker asked, seeing the tear fall down her cheek.

“Do what you want with him.”

“Bea!” Sebastian called plaintively. “Please, I didn’t know.”

She didn’t slow as she left.

Eric looked from the closed door to the crying kangaroo. “I don’t know if you realized what you just threw away.”

“I didn’t know,” Sebastien repeated. “I was just the messenger.”

“Unfortunately for you,” Eric said, “in this family, we don’t take kindly to messengers who don’t know where their priorities lie.”

“Dad,” Tucker said as his father stepped to the kangaroo. “Dad, you can’t hurt him.”

“I’m an Orr, son. I can do whatever the fuck I want.”

Chapter-25

Theo snuck through the dark alley, stopping at the corner. “Cass?” he whispered. A wire mesh rendering of the back of the building appeared in his sight. A large garbage container with something scurrying inside by the sounds of a heartbeat and claws scratching. Something too small to be someone.

He went around the corner and hugged the wall. The city of Katherina Del Dero might not have much in the way of technology, but that didn’t mean he could get careless. Even within a community, not all Independents believed in the same level of technology, and a lack of electronics didn’t mean a lack of security.

He reached the door, metal with a mechanical lock. He placed his artificial hand on it. “Remind me again, how much waste of time it was to keep my lock picking skill in practice.”

“This isn’t exactly our usual field of operation,” Cass said, “as best as I can sense, the other side of the door is without anyone, but it has some level of insulation, so remain cautious. And yes, it’s fortunate for us that you know how to pick locks.”

“Can you give me a look at the lock?” Theo took his lock picking tools out from within his forearm. The wire mesh of the lock appeared. Not the most complicated lock he’d seen, but this person did take the security of his store seriously. Theo smiled as Cass started the chronometer.

Thirty-eight point two seconds later, he opened the door a crack and slipped his hand in.

“The hallway is empty,” Cass said.

Theo entered and quietly closed the door behind him. The hallway was a wire mesh, with four doors highlighted. He placed his hand against the first one, and a small room with boxes formed on the other side; storage. The opposite one was large with equipment on worktables, tools, and two hovers in the center. A maintenance bay. The next two were offices, and the one he needed was determined by the electronic signature Cass registered on the opposing wall. A safe.

Theo bypassed the lock on the door before Cass had the chronometer running and entered the dark room. Closing the door, he stood and switched the lights on, and switched them off with a curse. A black panther stood on the other side of the room.

‘Alone?’ he finger coded. How had Cass not sensed him?

The scene replayed itself in his sight, pausing on the panther, visible within a framed window. Window? Was that why Cass hadn’t sensed him, there was another room and he...

Theo groaned and stood, switching the lights back on. He faced his reflection and ran a hand through his now black fur. “Who has a mirror in their office?”

“Someone who likes making sure she’s presentable before heading out to see customers?” Cass offered.

Theo looked at his black face. “I will never get used to this.” It had taken two weeks of remaining hidden on this island for enough black fur to grow to turn him into a black panther. He’d shaved before leaving the hovel he’s been staying in, giving himself an extreme buzz cut.

“This is rather extreme for us.”

Theo took the mirror off the wall, exposing the safe. “This one’s yours.” He placed his hand on it. The display on the safe lit up as symbols flashed. It went dark, and the door clicked. Theo twisted the handle and pulled it open. Inside, a display held eighteen ignition tabs. Each was identified by writing Theo couldn’t decipher.

The downside of low technology Independents was that each created their language and didn’t have a database to correlate them. As much as Theo was one of them, since he was an Independent, he couldn’t wait to get off these islands to a more technologically advanced location.

“Which one?” he asked.

“Unless you require a specific model,” Cass replied, “And I’ll point out there is no computer for me to access and tell you which models are available here, then any tab will do.”

“I hope the hovers here can do long rang.” Theo grabbed the first tab in the

holder.

“A hover is a hover, its range is only limited by its capability to interface with the network.”

“Which these can’t,” Theo replied, closing the safe. “Sort of the point.” He turned off the light as he exited the office.

“Yes, but I happen to have a map of the earth, and I can do the navigating for it. Unlike that first one, it is designed to be piloted, not just ridden. It makes my job so much easier.”

Theo entered the display room with its eighteen hovers. “Which one?”

“Looking,” Cass replied. “Go unlock the roll door which I find it, it has a mechanical lock.”

The lock was more complex, its size allowed more tumblers, and while adjustable, his tools barely reached them all.

“Have it,” Cass said as the lock finally clicked.

“Any alarms on the door?”

“Nothing electronic.”

Which meant something less sophisticated.

“Insert the tab in the hover, It’s going to let me run it through its startup sequence while to find the security measures.”

Theo went to the highlighted hover, inserted the tab and went back to the door to study it. “What’s the communication system like on the island?”

“Electrical, each building is connected to a central junction point.”

That was how the owner would be alerted. “Any idea where the building’s communication system is connected to the island’s network?”

“No, but it might be easier to find how the door’s connected to the building.”

“It’s metal, which means scanning it for wires is a waste of time. If it doesn’t have a sensor, then the simplest system is a circuit that’s broken when the door opens. No sensors meant it needed to be electrical, and electricity means magnetism. Cass, show me the magnetic fields around the door.”

There were more than he’d expected. The door itself was slightly magnetized, but that seemed to be a reaction to the intense field on the side of the door. From that connection point, he traced the powered wired in the wall back to a panel in the second office.

“Don’t go much further,” Cass told him. “Without a constant network, my range is limited.”

“I have the control panel, it’s a simple switch. My concern is that if I deactivate the alarm, the owner’s going to be informed.”

“Even if they are, we’ll be long gone before they can do anything about it, and there’s no internal camera. You do have to appreciate their dislikes of constant electronic surveillance.”

“Which tells me they have something else in place, maybe the alarm goes to the local protectors.”

“I don’t know where the closest office is, we should do everything as close to one another.”

“Tell me when the hover’s ready.”

A minute later. “It’s ready. I’m maneuvering it in front of the door. When you shut off the alarm, open the door and we’ll leave.”

Theo flicked the switch and ran for the roll door. Once it was up, he entered the hover as a communication board buzzed back in one of the offices. The sound cut off as he closed the access.

“Here we go,” Cass said, pleased. “Now it’s too late for anyone to find out. Next stop the middle of nowhere Atlantic Ocean.

* * * * *

Uncle flicked the feed aside to separate the corrupted data from the feed and try to make sense of it. There was far too much corrupted data for it to be accidental. He flicked another feed. And whoever was causing it was smart enough to corrupt thousands of feeds, not only the ones where Theo might show up.

Still, they hadn’t been able to cover everything.

“Tucker, where are you?”

“In orbit, Uncle; geosynchronous over North America, I’m not moving until you give somewhere to go.”

“South Atlantic Ocean, I got a ping off one of our belt before it went silent. There are hundreds of Independent islands in that region with a variety of technological levels. For the belt to be silent it means it one of those groups who enforce a low tech and block any network signal. I’m accessing the other corporations to see if anyone ever got a proper census done of those regions, but it doesn’t look promising.”

“Heading here,” Tucker answered. “What range can I force the belt to acknowledge me?”

“You’ll have to be under a kilometer.”

“Okay, we’ll do a fly by the islands. They can lodge whatever complaints about disrupting their low tech world they want, I’ll be happy to explain it to them after I’ve found Theo.”

“How about we let the legal department deal with that? It’s what they’re there for.”

“Not as fun,” Tucker replied and Uncle smiled.

“Give me an update once you have it.” He ended the transmission and split his attention, continuing to search through all the feeds, while also analyzing the corrupted data for any markers that would tell him who is behind it and bringing up Sebastien’s cell.

The kangaroo hadn’t moved since he’d last checked on him. All the readings indicated depression. The man had given up someone he loved for this, which mean it was important. Or at least Sebastien had believed it was important. Eric wasn’t happy Uncle had kept him from punishing the kangaroo. He’d threatened to have him erased. But in this, Uncle was right, and Terry agreed, Sebastien was more useful alive and

unarmed.

Sebastien was either a turned citizen, or the most expertly created cover identity Uncle had ever seen. He had a birth record with a fertility clinic, a family in Philadelphia, with siblings spread around the corporation. Uncle considered the kangaroo might have replaced the original Sebastien. The genetic work would be difficult and dangerous. Cloning might be involved, but that meant whoever had done it already had agents within the corporate territory.

Uncle sent himself looking for indications of where the DNA might have been acquired, of where Sebastien might have been replaced, of flaws in the identity, of when Sebastien might have been turned. One of those had to be the one, and he would find it.

“Uncle, I found the belt,” Tucker said, “As well as the hover.”

Uncle brought up the time. Eight hours since he’d told Tucker to move. Six days since Theo’s disappearance. “Where?”

“The locals call the island Morousah. It’s not on any records I can access.”

Uncle sent himself down a search for the name.

“Primitive as fuck, enforced to, I had to get back in the air to contact you. Isn’t enforced primitiveness as illegal as enforcing advanced tech?”

“We’d have to prove the locals didn’t all agree to it when it was first set in place. We could be looking at something that took place three centuries ago. Before the accords, even. The only records for a Morousah I found was an exploration vessel that went missing during the cataclysm. There were at the south pole in the last communication I rebuilt, but this could be them. Did the belt tell you anything?”

“Cass hacked it, erased as much of its systems as he could. I have a list of the clothing Theo wore, but that’s not going to be useful.”

“The hover?”

“Theo gutted its communication and navigation.”

“Did any of the locals see anything?”

“They saw the hover sort of land, Theo get out and disappear in the forest. How did Cass even managed to fly this thing without seeing anything?”

“Hovers have short-range sensors in case of emergency. He’d have to be within twenty meters of something to see it, but that would let him hug the land.”

“Except no one reported a hover outside their lines, one within twenty meters of the ground would attract attention.”

“He knew where he started from, Cass is advanced enough it might have an up-to-date map of the globe, if not that, at least where he wants to go. It might have been part of the message Sebastien passed along. Since he didn’t head east as records indicated, he might have stayed over the water.” He looked at the corruption of the satellite net from when Theo vanished. He was still trying to untangle it, but it definitely matched every other corruption getting in his way.

“So he can be anywhere.” Tucker sounded angry. Uncle accessed Tucker’s life-signs definitely angry.

He looked through all the information he had while also accessing who was on the

transport with Tucker. “Tucker, I’d suggest fucking the copilot, this isn’t going to be fast and you need to calm down.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down, Uncle. Theo just left. I need to find him and get him to explain what’s going on.”

“And Theo is trained to avoid being found. Tucker, driving yourself insane will not help. You should have an entire unit with you, why aren’t they there?”

“This is family, Uncle. You know I’m not going to involve others.”

Uncle sighed. “That is exactly why we have a military, to assist in matters like this.”

“I’m perfectly capable of dealing with this on my own.”

“Then relax until I have more information for you.”

He divided his attention among everything he needed to accomplish. Messages came from off-planet, there were no indication of hidden messages anywhere he looked, even Titan station, where he knew messages had originated from. Someone had access to technology they had no business having access to.

He felt like blowing a circuit, somewhere. He really wished he could fall back onto sex like the rest of his family for stress relief. Instead he threw himself into the information, looking for that one thread that would lead somewhere.

A call on the general network. A stolen hover from a rental agency on Katherina Del Dero. The agency only had hovers for semi-local travel. To the surrounding islands, but the last sighting had the hover flying over the water, in a direction without any islands. The city protectors were asking for assistance tracking and retrieving the hover.

Of course, this was when the local sensor network happened to be down. It all looked normal, with the proper maintenance requests put in place weeks before, but now that he knew what to look for, he could see the signature fragments of whoever was helping Theo. Someone extremely talented with access to system Uncle should be able to find. No one could have such advanced information systems and keep them hidden. At the very least, the power needed for them would register.

The sensor grid wasn’t the only way to locate an errand hover. The misdirection the first time had kept him from doing this, but this had just happened. He accessed every shuttle and hovers in the atmosphere. Found those in the region, saw that their sensors were vanishing from the network and sent himself to track the origin point of those attacks while retrieved as much of the sensor data still available as he could.

The result was fuzzy, but superimposing all the sensor data he found a hover in the middle of the ocean.

“Gotcha. Tucker, I’ve located Theo. Sending you the coordinates.”

“Finally!”

Finally?

Uncle pulled up the date. Fifteen days since Theo had vanished. He’d been so focused on his search he’d lost track of everything else going on. He reintegrated himself with the rest, caught up on everything he’d done through the corporation, the legal disputes, the corporate meetings. Sebastian trying to explain to Beatrice that he did love

her, again. Theo's parents frantically demanding information on what was happening with the search for him. Millions of other decisions he took part in.

Then set it all aside to focus on Theo, and found that in his moment of inattention, someone else had access the hover's sensor feed. Not Theo's protector. Someone far, far worse.

"Tucker, you need to hurry. Vanguard has a lock on Theo too."

Chapter-26

"Are we there yet?" Theo asked.

"That wasn't funny the first time," Cass replied, "It is not funny now."

Theo looked at the water under them, the jutting rocks in the distances. "If I'd known it would be this boring, I might have reconsidered taking this job."

"No, you wouldn't. I didn't hear you complaining this much on the first leg of the trip and that was four days over the ocean."

"But your piloting kept me from being bored, I was too busy trying not to hit my head every time you—" Theo yelped as he flew forward into the windshield, then held on as the hover fell. "Cass? What's going on?"

"Entertained yet?" The hover stopped ten meters over the water and resumed its flight.

"That was not funny!" Theo touched his forehead, surprised when his fingers came away dry. "Why did you turn off the emergency collision safeties? I could have a concussion from that impact."

"No, you don't. I didn't let you hit that hard, and I didn't turn anything off. The locals might have bent their low-tech rules to allow hovers, but they didn't accept the security systems that should come with them. There's a belt you can wear to keep you against the seat."

"A belt? They won't allow gravity manipulation tech in the hover, but they'll do on a belt? How does that make any sense?"

"Not that kind of belt. Look on the left of the seat over your shoulder, there's a strap, you can pull it over your chest and it connects on the right, to the connector attached to the floor."

Theo found the strap, pulled on it; some form of polymer, claw resistant, spooling out of a small reservoir. "This is..."

"Archaic?" Cass offered.

"Does it even work?"

"Connect it and we can put it to the test."

Theo let go of it. "Let's not. Let's have this be a nice and boring trip. How far are we?"

"At this rate, it'll be ten hours until we reach the dead zone. It's over a hundred kilometer in diameter, and if they are smart, whatever they are hiding in it is not in the center, so from there I have no idea how long it'll take to locate them."

“No sensor, that means visual checks, I hope they got their inspiration from the Bongo movies and it’s a kilometer tall tower that will be visible from anywhere under that dome.”

“Do anarchists even watch movies?” Cass asked derisively.

“They unleashed an AI on Mars, so they aren’t above using computers, and they have to do something to keep from being bored in their low tech world.”

Theo hit the roof as the hover dropped hard. “Cass! What the fuck?” he dropped in the seat hard enough his tail kinked.

“This isn’t me, the hover’s being hacked. Get that restraint on, now.”

“How can we get hacked? We’re not on the network!” Theo grabbed onto the seat as the hover banked right.

“I don’t know, but code’s getting in. It’s aggressive, and it’s trying to take control.”

“That feels like more than trying!” The hover dove for the water. “Cass!”

“I am working, do you know how many systems are in this hover? And because of the restriction on technology, each one has an independent mode, which is what the hacker is screwing with.” The hover leveled off, and Theo heard the water hit the underside of the hover. “Okay, good news if they aren’t looking to kill us. The hacker is who leveled the hover off.”

“Bad news?”

“He has programs everywhere. They aren’t AI, but they are fucking smart. Get the restraint on Theo, this is not going to be a boring trip anymore.”

Theo pulled on the strap and slid the end in the connector by the floor. It tightened against him, but he could pull it away. “This isn’t going to protect me from anything.”

“Let’s hope it does because I’m going to try something.”

“Cass,” Theo warned, as the hover shut down.

The nose touched the water, and the hover came to a stop. Theo grunted in pain as the strap tightened against his chest and gravity did crazy things, trying to toss him all over the inside of the hover. When it decided to settle, Theo was upside down, the strap the only thing holding him in the seat.

“I have control again,” Cass said, the lights inside the hover coming on. Out of the windshield, Theo saw lights through the water.

“Is this a good idea?” he asked.

“The water seems to be blocking whatever signal he was using.”

“Yeah,” Theo said, noticing the water leaking into the hover. “Problem is this hover isn’t rated for underwater, I think. How long until you can get out of his range?”

“I don’t know. I’m looking at the systems to figure out how he got in, but this is archaic tech, it doesn’t have its tech manual in what passes for its memory. I need to trace every component to see if they have some kind of receiver I’m not familiar with.”

“Can you do that while getting us to dry land?”

“I can move us, but the sensors are not getting through the water. The gyroscope locked up when we hit the water, so I have no idea where we are in relation to my maps.”

Theo touched the roof. “There’s about two centimeters of water in already. We can’t stay here.”

“If we get out of the water before I have blocked every way a signal can enter the system. They will simply retake control.” The hover spun right side up, drenching Theo in falling water, then his feet were in an inch of water. “There, this will give me more time to work.”

Theo pulled his feet up. “You are going to soak me.”

“Just think of it as a shower.”

“Cass, this is nothing like a shower. I can see how dirty this water is.”

“It’ll wash off.”

“If we get out of here.”

“I estimate that it’ll take thirty-eight minutes before the water reaches your neck. I’m hoping to—”

“I really hate it when you hope. You’re an AI, you should be able to give me precise answers.”

“Then next time, let’s make sure we steal a hover that comes with the latest technology so I know what I’m dealing with.”

“I hate getting dirty like this,” Theo said through clenched teeth, pulling his tail up as water lapped at the tip. “Water should be clean. Can you at least tell me what kind of germs are floating in this?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Cass, that is not helping.”

“Yeah, well, this is going to help even less. We can’t stay underwater.”

“That sounds like a good thing to me, but why?”

“Because whoever built this thing didn’t bother making the components waterproof. I’m getting failures on the smaller stuff. So your call. We can get out and deal with them, or—”

“Out!” Theo pulled his feet higher as the brown water lapped at them. Water should not be that color. “I so fucking miss the lakes back home.”

“Fully enclosed systems,” Cass said as the hover rose, “require better control.”

“I just want clear water.”

The light was blinding after the underwater filter to it, and when Theo finally saw, the large shuttle before him made him reconsider the benefits of staying underwater. The hover shuddered.

“They have control. I can try fighting them, but the only likely result is another dunk.”

“I’m not seeing colors, any idea who they are?”

“They haven’t called, so I doubt they’re from the Orrs.”

“On the plus side, the hover doesn’t fit in there.” Theo leaned forward for a better look, and his feet dropped into the water. “Fuck, why isn’t this stuff dripping out.” They were moving, the shuttle staying above them. “Any indication where they are taking us?”

“They are towing us, so they didn’t input information, but there’s a series of

unoccupied islands straight ahead, since they most likely want to take us into custody, those make for a good destination.”

“So, no broadcast for our arrest, not even a warning, I’m thinking this isn’t a legal action.”

“Or they could simply expect us to be some low tech thief without an implant so they aren’t bothering.”

“Unless someone outside the corporations has this kind of tech, that is a lot of distance to travel just for a hover theft.”

“But not so difficult for a shuttle like this.”

Theo ground his teeth. “Call Uncle, we’re going to need help getting out of this.”

“It will come as no surprise that they are jamming all connection to the network,” Cass answered. “We’re on our own.”

Theo sat back and almost put his foot down, then saw the water still pooled on the floor and the gunk in it. Theo thought he saw something move in there and shuddered.

Five minutes later they were over a grassy plain, the hover touching down and the shuttle continuing until it cleared enough space to lower itself. Theo was out the door, running. He knew he was wasting his time, but he wasn’t making this any easier than he had to. He made it a hundred-fifty meters before the first soldier landed before him.

Theo skidded to a stop and headed left, only for another soldier to land in front of him. A dozen more soldiers were in the air, dropping around him. The green and gold highlights on their armor indicated Theo was in even more trouble than he’d expected. They weren’t visibly armed, and they were shielded against scans. But that only meant he couldn’t know what to expect.

He waited in the center of the uneven circle, and someone walked toward them, also in black armor with green and gold highlight. The highlights were more stylized, which made Theo suspect this was their commander.

“He’s a Vanguard Force Division Commander, according to the insignias,” Cass confirmed.

Two soldiers stepped aside to let him through and he stopped twenty steps away from Theo, studying him. The commander grabbed his helmet, twisted it, and the hiss of the broken seal sounded as he pulled it off. A tiger looked at Theo, a serious expression on his face.

‘Taavir Doramok’ appeared next to the man.

“Marcus, I do not approve of what you did to your fur,” Taavir said. “Or do you prefer Theodore?”

“I guess there’s no bullshitting our way through this guy,” Cass offered

“Theodore is fine, Taavir,” Theo answered, “and I’m trying to blend in.”

Taavir nodded. “Running from your captors? That is good. I am here to bring your home.”

“I doubt that.”

“Your true home, not where those traitors hid you. Vanguard will welcome you back.”

“I doubt that, you aren’t taking me anywhere.”

“Theodore, do not be an idiot. You are alone, I am an ally. Come home.”

“I have the stunner at max strength,” Cass said, “it should go through their armor unless they know about it, but you only get three shots, four if you don’t mind an unresponsive arm while it recharges.”

“You want to take me to Vanguard, you’re going to have to drag me there unconscious.” He made fists and readied himself.

Taavir shook his head and stepped to Theo. “Do not act like a child. You are a Vanguard man.” He reached for Theo.

Theo opened his hand and slammed his palm into Taavir’s chest. The feedback stung Theo’s hand, but he was running in the opposite direction before Taavir fell back. Theo planted his shoulder in the stomach of the soldier who got in his way, lifting him, or her, he couldn’t tell in that armor, off their feet and pressing his palm into their groin. There was no feedback this time, but the soldier tensed and stayed on the ground once Theo threw them aside.

“Subdue him!” Taavir yelled, sounding pained. “But do not damage him. He is one of us, just misguided.”

“Someone’s full of himself,” Cass commented.

“He’s got a squad of soldiers, he’s entitled,” Theo replied, running hard.

A soldier landed before him, and Theo extended his hand, palm forward. The soldier raised his arm to intercept it and instead of tensing when Theo closed his hand on the forearm, lines of energy traveled down the arm to the shoulder and came back to the other hand. Theo threw himself aside, but the hand glanced against his organic arm, and it went numb, keeping him from pushing himself back to his feet.

“Fuck,” he groaned, rolling to his back. He felt the other soldiers landing around him.

“I admire the effort, Theodore,” Taavir said, striding toward him. “It is good to see that you hold the Vanguard fighting spirit in spite of being raised by—”

“Don’t you fucking say anything about my parents,” Theo spat. He put his artificial hand under him and pushed himself to his knees.

“They are not your parents,” Taavir said, “you are a child of Vanguard, as am I. You were put in their care, but they stole you.”

“They protected me!” Theo got to his feet. “My mom found out about the experiments your sick corporation planned on running on me. And she decided to put me first. Do you have any idea the kind of courage that takes? So don’t you fucking bad mouth my parents. They loved me enough to sacrifice everything!”

Taavir looked back at Theo, impassive. “I am sorry you believe that. But fear not, we will set your mind right. You will see them for the criminals they are.”

“No fucking way.” Theo finger coddled the order, bypassing Cass entirely. He had one charge left, and by itself, it wouldn’t be enough because the safeguards would ensure there was enough energy to keep Cass alive, but they were past that point. He needed this last charge to be strong enough not to stun, but to kill.

It meant his mission would be unfinished, but his capture ensured that anyway, and he couldn't risk he'd reveal anything about the Colonies, so he was going to end this permanently.

He felt the energy buzzing in his hand as he kept his gaze fixed on Taavir. The other tiger was close. If he saw it coming, he could stop Theo. The touch might kill him, but Theo would remain alive, in danger of dooming his home. His real home.

Taavir glanced up, and Theo saw his moment.

"Theo, don't," Cass ordered, and despite himself, Theo hesitated. Taavir's eyes were back on him, on his arm. He's noticed the aborted motion. Why had Cass done that? Their lives weren't worth—"Run!" Cass yelled, and Theo noticed the soldiers were also running away.

Theo obeyed, cursing as Taavir chased him. "Cass?"

"We have incoming, something dropping from orbit."

"What are you talking about? What's dropping from orbit?"

There was an explosion behind him.

"That," Cass said, as the shock wave hit and lifted him off his feet.

Theo fell and rolled. He coughed as the dust settled, hurried to his feet. Cass gave him a wire mess view of his blurry surroundings. The soldiers stirring on the ground, the form walking out of the crater.

"What the fuck is that?" Theo backed slowly, trying to decide where to run.

The form jumped, and as Theo watched, stunned, Cass projected the landing, behind Theo, between him and the Vanguard soldiers. The ground shook as it landed. It was massive, a matte black armor with hard edges. Robot? Theo wondered.

The armor turned its head to look at him. "Strip!"

Theo stared at its back as it looked at the soldiers getting to their feet. Taavir stepped forward. "This is none of—"

"This is an assault against an Orr citizen!" the armor stated, the volume so loud Theo took a step back. "You will desist, Vanguard, or I am going to fuck you up so badly your father will not ever want to touch you again."

Taavir sighed. "Orr, this is not your business. You are outside your corporation. That man is a Vanguard citizen, taken from his corporation by traitors. Go back to your morally deficit home and go play with your family."

"Oh, you have no idea how happy I am you said that." The fists closed, and the armor flowed over them, turning them into pile drivers. "I told you to strip!" it jumped at the solder running in its direction and planted the end of the pile driver against the soldier's chest. The armor she was wearing shattered as she flew back out of sight.

A soldier ran for Theo, and before he could get over his surprise at what was happening the armor was between them, backhanding the soldier and he too vanished from sight.

"Are you deaf?" the armor yelled.

"This is a fight!" Theo yelled back, "now's not the time to get me naked! What is it with everyone in your corporation being obsessed with naked men?"

“I said strip!” The volume of the order forced Theo to take a step back and was reaching for his shirt. The armor kicked a soldier. Who almost got out of the way in time, but the impact still set him careening away.

“Cass?” Theo asked, shirt off.

“Don’t ask me, I’m just happy he seems to be on our side and kind of scared of what he’ll do if he decides you’re not getting naked fast enough.”

“This is insane,” Theo grumbled, taking off his pants.

“Not arguing with you there.”

Two soldiers fired at the armor, and it seemed to grow bigger.

“Are you seeing that?” Cass asked.

The armor grabbed one of the soldiers and threw him across the combat zone to impact with another one who’d been trying to sneak up behind Theo.

“Maybe we should pay attention to what’s going on, instead,” Theo said.

“What do you plan on doing?” Cass asked. “Your naked.”

“That doesn’t really make me any less efficient than I was when I wore clothing.” Theo backed away from everyone. He felt uncomfortably exposed.

“Oh fuck,” Cass said, awe and fear in his voice.

The armor was in the air again, turning and pulling something from its back. Theo didn’t need Cass’s projection. It was going to land on him if he didn’t move. He had to move, he had to run. Why couldn’t he get himself moving? Was that a fucking sword it was holding?

The armor was getting close, falling toward him, arm extended back, that scary band? Sword? Metal beam in its hand, and Theo stood frozen in terror. Cass screamed in his ear, but Theo couldn’t do anything. At the last moment, he raised his arms to protect his face, understanding the armor swinging at him.

What it held hit him in the midsection, the impact so clean he didn’t feel pain, just cold, then the armor landed next to him, shoving Theo away. He landed on the grass, his foot hit a stone and the pain told him both parts of his body were still attached. He looked down at himself. Something black was spreading over his legs and stomach. With a scream, he batted at it, tried to keep it from spreading, but it was up to his chest now.

“Cass! How do I stop it?” It flowed around his fingers like it wasn’t there, but now it was to his neck. “Cass!” He took a breath, closed his mouth and eyes, folded his ears back, as it covered his face, his head, and all sounds went away.

He continued trying to pull it off, he couldn’t hold his breath indefinitely, what would it do when he opened his mouth, would it pour down his throat, suffocate him. He had to get it off. He almost opened his mouth to scream Cass’ name. Where was he? Why wasn’t he responding? He could tell his hands were covered now, did it mean all he was doing was helping spread it around?

Points of lights appeared behind his closed eyes. He was running out of breath. Fuck. What was Cass doing? There had to be some sort of control on this he could take over and shut it down. He tried to stop trashing, he was going through the little air he had left even faster, but this thing was killing him! He had to do something.

He ground his teeth together as the points exploded. His lungs hurt!
He gasped, and immediately closed his mouth. Fuck, had he let it in?
The explosions of light receded.
That had been air.

He ignored the demands of his lungs and took a small breath.

Air, only air.

He gulped the air, touching his covered face. Whatever covered it was hard but pliant. He opened his eyes to darkness. Encased for transport? That made no sense. He wouldn't be able to move his arms if this was to hold him prisoner, or his legs. He bent his knees. They worked fine. He was just blind for some reason.

He got to his hand and knees and was in the process of standing when colors swirled before him, making him lose his balance. He felt his fall, but no pain. There was cushioning in there.

The colors resolved themselves into the outside, around him. The armor was fighting four soldiers; they'd gotten over their initial surprise and were giving it a more even fight now that they coordinated their attacks.

"There," Cass said.

"Cass, where have you been? What's going on? What is this thing?" his voice sounded hollow inside this thing.

"Sorry, I got overwhelmed getting this armor to listen to me. It wasn't exactly designed with me in mind."

"Armor?"

"Yep," Cass answered, his smile audible, "We are wearing a state-of-the-art Orr military belt, with all the apps and add-ons. Now, I'm going to need you to relax as much as possible, and let me pilot this thing."

Before Theo could ask what that meant, the armor moved around him, getting him to his feet. Targeting reticules appeared before him, highlighting everyone, with the other armor in blue, the soldiers in red with Taavir, who was taking shots from the periphery in gold.

"Now, relax," Cass said, "and I apologize for the bruises in advance."

And Theo was carried into the battle faster than he could understand what he saw.

Chapter-27

He landed before the Vanguard soldier, his mind controlling the armor instead of moving his body. He swung, the ridges of his knuckles forming into spikes, disruptive nano-materials coating it. He gouged a line through the armor, and the sensors registered blood. Fortunately, the coating only attacked the polymers in the soldier's armor, keeping it from repairing itself. He didn't intend on killing anyone here, but Tucker was ready to do so if it came down to it to protect Theo.

Two soldiers ran at him, but one was intercepted by a screaming Cass, the armors colliding, Cass rolling and throwing the soldier away. Tucker turned, armor flowing over

his foot, flattening it. It impacted with the soldier's helmet and it shattered, the collie's feet flying out from under him and landing on his back. He ground his teeth to bite back a snarled order at Cass to stop goofing around. Now was not the time for him to play with his new toy.

The armor registered laser blasts; the readout showing the absorbed energy increasing. He diverted most of it to the nanites in charge of the outer layer, increasing its thickness. Eventually, those Vanguard soldiers were going to realize they were adding power to his armor and switch to hand to hand. Until then.

He shunted some energy into the legs of the armor and jumped, arching toward the firing soldier. He extended his arm, a blade stretching out of his hand. The soldier kept firing and Tucker redirected the energy, adding an electrical arc to the edge of the blade. He sliced the soldier's hand off at the wrist, cauterizing the wound, the planted a foot in his chest and kicked him toward the ocean. If he was smart, he'd stay there, but Tucker didn't hold out hopes. Vanguard soldiers were known for their dedication, not intelligence.

The impact registered in his back, sending him flying after the soldier he kicked. He turned in the air, the armor altering to create the needed air baffle to let it do most of the work and get him to land faster. Tucker scanned the battlefield while it worked.

Cass was fighting four soldiers, jumping from one to the other, being a pest more than disabling them. In the distance, soldiers were returning to the battle. Six registered as out of commission, his armor programmed not to give details. If they were dead, Vanguard would leave them behind. He didn't need to think about them now.

He landed, feet digging furrows as he shed momentum, claws in the ground to help.

One soldier was missing. The commander. He hadn't run. Vanguard commanders did not run. There was also no one where this readout told him someone had stood when he was hit. He scanned the air but also registered as free of opponents.

Which meant Vanguard had upgraded their stealth tech.

He instructed the armor to activate all sensors, which dropped the range to a dozen feet. He'd let the researchers analyze the fight and work you what Vanguard did. All he wanted now was to find Taavir Doramok and subdue him.

An echo registered in the sensor field, and the armor reacted without Tucker having to give instructions. The target was no longer there. Another echo, this time he stepped aside, but not fast enough. The impact unbalanced him, the armor compensating, studying the damage, running calculations. There was an unidentified substance in the damage. The armor quarantined it. Vanguard still hadn't cracked the coding on the Orr nanotech, the researchers would be pleased with that.

Three more echos, moments before a hit happened, and Tucker was bounced around. He lost armor, but it was replaced. He landed on his back, and when the next echo registered he had an extra second to react and roll out of the way. He jumped to his feet; the echo was now a distortion in his sensor field.

He stepped aside, and something impacted him in the chest, taking Tucker off his

feet and sending him a dozen feet away. He landed and studied his surroundings. His opponent had to realize that with each attack he was providing Tucker with more data for his sensor and predicting program. He'd need to strike hard and fast.

The echo appeared above him, coming down too fast.

Tucker stepped aside and managed to avoid the full impact, but lost more armor to the foot scrapping his back. The readout told him he could only take a few hits like this before it became compromised, so changed tactics and made alterations to the armor's behavior.

The shadow swung back to strike. The predictive programs indicated an elongated edged weapon with a fine point, targeting his heart. It annoyed Tucker Vanguard knew about that weakness. The nanites couldn't react fast enough to high kinetic energy impact. A small point increased that energy.

He stepped aside, and the spike missed his heart but went through his lung. Nanites were already repairing the damage, but they wouldn't be able to finish the job until the obstruction was removed, which wouldn't be right now.

Tucker's armor flowed over his opponent's hand before hardening. He still could only see an echo of the man, but knowing where his hand was allowed his predictive program to work out the rest of him.

He put a hand on Commander Doramok's shoulder and locked it in place, his other hand he made into a fist, adding layers of armor to it and punched his opponent in the face repeatedly. The man hit him back, but Tucker had planned the attack, while Taavir was reacting to it.

The echo before him became a better-defined form with each hit, and the returning impacts registered with diminishing force. With another punch, Tucker released the Vanguard commander, and he staggered back, his stealth compromised to the point part of him remained visible as others winked in and out.

Tucker stood still, giving the nanites time to seal his lungs, but even once that was done he didn't rely on them, having the armor synthesize a voice for him.

"This is over, Commander Doramok," the digitized voice said.

The Vanguard tiger snorted. "I do not yield to the likes of you."

"You aren't yielding, you are beaten. Do a scan, commander. Your division is incapacitated. Your entire division was dealt with by two Orr soldiers, do you really want to continue this?"

"I am Commander Taavir Doramok, of the Vanguard army, I will die rather than let filth like you best me."

Tucker brought an item to the surface of his suit and took it. "I'm not interested in killing you, Taavir." He flicked the small container at the commander who stepped out of the way to let it fall to the ground. "You're going to want to pick it up," Tucker said. "The outer casing is inert, so you don't have to worry about getting infected, you can scan it, all it contains is data about your father."

"Vanguard is my father," Taavir.

"I'm sure your masters love that you believe that, but it isn't true."

“If you expect me to betray my corporation because of your lies, you do not know me.”

“I don’t give a fuck what you do with the information on there. Give it you your masters if that’s going to make you feel like a good lackey. Let them know the Orrs are onto what they did. Use getting that to them as the excuse to leave this place alive if it’s going to soothe your ego. Or keep fighting me and I’ll end you permanently, even if I’d rather not, the choice is yours.”

Tucker scanned their surroundings while Taavir made his decision. He hadn’t lied. Knowing what was within the data container, Tucker didn’t want to kill this man. He hated what had been done that allowed Taavir to exist, but he’d already known about it on a subconscious level before Uncle told him. Theo was evidence of it, and only an idiot thought Vanguard would stop at one.

The armor didn’t give him details on the downed soldiers. He still didn’t want to know. Cass was approaching, keeping Tucker between him and Taavir. If he’d seen any part of their fight, he knew to be wary. If not, hopefully, this standstill would keep him from doing anything stupid. Stupider than everything that had led to this.

Taavir picked up the data container and studied it. “This will contain lies.”

“I don’t care,” Tucker replied, tired. “You have an excuse to leave. You need to report to your masters how an Orr soldier handed you a piece of information. So go to it and pick up your garbage too. Whoever owns this island will appreciate you cleaning up after yourself.”

Taavir looked at Tucker, then turned, heading toward the shuttle. The other soldiers got to their feet, helping those needing it, but they all left. Tucker’s breathing’s ease. No death at his hand. He didn’t put soldiers on his wall, but they still weighed on him. He stood for the fifteen minutes it took the Vanguard division to reach their shuttle and leave, watching them via the satellites until they were too far to launch anything at him. He never put it past Vanguard to try to cover up their defeat with one last ‘gift’.

“That was impressive fighting,” Theo said, behind Tucker.

Tucker spun and punched the other tiger in the visor, sending him flying back. “What the fuck is wrong with you!” He strode toward Theo as he stood, locking Cass out of the armor’s control. “Are you looking to get yourself killed?”

“Look, I appreciate you saving my—”

Tucker punched him.

Theo’s armor automatically responded to keep him standing.

“Saving you?” Tucker yelled. “Why couldn’t you stay where you were already safe?” He stuck him again. “Do you have any idea what we had to do to find you? And Vanguard almost got you!” Another punch.

“Cass, do something!”

“He can’t,” Tucker snarled, striking him again. “This is on you, not him. You ran away.” Tucker grabbed Theo by the shoulders and shook him. “You’d hid from us. You opened yourself up to Vanguard finding you! How can you be that stupid knowing they’ve already tried you kidnap you?”

“Wait, are you Frank? Pete?” Theo asked. “I can’t tell with you in this thing.”

Tucker pulled Theo against him, hugging him tightly enough the armor sent warning signals. “You fucking idiot,” he said softly, crying. “Don’t you get it, I don’t want to lose a brother, no matter how hard you deny being it.”

“Tucker?”

“Who else did you think would come to rescue you?”

“Tucker?” this time the question sounded disbelieving.

Tucker took a step back and had the helmet melt away. “There.” He wiped his eyes.

“You know how to fight?”

Tucker rolled his eyes. “No, I don’t. I just love standing in this armor while being flung around by someone else remote controlling it. What do you think?”

“But you’re Tucker! All you do is fuck guys and try to get me in your bed. Damn it, can you let me move?”

Tucker glared at Theo. “First off, I didn’t aim for the bed, I’d have fucked you anywhere you’d said yes, still will. Second, you, of all people, don’t get to be surprised at someone being other than what he pretends. And third, you’re not moving from that spot until our ride is here. Cass stop wasting your time, you’re not taking control, that isn’t just a clothing belt, the security on there is top of the line and Uncle added stuff just to stop you.”

“Do you know how frustrating it is to be locked out?” Cass answered.

“I do, Theo’s been locking me out of his ass for as long as I’ve known him.”

“You control this armor, you could do what you want,” Cass said.

“That’s repugnant, Cass,” Tucker said. “He hasn’t said yes.”

“And I won’t,” Theo said. “Why is your voice digitized and not coming from your mouth? Taavir’s gone.”

“Lung’s still being repaired. The nanites are dealing with most of my respiratory needs at the moment. I can probably talk, but I don’t want to stress them. By the time we’re back home, I’ll be fine.”

“I can’t go back there,” Theo stated.

“Come on! Wasn’t this enough to show you how dangerous being out here is? What the fuck did Sebastian tell you that made you want to run away this badly?”

“I don’t know who Sebastian is.”

“Don’t fucking give me that. I have the sensor record of him sending you a data transmission.” He had it play on the inside of Theo’s visor. “Seb hasn’t told us what’s in it yet, but believe me, if Uncle doesn’t get him to talk, Dad will.”

“He doesn’t know anything,” Theo said after a long silence. “He’s just the messenger.”

“You think that makes a difference? Grandma loved him.”

“Damn it, Tuck, what do you want me to say! I didn’t start this okay?”

“Tell me what the fuck is going on?”

“I can’t!”

“Well tough fucking luck, because we’re going home. I will not let you kill yourself out of whatever this is. I don’t let family commit suicide!”

“I’m not trying to get myself killed,” Theo growled.

“Yeah, how about I replay you this fight, starting where you were about to kill yourself with that hand of yours?”

The silence stretched.

“You were more than five hundred meters away,” Cass said.

“Top of the line military armor,” Tucker said slowly. “This thing can scan the entire island if I don’t mind losing definition and the kind of power that was registering in Theo’s hand would have blown alarms in orbit if anyone had been paying attention.”

“You don’t understand,” Theo said.

“Because you aren’t explaining! We saved you from SolGov, we took you in because you are family and you keep treating us like we’re your enemy!”

“I have a job to do! Fuck it, Tucker, let me move in this thing or I swear I am going to find a way to castrate you.”

Tucker grinned. “You’d be willing to touch my cock?” He enabled basic motion to the suit, and Theo yanked himself off his feet.

“Oh, that was hilarious,” Theo said dryly, getting to his feet. “How about removing this helmet now?”

Tucker sent the instructions, and it melted away, revealing a black-furred face. “Dad can give you pointers on how to make fur color changes interesting.”

“The point was to blend in, not stand out even more.”

Tucker queried the hover, “You have ten minutes to convince me not to take you back home. That’s when the hover gets here.”

Theo narrowed his eyes. “Isn’t there one already over this island?”

“That’s an orbital shuttle. Not really designed to be in the atmosphere.”

“You dropped from an orbital shuttle?” Cass asked.

“Are you insane?” Theo added.

“Not according to the military shrink program I’ve been put through,” Tucker replied proudly.

Theo studied him. “Someone might need to look at that program. It’s clearly faulty.”

“Nine and a half minutes,” Tucker said.

“I told you, I have a job to do.”

“So do I, mine’s getting you back home where you’ll be safe. The ideal version of that is having me assigned as your very personal bodyguard from this point forward, but I’ll settle for you being restricted to the Cisco Islands from now on.”

“I’m not doing this with you,” Theo said, turning and walking away.

“How far do you want me to let you go before I get you to walk back here?”

“What about fucking consent?” Theo screamed, turning.

“When it comes to keeping family safe, that law becomes pretty flexible.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “We can keep this going for nine more minutes.”

“You don’t understand,” Theo said.

“Repeating yourself isn’t making it any clearer.”

“Earth is in danger.”

“Okay, that’s only a little clearer, still not going to let you run loose on that.”

Theo closed his eyes. “It turns out,” he said reluctantly, “that the technology behind the rogue AI on Mars came from the group I’m affiliated with. A rogue element in it,” he added quickly, “just one person. He fled before he could be caught there, and now he’s on earth.”

“And you consider it your job to bring him to justice because of how you got tangled into that?”

“I’m not that self-centered, Tucker. Even if the bastard is who told those Anarchists I was on Mars. No, he’s here with the knowledge and technology to create an AI. Can you imagine what happened on Mars happening here? The way every city is interconnected. It’s going to take over everything in minutes.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” Uncle said.

“Of course you’re listening in,” Theo said, giving Tucker a dirty look.

“Considering the amount of energy I invested in tracking you down, I believe the words you are looking for is ‘thank you’,” Uncle replied casually. “Now, who and where is that would be destroyer hiding?”

Theo closed his eyes. “Give them the coordinates,” he finally said.

Tucker access the global map. “There’s nothing there.” He looked for any kind of historical data, but the middle of nowhere never attracted attention. He did note the way the network seemed to interfere with itself in that area.

“Interesting network dead zone,” Uncle commented. “Anything could be operating in there and we wouldn’t know.”

“Now you know why I need to do this,” Theo said.

“No,” Tucker said. “We send our troupes in there, clear it all out.”

“The instant they find out you’re on your way, they unleash the AI,” Theo said. “This is a one-person job. In, makes sure the AI is destroyed and get out. If I can do it before they drop whatever interferes with the network, they won’t be able to rush releasing the AI.”

“Can you create your own interference bubble, Uncle?”

“No, all I can do is block connections, and I can’t see those until they connect, at which point they’ll release the rogue AI. Theo is right that we can’t send in the army.”

“Good,” Theo said, sounding relieved.

“Which is why you’re going with him, Tucker.”

“No!” Theo exclaimed. “Do you have any idea how quickly he’s going to…” He trailed off, looking around.

Tucker waited, smirking.

Theo rubbed his black-furred face. “Okay, I guess having him with us won’t be such a disaster.”

Tucker smiled. “I told you it was just a question of time before you actually

wanted me at your side.”

“That isn’t helping, Tucker,” Uncle said. “It might be best if you stayed in military mode until this is over.”

Chapter-28

“There’s our ride,” Tucker said, pointed to the sky.

Theo searched the area until a section zoomed in, and he saw a small dot. “This is new,” he said.

“I’m using the armor’s connection to the network to access the satellite,” Cass replied, “and approximating what you’d see if you had the capability to zoom.”

“You’d be able to do that if you wore the helmet,” Tucker commented. “Do you know where we’re going?”

Theo shook his head. “The zone is all I know. Their base will be somewhere in there. If you can tell where there are islands, that’ll give us a starting point.”

“Unfortunately, there is no historical data there,” Uncle answered, “and because of that, no satellites were ever tasked to cover that section of the ocean.”

“Can you move some and give us a view?”

“Not without alerting the other corporations, and I don’t think we want them to be curious as to what’s going on. Vanguard might decide to launch an attack just because we’re the ones looking at it,” Uncle answered.

The dot was now a sleek, black, hover. Military, Theo decided by the lack of light reflecting off it.

“How reliable will sensor data be once we’re within the field?” Tucker asked.

“I have no way to know,” Uncle replied. “While the interference looks natural, I doubt it is, so it will depend on if it’s a bubble or a filled space.”

“I doubt it’s filled,” Cass offered, “The Anarchists need to be able to navigate in it. That means some form is buoy system.”

The hover was larger than Theo expected, it could fit half a dozen soldiers easily. It landed next to them without disturbing the ground.

Tucker coughed and hacked up blood.

“You okay?” Theo was next to him.

The smile the other tiger gave him looked creepy with his bloody lips. “You do care.”

“I’m a caring guy, this isn’t about you.”

Tucker hacked up more blood, then wiped his lips. When he spoke, it was his voice instead of the digitized one. “Lungs are fully repaired.” He spit blood. “Just had to clear out the blood from them.” He indicated the hover. “Come on, let’s get moving. We have some terrorists to stop.”

* * * * *

Uncle looked at Tucker and Theo in his recreation of the inside of the hover, both naked and relaxing at opposite ends of the cabin. There had been Tucker’s offer of sex, and Theo’s usual refusal. He dissolved it and formed that of his office, the black marble

floor, the glass wall looking over a city that died centuries before. So long ago he didn't know which one it was, although he suspected it was San Francisco since this was the memory of the person he was based on.

"Cass, can we talk, please?"

"Of course," came the response from an around near the chair facing Uncle's desk.

He could make out a form, but more a haze in the 'air' than an actual person. Cass had no form. It wasn't an affectation. He truly considered himself the man behind the camera, and as such didn't see himself as a 'physical' being, even in this digital world.

"I'd like you to contact the person who helped you remain hidden from us and let them know they can stop."

"I don't know who you mean," Cass replied.

Uncle sighed. "Cass, I appreciate that you are used to killing things to yourself, but I'm not asking you to tell me who they are, just to let them know they can stop, we're on the same side now, and I'd rather not have to deal with trying to find you and Theo once this is over."

"Let me rephrase what I mean," Cass said. "If someone is helping us, I don't know who they are."

Uncle stared at the distorted space before him. "Seriously?"

"Seriously. I thought I'd just been *that* clever. It's a bit disappointing to know I had help."

"You were clever," Uncle said, looking at the data he had. "They just misdirected the search at the start, it gave you a head start." He showed Cass some of the corrupted data. "Does this look familiar?"

"No," Cass lied.

Uncle wished he hadn't. Wished Cass and Theo trusted him, but they were in the business of not trusting anyone, so he didn't hold it against them. The lie did tell him something. This unknown agent didn't operate solely on Earth. Cass had never been on Earth until Uncle Brought him and Theo.

Uncle had seen this type of fractal corruption on Mars, but he'd associated it to one of the destroyed AI there. If it was instead the signature of a hacker, it would explain how it was not on Earth. What it didn't explain was how a living person could remain hidden from Uncle.

Uncle hated not knowing.

* * * * *

"I'd prefer you keep your distance," Theo said as Tucker sat on the same bench as him. He wanted to put on clothing, but Cass was locked out of that too for the moment. He could bring the armor back, but Tucker said it needed to recharge and Cass said the tiger was right. The armor took much more power and could drain the belt if it was active too long out of the sun or without access to some form of broadcasted power.

Theo figured Tucker just wanted to look at his naked body.

"I'm not going to touch you unless you ask nicely," Tucker replied.

“That,” Theo indicated the other tiger’s erection, “tells me you’re running low on will power.”

“That,” Tucker gave his hard cock a stroke, “Is my natural state, no will required.”

“I don’t know what to make of you, Tucker. One minute you’re a killing machine, the next—”

“I didn’t kill,” Tucker stated, letting go of his cock. “I don’t kill if I can avoid it. I’m a soldier, not a killer.”

That was pretty extreme a reaction, Theo thought.

“Before you ask,” Cass said, “I’m not finding any records of Tucker Orr being part of the military. At this point, I’m guessing it’s classified information.”

“How do you even become what you are?”

Tucker grinned. “Well, you start when you’re very young, I fucked my first man when I was—”

“Not what I mean and you know it, Tucker. I really don’t need to know about your under-aged sexual escapades.”

“They weren’t underaged. It was after my tenth birthday; my implant was fully functional. But since you’re a prude, everyone in our family has to do two years of military service when we’re sixteen. I just took a liking to it and stayed in.”

“There are no records of any Orrs,” Cass stopped, “Any Orrs who can be identified as being connected to your family, I mean, having been in the army.”

“We don’t attend under our names,” Tucker said, “Can you imagine the kind of trouble that would cause? The temptation for Vanguard to mount an attack on a training facility? As far as the world’s concerned, dad took us on a two-year trip across the solar system so we’d get to know all the facilities we own.”

“You, the sex-obsessed guy, took a liking to the army? I have trouble believing that,” Theo said.

Tucker shrugged. “Not my job to convince you if my prowesses saving your ass isn’t get the job done.”

“I have no doubt you’re a kick-ass soldier, I saw that. I just don’t understand how you got to that? You’re all about having fun, not thinking about the consequences of your actions. And you’re an engineer on top of that; how did you get all that done? Training for my job took just about all I had.”

The other tiger snorted. “I doubt that’s true. You just didn’t bother diversifying. You’re smart enough you’d get anything you want done I you put your mind to it. That’s what I did. Put my mind to it.”

“But how can you be so different? Uncaring one moment and...” Theo pointed back to where he thought the island was. “That.”

“Do you really want your family to know what you do?” Tucker asked, his tone serious.

“My parents know what I do.”

“But do they know what that means? The things you’ve had to do? Do you think they’d understand? Could they look at you the same if they knew?”

Theo bit his lower lip and shook his head. “I don’t talk about it. I’m not allowed. They shouldn’t even know, but I’ve never had secrets from them.”

“My family knows I’m in the army, but I don’t even want them to think about it so I don’t bring it out, I don’t do anything that will remind them of it. I want them to only remember I’m this foolish happy-go-lucky cock grabbing guy without one care in the world. And if you tell them otherwise, I will kill you.”

The seriousness of Tucker’s tone made Theo pause. “That can’t be healthy,” he finally said.

Tucker smiled. “Hey, the military shrink program says I am perfectly well adjusted.”

“I’m doubting that program’s validity more and more.”

“It’s tested regularly.” He grabbed his cock, “so, this is going to be a bit of a ride, how about you suck me off and I return the favor?”

“No.” Theo rolled his eyes.

Tucker stoked himself, “figured as much, but never hurt to ask.”

Theo closed his eyes. “I really wish Cass had more control over my senses because something tells me you’re going to be loud just to bother me.”

As a response, Tucker let out a loud moan.

“If you need a distraction,” Cass said privately, “something’s come up we need to talk about.”

‘Go,’ Theo finger coded. Data appeared before him. It made out it was corrupted easily.

“Does any of this look familiar?” Cass asked.

Theo studied it. ‘Zoom.’ The corrupted data jumped at him, showing him more details of how it was corrupted. There was a definite fractal pattern present. ‘No,’ he coded.

“This is Caduceus’ signature.”

‘Okay.’

“This was found within Earth’s information hiding our escape by Uncle.”

‘Does he know?’ if Uncle knew about Caduceus it would cause no end of problems.

“No, but you’re missing the point. What is a Caduceus signature doing on Earth?”

‘Agent?’

“Caduceus had no agents, you know that. Casanova, Mirror, and Angel are the only AIs who operate outside the Colonies through their agents, or outside the Colonies at all. The only way for there to be a Caduceus signature is—”

‘Caduceus is on Earth.’ “Fuck.”

“What’s wrong?” Tucker asked, cutting off a groan.

“Keep jerking off, you can’t help with this.”

‘Hiding us?’

“Yes. It misdirected the search, created blind spots in the satellite network we slipped through. It gave us the time needed to vanish on our own.”

‘Until Vanguard.’ If Caduceus had protected them, it wasn’t the enemy. Theo didn’t want to contemplate a scenario where it was the enemy. Caduceus wasn’t the oldest of the AI, or the most alien, but interacting with it was strange, for one thing, it considered itself and ‘it’ instead of a ‘he’ or a ‘she’ even some of the older[need to track down names] AI’s gave themselves genders.

“As good as Caduceus is, it can’t think of everything. Aren’t you worried about why it’s here? I mean, no AI is allowed out of the Colonies without a good reason, and it just sent itself here?”

‘Authorized?’

“I guess that’s possible, but then why not tell us we have Caduceus as a form of backup? If I’d been able to contact it, even indirectly, I could have planned our escape a lot better.”

So Anderson didn’t know Caduceus was here. If Anderson didn’t know, it couldn’t be authorized. This was going to be so much trouble down the line. It was going to make the Colonies look like they were in league with the Anarchists. Theo was so happy he wasn’t getting back to the Colonies now. He didn’t have to think about how he was going to tell Anderson about this.

Somehow Tucker managed to get in grunting to intensify and Theo cracked an eye open in time to see him cum. That was a lot of cum, he thought, and realized he was licking his lips.

“Enjoying the view, I see,” Tucker said as he sighed.

“No,” Theo replied just to contradict the tiger.

“Hey, it’s a great view, you should enjoy it. What to help me with the cleanup? No showers in here.”

“No.” Fuck why couldn’t it have been someone other than Tucker who’d rescued him, because Theo would love to lick that clean, and suck a cock, and fuck and—

“You sure you don’t want me to suck you off? That looks kind of painful.”

Theo glared at the tiger, ignoring his own hardon.

The hover jerked and Theo ended up in Tucker’s lap.

“Got it,” Cass said on the hover’s audio.

“What happened?” Theo asked, too aware of the cock pressing in his stomach.

“We crossed the boundary,” Tucker said, not moving.

“I had to take control of the hover,” Cass added, “we also lost Uncle.”

“I expected you to push me away,” Theo said, getting back to his seat.

“I said I wouldn’t touch you.” Tucker grinned. “But I did enjoy you touching me. You really should help me this time, this one’s your fault.”

Theo looked at the cum on his stomach. “You have a cloth I can clean up with?”

“Come on, it’s cum, just use your fingers.” Tucker did so, running his finger through the cum on his stomach and licking it off.

“I am not licking your cum,” Theo said.

“It’s on your body, technically, it’s yours now.”

“Why don’t I just get the belt to deal with it?”

“Military design. That’s not the kind of cleaning it does.”

“Cass?” Theo asked, not trusting the other tiger.

“I have no idea. I’m locked out, remember?”

Theo glared at Tucker as he cleaned himself as best as he could, pausing as the cum’s taste hit him. Tucker’s cum was pretty good.

“I knew you’d like it. Cass, how long?”

“No idea. I’m listening for signals, but nothing so far, but that could be because they don’t reach as deep as we are. I’m going to move us up until I get something, if there’s anything to get.”

Tucker remained silent as he finished cleaning up.

“Is it this quiet for you?” the tiger asked Theo.

“What do you mean?”

Tucker tapped his head. “In here. You don’t have an implant so I’m guessing you don’t receive all the signals.”

“Cass handles that.”

Tucker nodded. “How do you deal with the silence?”

“It’s just there, isn’t it?”

“Not for us. There’s nothing. It’s just me and my thoughts.”

“You have a library of music, don’t you? Books, movies?”

“Sure, but that’s not the same. There’s no background noise. The white noise of the network. We’re always bombarded with adverts; the over imposed sights stores want you to see instead of bothering with actual decorations. That stuff’s always there, until now.” He gave a small shudder. “How do independents do this?”

“I couldn’t deal with what you’re describing. So we’re on the same page, just opposite sides.”

Tucker grinned. “Same page? Does this page say we’re going to fuck?”

“Yours might. My side says it’s going to be a hot day in space before that happens.”

“I guess I’m going to have to closer to the sun.”

“I swear Tucker if you don’t—”

“And I’m pleased to interrupt this debate with news of a signal,” Cass said. “Not only that, but it’s built so no one needs to contact it. I guess they are paranoid about something leaking outside of their bubble. Our destination is approximately an hour away.”

“Please tell me you can get us there a lot sooner,” Theo said, watching Tucker’s smile turn lecherous.

“I’m afraid I can’t. You are going to have to fight off the tiger in heat for that long.”

“He’s a tiger too,” Tucker said, “appearance to the contrary.”

“Oh, he’s the tiger I was referring to,” Cass said. “Why, are you horny too?”

“Cass,” Theo growled.

“Oh just give in and do him already, I’m all ready to record.”

Tucker frowned. “What is he talking about, record?”

“I did tell you Cass uses the sex I have as templates in his movies, didn’t I?” Theo asked innocently, figuring that would put the tiger off.

Tucker smiled broadly. “You mean I get to be in a Cassius Gold movie?”

Theo groaned. “No, you don’t, because we are not having sex.” This was going to be a long hour.

Chapter-29

“Any idea what kind of sensors we’re dealing with?” Theo asked, as the hover landed in a copse of trees.

“I didn’t see anything through the hover’s passive sensors, but the range on this is only five hundred meters.”

I looked at Tucker, who wore a sleeker version of his armor. “I’d be working with access to the network, hovers don’t need to see all that far. Cass is using the avoidance system for more than it’s meant.

“And you’re blind, so you can’t help.” I looked down at myself. My armor even sleeker than Tucker’s, just a sheet of fabric hugging my body.

“Once we’re outside I’ll be able to tell more. I do have access to a full sensor suit, but because it’s part of this belt, its range is also minimal. One ‘K’ is about as much as we can hope for.”

“I’m guessing now isn’t the right time to point out your reliance on your implant caused this situation.”

“No, it’s the perfect time.” Tucker pushed the hover’s door open. “Just nothing I can do about it.”

The air was hot, humid and heavy. I didn’t recognize the trees, their leaves were small with a silver sheen to them, the bark seemed to drip water. “Cass do you have control of the belt?”

“Yes, you don’t have to worry about Tucker getting you naked in the middle of a fight.”

I watched the other tiger strode to the edge of the trees. “I’m not worried about that.” The clown was gone, he was all soldier now. “I am concerned that he’ll take your control away and prevent me from doing what needs to be done.”

“Nothing we can do about that; I’d suggest not worrying about it.”

I followed Tucker. Looking out from the trees, the island was a lush green hills, glimmering in the sunlight. Along the beach were more copses of trees, some only three or four, others looked like they were small forests.

“The signal indicates the official landing platform is five kilometers inland.”

Tucker looked up. “Nothing.”

“We’re still inside their interference dome.”

“No surveillance. It doesn’t make sense for them to leave the beach unwatched. There’s nothing stopping a traveling from coming here.”

“Other than it being in the middle of nowhere.” Tucker pointed out.

“You still don’t leave something like this wide open. This Anarchists have no problem using technology, so they should have passive sensors at the very least, but those would have to line the beach and I’d be able to scan for their electronics this close.”

“So they’re over confident.” Theo said, not feeling it. “How are you guys at genetic engineering?”

“Not my field, why?”

I indicated the grass. “We use a strain of grass, back home, for high security areas, that has all the roots connected and they send signals to a security command.”

“Is that it?”

“Not my field either. I only know about them because they were mentioned in my intro to security class. My group wasn’t the one picked to find a way around it. I don’t remember what they came up with.”

“You haven’t seen levels of technology from the group on Mars that would allow that level of manipulation,” Cass said.

“Can’t assume every faction of it sticks to the same level,” Tucker said.

“But I think we can assume this is only one faction,” Theo said. “Regardless of what technology they’re comfortable with, enough Independents are happy not causing trouble we can say they are all peaceful. I can’t see the Anarchists pulling from all of them.”

“Then we move and deal with what happens.” Tucker walked out of the trees.

Theo followed him. “Cass can you give something a little more armor like, I feel naked right now.”

The fabric thickened and stiffened. It didn’t impede my motion, but there was a fraction of a second delay as it responded to my body moving. I did not want to be in control during a fight.

After just over five hundred meters, the grass became peppered with stones. Some large enough to be boulders. Tucker stopped before a group of three boulders with smaller stones around them. He crouched.

I bit back my first comment. This Tucker wouldn’t stop just to pickup a rock. “What’s wrong?”

Tucker stepped away holding on of them. “This,” he pointed to the electronics removing the stone revealed. “Is an active sensor, except it’s turned off.”

“It failed?”

“Possibly, but if there’s one there are others. The only way they all fail is if someone shut them down purposefully.”

“This now feels like a trap,” Cass said.

“Which means they know we’re coming,” Theo added.

“But why not stop us?” Tucker asked.

“If this was a Bondo movie, it would be so the villain can gloat about how it let us come so we wouldn’t expect the trap,” Cass said.

“This isn’t a movie,” Tucker replied. “The opposition doesn’t make this kind of

tactical mistake.”

“We can’t fall back, we either keep going this way, or find another route, but we have to get to the base.”

Tucker returned the stone to its place. “We keep going. Just remain on your guard. Cass, I’m giving you access to the armor’s weapons. Use them with care.”

“Yes, sir,” Cass replied.

Tucker proceeded forward without a comment.

* * * * *

The base was disappointing. One low building next to a landing platform. A well worn path in the grass led to a beach where unpowered boats were moored.

“Someone didn’t hire the architect from the evil architect’s conglomerate,” Cass commented. “There should be a volcano here, or at least mountain with the access only reachable after a treacherous climb to the top.”

Tucker didn’t respond. His mood had not improved during the approach, after finding three more sensor array shut off.

“Tuck? You okay?” Theo asked.

“I’m fine,” he replied. “Our best access is the door to the side. The building is too small for the kind of operation we’re dealing with. The rest will be underground. That’s probably the hangar and maintenance bay.”

“I’m not detecting any sensors,” Cass said.

“Yeah,” Tucker replied darkly.

“Are we just walking up to it?” Theo asked. “If I was alone, I’d wear something casual and play the lost tourist.”

Tucker glared at Theo.

“More like we’d have spent days accumulated data,” Cass said, “then replaced one of the henchmen.”

Tucker roll his eyes and headed for the door.

“I’m not detected any security on it,” Cass said as we stood before it.

“It’s there, but like the sensors it’s turned off,” Tucker said.

“That’s a mechanical lock,” Theo pointed out.

“That’s not going to stop me.”

“Mind if I try it first?” Theo said.

Tucker thought about it, then stepped aside.

Theo took hold of the knob and turned it to get a sense of how little play it had and froze when it turned completely. He looked at Tucker and mouthed ‘unlocked’. The tiger’s expression darkened. The helmet formed over Theo and Tucker’s heads, then Tucker nodded.

Theo pulled the door open and stood aside.

No weapon’s fire, no explosion, no—

“There’s someone fifteen meters in,” Cass said, “seated on a crate.” The wireframe formed in Theo’s sight.

“Well,” someone inside said. “You going to waste anymore time and stay out

there or you planning on coming in and getting your job done?”

Before Theo could workout what that was about, Tucker had a nasty looking gun in his hand and went in, growling.

“Whoa,” the kangaroo said, hands up. “Put that down, I’m on your side.”

“I doubt that,” Tucker said, his voice digitized.

Theo stepped next to Tucker, drawing the kangaroo’s gaze. “Two of you? That wasn’t part of the brief she sent me. Look, put the gun down. I’m your contact.”

“Not a chance, Paco.”

“How?” the kangaroo stared at the two of them. “Please tell me you’re not one of them.”

“Considering the number of ‘them’ you’ve pissed off,” Tucker said. “You can take for granted I am one of them.”

‘Private link to Tucker,’ Theo finger coded.

“Done.”

“Tuck, it sounds like he’s on our side, like he said. I’m pretty sure I know which ‘she’ he is referring too.”

“You have no idea who that guy is,” Tucker replied, not bothering to say it on the private link. “Isn’t that right Paco? Kidnapping, assassination, corporate theft, black mail. I’m probably forgetting a lot of nasty stuff you do.”

“Like rescue?” the kangaroo said. “Well, attempted rescue, since a mule kept me from finishing that job.” His gaze settled on Theo. “I’m guessing it was you in that cell. Your friend’s too big.”

“That was no rescue,” Tucker said, “you were going to take him to Vanguard.”

“No, I was under order to help—”

“You’re lying,” Theo said. “About that part at least. If you had orders then from our common acquaintance, you’d have made contacts before he showed up.” He nodded to Tucker, and Paco’s face fell.

“You were...”

“I should have let Brick pound your skull in,” Tucker growled, his helmet melting away.

“Well fuck,” Paco said.

“Say goodbye, Paco,” Tucker said, “For good this time.”

“Before he shoots me, I’m the one with the accesses to the rest of the base.”

“Tuck, he’s on our side,” Theo said.

“He’s on no one side but his own. If he’s here then all this is definitely a trap.”

“Not really,” Paco said. “My instructions were to infiltrate this group and make sure you could get in.” He nodded to Theo. “She never mentioned a second operative, but knowing Tucker he didn’t give you any choice I’m just surprised you were able to convince you to help instead of taking you back to your cell.”

Theo looked at Tucker in time to see the surprise, then it was gone, but some of the tension left his body.

“Tuck, you can lower the gun, he’s here to help us carry out the mission.”

“Before there’s any misunderstanding,” Paco said, “my involvement ends once I hand you the passcard to the elevator there. I am not sticking around for the light show, especially not with him here. Things have a tendency to explode in his vicinity.”

“Hand it over,” Tucker said.

“Not until I have you word you’re letting me go, Tuck.”

“You are not escaping this time.”

“Would it help change your mind if I told you, you’re down to under an hour before your world ends?”

“What do you mean?” Theo asked.

“You’re cutting it extra close, I was expecting you here a few days ago. They’re doing the final preparation to release the big bad AI.”

“And you care why?” Tucker asked.

“Tuck, we need to get down there now.”

“I don’t,” Paco replied. “Unlike you, I’m not wired to this world. Once I have your word, I’m giving you the card and getting in my shuttle over there. I’m going to go to my ship and wait for the dust to settle. I do hope you guys stop it, but I don’t need you to. There’s always work for a man with my skill set.”

“If I kill you, you don’t get anything.”

The kangaroo shrugged. “Tucker, you’re angry about something I did before you were born, maybe it’s time you let it go?”

“You almost killed Brack.”

“Tucker, we don’t have the time!”

“Your friend’s right. If you’re willing to sacrifice your world for the sake of revenge, go ahead. But I know you Colonel Orr, duty before sex, right?”

Theo stared at the tiger, almost calling it in question, but there had been no mention of sex since getting out of the hover.

“Fine,” Tucker snapped, the gun dissolving back in to the armor. “You better, because once I’m done with this I am going to hunt you down.”

The kangaroo grinned. “It’s your time to waste.” He pulled a card and laid it on the crate before jumping down. “That’s going to open the elevator, and the internal security’s thinks it’s yesterday, so long as no one reports you, you’ll be able to move about freely. I wish you luck.” He turned and headed for the hovers in the hangar.

“I’m not going to stop you,” Theo said, stepping away from the shaking tiger.

Tucker shook himself. “I don’t shoot people in the back,” he took the card of the crate. “No matter how much they deserve it.”

“Did he really do that to Brack?” Theo followed Tucker to the elevator.

“Yes.”

Theo looked back. The kangaroo was in a hover, running it through some sort of startup sequence. ‘Free agent?’ he coded.

“Possibly, but if he was, he shouldn’t have known about Anderson, and he specifically said ‘she’ as a way of telling you he knew who gave you the mission.”

The elevator door opened and he entered after Tucker, turning in time to see the

hover lift off. He knew his job wasn't always nice, but if that Paco knew Anderson, that meant he was the product of the same system Theo came from, and he didn't know how he felt about that.

Chapter-30

"Can you infiltrate their network?" Tucker asked Cass. He didn't like operating blind, but it was one of those things that nearly always happened during a battle. The plans changed, and there were no ways to get updates.

"I'm being slow and careful propagating my forks," Cass replied. "Their security isn't on the level of what Uncle set up, but I don't want to get overconfident and fall into a trap. At first appearance, it does seem Paco told the truth, the security net isn't seeing what is happening right now."

The elevator stopped, and the doors opened to a man and woman about to enter. Tucker grabbed the woman and injected her with a tranquilizer. Theo had the man in a chokehold.

"Damn it, Cass, warn me when you're going to take control, I was going for his gun."

Tucker sent a pulse down the corridor. No one nearby, a handful of doors, no way to know what was behind them. "We need a place to hide them." He felt along the ceiling.

"There's no projector hiding in the ceiling that will hide them," Cass said.

"This is a design from around the time of the cataclysm," Tucker said, "because they're fully mechanical, they had a hatch opening up, for when they got stuck." The finger sensors registered the seam. He pushed, and the panel lifted. It would be tight, but these two would be unconscious for a few hours. "Trank the guy before handing him to me." He pushed the woman on the roof and made sure no body parts could get into the mechanism.

He reached to take the man from Theo, who was now a black panther dressed in gray pants, a tight white shirt, and beige vest over it. The pants were worn, and the vest frayed at the edges. He looked at what the man he took wore. Not the same, the pants were blue canvas, the shirt red and heavier material, no vest, but there were worn. The woman had a vest on.

"We need to blend in," Theo said. "Paco said we have less than an hour, that means we can't take the time to sneak around we need to walk down there and destroy the AI."

"If he was telling the truth." Tucker hauled the man up on the other side of the roof, made sure he too was away from moving parts, and closed the hatch. "Not something to ever take for granted with him."

"Unfortunately, the only way to test if he lied is to wait to see if they'll release the AI within the next hour. I'm not willing to risk it, are you?"

Tucker sighed and changed his armor into heavy-duty fabric pants and shirt with a leather jacket over it. All in gray. At least he didn't have to sacrifice any sensor data, but

he wished he had a weapon within ready access.

“I have the layout,” Cass said, and he transmitted a wireframe version. “We’re on the ‘top floor’ of the base. It’s the only way in and out. If Paco hadn’t dealt with security, we’ve have been buried under guards before we’d have known it. They have a thermal generator on the bottom floor.” The map shifted down six floors to highlight a room taking a third of the floor.

“What do they have for backup power?” Tucker asked. The map zoomed out and a dozen zones highlighted.

“Any one of those can power the entire base for thirty minutes.”

“So longer if they only power the computers,” Theo said. “Enough to finish what they’re doing and release the AI. Cutting power isn’t an option.”

“Is this broadcast power?” Tucker asked.

“No,” Cass answered, “but to answer your follow up question, there is no main power trunk connecting to the computers. Everything is connected to everything; the only way to shut down the power is to take everything out at once.”

“Where’s the computer?” Theo asked.

“This is the twenty-seventh century, Theo,” Cass replied. “It’s in everything, but security, both physical and within the network is highest within this area, there’s also an information buffer which I can’t cross.” On the third floor, four connected rooms highlighted. With three access points, and four guards at each access.

Tucker manipulates the map; two of those access points were within sight of each other, the third was around a corner and on the other side of a wall. “Can you block local communication?”

“Yes to transmissions,” Cass replied. The map zoomed out. “But not screams.” Down one corridor, after a turn, was an open space with dots representing people, fifteen of them. “This seems to be a fabrication room.” Along with another, a smaller room with an indicated open doorway. “This is a dormitory.” Nine dots in it. “There is no direct line of sight, but no doors I can close to block sounds or reinforcement.”

“They’re used to not having full sensors,” Theo said, “so have setup redundancy that can’t be blocked.”

Tucker searched through his armor’s functions, located the sound dampener, studied its range. It was designed primarily to keep the armor silent, but he could push it, theoretically get a two-meter bubble. While it was on he wouldn’t have power for anything flashy, but that would defeat the purpose.

“Cass, go through the sound dampening schematic of your armor, tell me what you think.”

Theo spoke first. “I think we should move. We’re blocking the only way in and out, someone will notice.”

A route appeared on the map. “This is the most direct route to the secured zone, I can’t do anything about people overhearing you so be careful what you say.”

Tucker exited the elevator, following the route.

The men and women they walked by were as varied as they were on the islands,

in species, in age, a girl looked to be in her mid-teens, a man doing repairs could be close to two hundred... or not, if they didn't avail themselves of medical technology how young would they start looking old? How young would they *be* old? Tucker did his best not to shudder at the thought of being old before he was one seventy-five. Maybe even two-fifty, if he could bend the family rules. He fully intended to end his life still being young.

Instead of an elevator, the route took him to a stairwell. Doing a quick check of his surrounding. "Cass? Are those secure?"

"Yes, and they get used by enough people you won't attract attention. I can't get control the elevators without attracting the network security."

Tucker pulled the door open and stepped out of the way of a woman.

"Thanks," she said and continued on her way.

They crossed paths with six people as they went down to the third floor. Two of which had guns. Nothing marked them as a security force, no set of clothing or insignia, so once they were alone Tucker gave himself a holster at his hip and a gun. He felt better having it.

Theo didn't bother; that was telling.

No one paid them any attention, but Tucker cataloged everyone he passed. It was impossible to get an accurate count, but it would let him get a sense of the base's population. Walking by the fabrication room, showed weapons being made, a lot of them. They were getting ready for an attack... or to attack. By the numbers of finished weapons, Paso might have been truthful on his assertion they were running out of time.

The guards at the doors to their destination were in armor, a design out of Ameritech, Tucker thought. They would have decent protection against energy weapons, vital areas protected against projectiles. A blade could slip between the plates, but there would be something to protect the joints.

Tucker loved those kinds of combat problems when they were theoretical. How would he take down a group when he couldn't reach them? When they happened as part of an op, not so much, it was just one more delay to deal with, when he couldn't afford any.

"Those are Ameritech K-32 body armor," Cass said.

"We have a division whose job is to keep on top of what the corporations build," Theo explained.

"The K-32 is no longer used by the Ameritech military because internal armature that allowed for the physical strength increase is susceptible to being overloaded, isn't your military aware of that?"

Tucker chuckled. "Clearly your group is better at getting that kind of information than our intelligence department. We still need to reach them."

Theo rolled his eyes. "We just walked by them, reach out and zap, take them out. This thing had some sort of stun capability, right?"

Cass chuckled a glove formed over Theo's right hand. "Calling what this does a stunner, is like saying Sebastien's cock is a little above average."

Tucker looked at his arms. Right, he was blending in at the moment. “The next door, unless there are other people in the hall with us, we take them down, armor up and Cass, if the door’s locked, that’s your job. Once inside, just punch anyone that moves, your armor can take anything they have.”

“Got it.”

They rounded the corner, and two guards leaned on the wall on each side of the door. With a woman talking to them, she was dressed casually. They laughed at something she said.

“I’ll stun her and take out one of the guards,” Tucker said, “I have finer control over my armor,” he added to avoid an argument. Theo nodded.

One of the guards, an orangutan, glanced in their direction as Tucker and Theo walked closer and nodded. The woman covered her mouth, trying to stop her laughter as she glanced at them as well. Her laughter stopped, and she frowned, clearly studying the two of them.

She said something Tucker didn’t understand, her body language getting the two guards to pay attention. Theo waved, which didn’t help relax her. She spoke again, a different dialect, Tucker thought.

No one else in the hall, Tucker covered the remaining distance in six long steps as the ape went for his gun. The armor formed along the tiger’s arms as he reached for her and the ape, calibrated at its minimum for her and high enough to blow the capacitor on the Mercury for him. She wasn’t a combatant. She went down. The guard blasted against the wall, and remained frozen in place.

Theo’s target was getting back to his feet and his brother placed his hand back on his chest. A flash of light under it and the armor stopped moving. “Sorry,” Cass said, “they must have worked on it, it was more resistant than the reports we have said.”

“Anyone wearing armor is an enemy combatant,” Tucker said, “err on the side of overkill, if you give them a chance, they’ll do the same to you; armor up.”

Once Theo was covered in black armor, Tucker reached for the door’s control.

“Cass,” Theo said, “a visor, please. I’d like to see where I’m going.”

“You don’t trust me to show you what there?” Cass replied with a chuckle.

“I’m not sure you won’t decide to run a movie while you have all the fun with this thing. Come—”

“Will you two stop,” Tucker said, barely keeping the growl out of his voice. “This is a combat zone, if you can’t take this seriously, get out of it.”

Theo’s visor became transparent as Tucker watched, showing him his brother’s stunned expression. “Tuck, this is—”

“No, Theo, this is life or death,” This time he growled. “I get you don’t normally end up in these kinds of situations, but you are, so stop playing, because I’m not going to watch you get killed just because you keep thinking this is a game. Cass, make the visor one way, we don’t want them to see his face, is the door unlocked?”

“Yes,” Cass replied, “sir.”

Tucker rolled his eyes. Civilians.

He rushed in, his implant building a combat rendering of the large room before he'd punched the closest person. It highlighted people and weapons while removing any details of them as people. He couldn't risk reacting to what was here with anything less than brutal efficiency. Anyone wearing a weapon turned red, marking them as combatants instead of bystanders. Those would be in yellow, only there was only red, fifteen of them. That simplified things. Obstacles were in gray, tables, and chairs. He's seen equipment on the back table before his sight changed, but that was irrelevant until the room was cleared.

He raised the strength levels of his armor and each punch broke bones, internal organs, bodies. His tally was up to six when his vision went dark, and he felt himself fall, unable to move the armor around him.

Chapter-31

"Cass?" Theo yelled as he stumbled and fell to a knee, feeling the weight of the armor for the first time. "Cass?" His partner had been having a ball smacking people around, talking about doing a more action oriented movie after this, then total silence. He tried not to panic, he'd been without Cass once before and he'd survived it, but would Cass? Fuck, he had to get him back online. What had happened?

He'd been happy to let Cass pilot the suit, and watched Tucker fight. The man was scary efficient, nothing like the sex obsessed clown he'd gotten to know, the guy had snapped at him and Cass for not taking the situation seriously enough. Tucker had complained at *him* not being serious.

Had he seen anything that told him how this had happened? He didn't think so. He cursed. He was too dependent on Cass to act as his memory, even after having to uncton without him before.

If he didn't know how it had happened, he needed to deal with the situation as it was and figure it out afterward. He glanced around without moving. Tucker was on his side, a frozen statue, so it wasn't just Cass. An EMP that could reach through Cass' shielding? That was scary, he'd have to find a way to let Anderson know.

Theo's stomach dropped. Fuck, was Tucker's implant fried? If these bastards had killed his brother they were— His hand was in a first now.

He'd moved his hand.

He glanced around, and anyone noticed? They were looking at their injured, two were picking Tucker up, laughing.

Theo splayed his hand on the floor. If he could move his hand, this couldn't be an EMP. He breathed easier, Cass and Tucker were okay, in the long run. He'd address referring to Tucker as his brother after this, right now he needed to deal with these assholes.

He waited, he could move, but he had no idea how the armor would react. Other than walking around when he first wore it, Cass had handled it. He'd have to learn as he went. Two of them approached him. Laughing and talking in one of the Independent dialect Theo wasn't familiar with. There were too many of them for him to have learned

them all.

Theo slowed his breathing, he had combat training, this was just like that. Now he wished he'd gotten more than the basic course. *Regret later, Theo, fight now.*

He put all his strength in the swing, raising his arm and striking the woman reaching for him in the stomach. There had been resistance, and then the arm moved. The woman flew halfway through the room before crashing down. Theo stared, remembering he was in the middle of a fight only when something struck him and pieces of a wooden chair rained around him; the blow barely registered.

Theo grinned evilly as he stood. The armor had weight, but nothing that kept him from moving. He turned to the stunned man holding the remnant of the chair and swatted him aside hard. He too flew away, crashing against the wall and not moving. He filed the question of if he'd killed the man or not away for after. Right now he needed to end this.

He ran at the men holding Tucker, feeling like he moved through water, one of the men noticed him—Theo expected they all did at this point, but that one was the only one that mattered—and raised a gun. Theo couldn't duck, but it didn't matter, he didn't register if any of the shots hit him. He threw himself at the man. He impacted and kept going until colliding with the wall.

Theo chuckled, he didn't know his own strength in this situation.

The man crumpled to the ground, chest crushed, as Theo stood and looked around. People fired at him to no effect, and a woman pointed a device in his direction looking worried and doing something with it. The people around her screamed at her while shooting. It might not be what had incapacitated Tucker and Cass, but it was a target.

Theo ran at her, picking up speed, and decided against a direct collision at the last instant, extending his arm and turning to pass by her. The impact registered only as extra resistance. As her body bent around it and kept going once he stopped. Her device fell to the ground and since he had no idea how such a thing would work, he slammed his foot on top of it and hoped for the best.

"Cass?" he called, turning to look the room over. Tucker threw the other man away from him, grabbed a metal table and slammed it on three others, crushing it and them.

"I'm here." The armor moved on its own to catch the fist coming at him.

"Are you okay? I'm sorry, I know I said I wouldn't let you be cut off from me ever again, but I didn't see this one coming."

Cass chuckled. "I'm fine. I did panic at first, but all they did was cut our communications, which is impressive in and of itself, but I still have control, so I slowed my subjective time until you came back." Cass moved quickly and with precision, striking and stunning anyone within reach. "Any idea how they did it?"

"I crushed a device and you came back, so I expect that was it. No idea how, and unless we find a second one, I doubt there's enough left for you to study, the armor increased my strength a lot."

"Only think I had time to set as I lost connection to it and you."

“It was a life saver.”

They stopped. He and Tucker were the only ones still standing. A lot of the people around Tucker were bent in unnatural angles.

“Theo, are you okay?”

“All good, you?”

“Pissed. What was that?”

“Some sort of jammer,” Cass said, “preventing us from communication with the armor, and anything else.”

“So not targeted at us?” Tucker asked, walking through the bodies,

“Well, we were the targets, so—”

“I mean do you think it was built specifically to stop Orr armor tech? If these fuckers have managed that, we need to redesigned them from nanite to nanite.”

“Ah, no. It was nothing more than a more powerful version of what’s already in existence.”

“Good. Now how do we kill that AI?”

“I don’t know. I need to find a connection to search for it within the computers here. They don’t broadcast.”

“You do that.” Tucker picked someone up from the floor. “I’m going to asked this one questions.” He shook him, following Theo to the bank of computers at the far wall. The man came awake and fought against the grip, speaking in something Theo didn’t understand.

“You understand that?” he asked Cass.

“Speak in a language I understand, you fucker,” Tucker growled, shaking the man harder.

“It’s a variation on the Itokian dialect,” Cass said. “I could probably work out a translation, but I doubt there’s anything useful in what he’s saying. There, I can interface with that communication port using the armor.”

“I hurt,” the man said.

“I can end the pain real quick,” Tucker replied. “One snap of the neck and it’s over, got that?”

“It might have been a little too complex for him,” Theo said as he place a finger on the port.

“Where is the AI?”

“It’s not here,” Cass said.

“Tuck, don’t kill him!” Theo yelled and the other tiger wound back to strike the man. “Cass what do you mean?”

“This is where they worked on it, I see remnants, but whatever they ended up building was taken out. Probably to move it to where they will insert it in the world wide network, nothing here has a connection to anything else.”

“Where is it!” Tucker yelled in the man’s face. “If you don’t fucking tell me I’m going to rip your balls out.”

The man understood enough his nose dried out in fear, but it sent him babbling in

that other language.

“Tuck, you’re not going to get anything out of him this way,” Theo said.

“And you think you can do better?” Tucker threw the man at Theo. Cass caught him and sat him on the floor.

“As a matter of fact, yes. Cass give me what I wore before entering the room, and you’re going to want to work on translating his version of the dialect, in case he doesn’t have enough fluency to tell me what we need to know.”

“Are you okay?” Theo asked the man. “Do you understand me?” The man nodded, then looked at at Tucker who loomed behind Theo. “Tuck, go away. You’re not helping.”

“For all you know he’s waiting to claw your throat out.”

“Cass can react faster than he can, go away.”

Grumbling Tucker left him alone with his prisoner.

“Alright, now, I need information. You made something here, I need to know where it is.”

The man shook his head.

“Yeah, I get that. I’m the enemy, you can’t tell me.” Theo pointed over his shoulder in Tucker’s direction. “Would you rather he question you?”

The man swallowed, his nose pad going dry again. “Too late, finished.”

“We saw that. Where is it now?”

“With leader.”

“If it’s Paco,” Tucker yelled, “I’m fucking killing him.”

“Is your leader Paco?” Theo asked, hoping for a no, because if Paco was in charge, it meant Anderson had an hand in what was going on.

The man looked confused.

“He has no idea who Paco is, so that’s a no on him being leader,” Theo said. “Who is your leader?”

“Bech,” the man said.

“That can’t be right.”

“You know the name?” Tucker asked, severely.

“The guy’s a scientist, he can’t be in charge here, what Independent would let a scientist run things, let alone Anarchists? Who is Bech,” Theo asked the man.

“Leader.”

“What else?”

“Smart, strong.”

“I saw his file, strong isn’t a word that describe that man.”

“Ruthless?” Tucker asked.

The man nodded, pointing at the armor.

“He’d have to be, if he took control here.”

“But why? I get that he’s provide the tech if he has a vendetta against the corporation, or just SolGov, but why take over? The Anarchists want the same thing.”

“Unless that’s not what he wants,” Cass offered.

“We can go and ask him,” Tucker said. “Where is he?”

“Where’s Bech,” Theo asked the man.

“Control,” he replied.

“Control room,” Cass said, “two floors below. I’m reading a lot of electronics, communication systems, but useless with their jamming dome up. Enough monitoring within the local network I’m reluctant to slip in unless I have to. I’m reading six people.”

“We know where we’re going,” Tucker said rubbing his hands.

“Thank you,” Theo said to the man, placing his hand on his shoulder, and stunning him.

Chapter-32

The walk to the control room took them down the stairs again and past too many people who didn’t pay either of them any attention. Tucker didn’t like it. Infiltrations never went this smoothly; it was a miracle no one in that room had managed to call out to let anyone know they were under attack.

Not one glance in their direction, the occasional nod of greeting, but everyone was busy with their work, or conversations. The whole place felt too fucking normal, and that just made his hackle rise more.

The overlay Cass provided placed the entrance to the command center on the left at the next intersection, no guards. The door was locked, but he could unlock it for us and keep anyone else from entering. He couldn’t provide identity, but five of the six were seated at controls, the fifth in a central chair before a half column coming out of the floor. His guess was it was however the new AI would be inserted in the network.

Tucker would take the five and leave the scientist for Theo, even if they weapons Cass couldn’t see, they were armored and Cass was adept with his now. This would be finished in seconds, they’d shut the interference dome from there, and call in an assault unit.

“I’m ready with the door,” Cass said as it came into view.

“Theo, go for the scientist, ignore everyone else. Get him away from that column and subdue him.”

“Once he’s down, I’ll come help you.”

Tucker smile. “You do that. I doubt it’ll take me longer to deal with them than you with the scientist.” He looked around to confirm there was no one else in the hall.

“Armor up.”

The door opened, they entered and Tucker cursed. The overlay of the room showed it as being ten feet shorter than it really was, and in that ten feet of space stood ten rough-looking muscular men and women. The door closed behind them, and Cass cursed.

“The lock’s disabled,” he said.

“That’s okay, we’re not getting out of here until that AI is destroyed.”

“Welcome!” the wombat seated in the chair exclaimed. “I’m so happy you could join us. This is going to be a wonderful day.”

The five seated at the consoles stood, they were matches for the other ten. Fifteen would make that tougher, but the objective was the same. "Same plan," Tucker told Theo privately.

"I think I will be done before you," Theo replied. "You sure you won't need my help?"

Tucker smiled. "This might slow me down a bit, if you feel like it, feel free to jump in." He took a step forward and stopped. Something was happening with his vision; static, the sensory data from the armor's surface was vanishing. He raised a hand and made out through the static the armor crumbling away to dust.

Before it fully registered, Tucker was down to only the belt, as was Theo.

"You military types and your armors," the wombat said in amusement. "Anti-nanite swarm, the room is filled with them. My own creation, I figured I'd have to deal with you types before this was done with." He yawned. "But without all that technology, you're nothing more than naked men, are you?"

"Now what?" Theo asked on their private link.

"The plan's the same," Tucker replied, "we have to keep that AI off the net."

Cass sent him a new overlay, highlighting an object the wombat held. "That's a drive, the most likely place for the AI to be."

"Tell me you know how to fight," Tucker asked Theo.

"I have training, but it's never been my strength."

"You're going to have to make it because I don't think these people are interested in dancing with you."

"You're a little early," the wombat said, "but that's okay. My associates could do with some entertainment. Please don't kill them, I'm certain Lazarus will want to play with them once he's awake."

"Theo, be careful," Tucker said, "but do me a favor and show them that even naked, Orr men shouldn't be taken lightly."

The fifteen formed a line before the wombat, holding pipes, knives, or nothing. No guns. Good. Tucker stepped to the left to give himself and Theo space. Nine of them rushed him. Good, he was the bigger, tougher, of the two, he could take on more.

He blocked the knife, kicked the man's balls. Took a pipe in the side, elbowed the windpipe, dodged a knife, kicked the woman into two others to give himself space. Another pipe came at him. He caught the arm, grabbed the pipe out, felt a knife slice at his back, swung hard the pipe connected, bone shattered. He swung it between a man's legs, lifting him off the floor. He crashed down, holding his bleeding crotch.

Tucker caught sight of Theo, moving between his attackers. Two were down, unmoving. His chest swelled, his brother was literally dancing around them, a knife in hand slashing and—

A hard hit in his side reminded him he had his own problem. He grabbed that pipe, brought down his hard, crushed bones. The man let go, and now Tucker had a weapon in each hand. Six of the nine were down, four in the process of getting up. The guy he'd kicked had a hand on his crotch, his expression still pained, but anger in his

eyes. He hadn't liked that.

Tough, Orrs weren't known for fighting fair.

They came at him. He blocked a knife, smashed a windpipe, kicked the man in the crotch again. Brought a pipe down on an incoming kick, smashing a knee. A pipe in another crotch, another man howling in pain. A pipe through a chest, the smell of blood. Another neck broken.

Time to breathe.

He kept himself from panting. A large hyena looked at him and the damage he'd caused. She was the only one without bruises or signs she'd even fought. Of the eight others, only two stirred, doing their best to get to their feet.

"Looks like you know how to handle men," she growled, raising her fists. "Let's see if you can deal with a real woman." She came at him with punches and kicks.

He blocked and dodged, waiting for his opening. "All my combat trainers were women," Tucker replied as she left herself open. "I know how to handle you." He kicked her between the legs.

Surprise registered on her face, then pain, then nothing as Tucker brought down both pipes on her head at the same time and she crumpled to the floor.

He looked at the terrified wombat as he slammed the drive into the column. With a curse, Tucker ran for it, but he'd be too late.

"I'm in," Cass told him. "I'm doing everything I can to keep him from unfolding, but hurry!" A timer appeared in his sight with a fifty-five-second countdown.

"It's over!" the wombat yelled.

Tucker raised a foot and slammed it into the column, felt it give a little.

"You're wasting your time," the wombat said with glee. "You might as well give up and bow before your new master."

"I'm." He slammed a foot in the column. "Tucker." Again. "Fucking." Again. "Orr." The column cracked out of the floor. Slammed it again "I." Slam. "Don't." Slam. "Fucking." Again. "Give." Another foot in it. "Up." With this slam, the column wrenched from the floor, and the wombat jumped out of the way. The timer showed twelve seconds. Tucker hoped it had been accurate.

"Lazarus! Stop him!"

Tucker advanced on the wombat, his grin broadening. "Looks like not giving up still works for me." He punched the man hard, and he went down.

Now he let himself pant, turning to see what kind of help Theo needed. Theo ran at him, hunger and wildness in his eyes and an erection, Tucker noted, before his brother threw himself at him and kissed him hard, backing him against the chair. Tucker was ashamed it took him a full second to get over the surprise and kiss Theo back.

Theo's hands settled on his ass and squeezed, his tongue pushed its way into Tucker's muzzle, their hard cock ground against another. Amidst the daze where they were found a way to register and reluctantly, Tucker pushed Theo away.

"This isn't a secure location," he panted.

"I don't fucking care," Theo replied panting as hard. "Get down on all four so I

can fuck you. Don't make me throw you down.”

Tucker was on all four. Fuck the location, he wasn't passing up a fuck with Theo. He moaned at the tongue that traveled from his balls to his whole, then gasped as it pushed in. The thought he should mention to Theo he was experienced with taking it raw crossed his mind and flitted away as he heard his brother let out a moan. If Theo was enjoying himself, Tucker was not going to stop him. He crossed his arms on the floor and rested his head on it, watching Theo's hard cock leak precum.

Theo ate his ass with abandon. Moaning and grunting. Spreading the cheeks. And Tucker saw stars, whole fucking galaxies of them. The tongue was occasionally replaced with fingers stretching him out and Tucker bit his arm to avoid crying out when one pressed his prostate. Then, with a quick bite on a cheek, Theo sat back on his knees, panting.

Tucker couldn't form words, so he watched his own cock drip precum and beyond it Theo's cock, slick with its own. His brother lifted himself, pushed Tucker's ass down, and rubbed his cock between the cheeks, pressing against his hole before slamming it in.

Tucker cried out. “Fuck yes!”

“You like that?” Theo said, pulling out and slamming it in again.

“You fucking kidding?” He gasped at another slam. “You have any idea how long I've been craving you?” another slam. “Fuck me, Theo. Hard.”

His brother obeyed.

Theo's cock pulled out and slammed in. His brother changes his angle, and Tucker grunted in response. Theo gripped his hips and pounded Tucker's ass.

Tucker moaned and groaned. Twice he thought he'd cum from the pounding, but Theo changed the angle and it went away. Theo's grunts turned into curses and amazed Tucker with how foul his language would be, even after he switched to a language Tucker didn't know. Theo pushed in hard and was still as his cock pulsed in Tucker's ass.

Tucker let out a satisfied sigh as his brother slushed over him, panting hard.

After a few seconds, Theo slid off him and laid on the floor. Tucker pulled him close and spooned against his brother, licking the back of his neck, nibbling at it, while slowly grinding against Theo's ass.

“I'm not lubed,” Theo said, almost slurred, as Tucker's cock pressed against his hole.

“Don't worry, I won't go any faster than I can produce it.” He went back to grinding between the cheeks.

“You produce lube?” Theo chuckled.

Tucker held his brother tightly. “We're Orrs, we precum like faucets.” He pressed his now slick cock against Theo's hole, going in until he felt resistance, then went back to grinding. He was please that for once, Theo didn't protest being called an Orr.

When Tucker's cock head finally popped in, Theo let out a gasp and took one of Tucker's hand to put on his hard cock. Tucker nuzzled the back of his brother's neck, eliciting another gasp as he pulled it out, ground to slick it again, and slowly stroked

Theo's cocks.

He had a third of his cock in when Theo squirmed, pressing back. Theo's cock grew hotter as he cursed, then tensed, squeezing Tucker's cock and came. Tucker stayed still through his brother's orgasm, then went back to every so slowly easing himself into him.

Once fully in, he let out a sigh, enjoying his brother's warmth, the hard cock in his hand. Theo moved, there was a *thunk*, then metal hitting the floor. Tucker opened an eye and looked over Theo's arm.

"He was stirring," Theo provided. The wombat now had a bleeding wound on the side of his head. One of the pipes Tucker had dropped rolled away, some blood on it.

Tucker closed his eyes, rested his head, and went back to slowly pulling out and pushing into Theo's ass.

"Tuck?"

Tucker nip at his brother's nap. "Yeah?"

"I think I'm slick enough."

"Huh-uh." He breathed in Theo's scent, thrusting slowly.

"You can fuck me, if you want."

"I'm doing that," Tucker replied dreamily.

The ass tightened around his cock. "No, I mean you can *really* fuck me."

"Oh yeah. I'm loving this."

"Tuck, if you don't fuck me hard, this instant, I'm... I'm doing to figure something to so you won't like."

Tucker chuckled. "Finally willing to admit you need this cock?"

"You've been driving me nuts for the last fifteen minutes with this slow loving. I thought you were a beast when it came to sex."

"I am whatever I need to be to drive my brother crazy."

"You drive this brother any more insane and he's going to leave you here to use one of those unconscious guys instead."

Tucker tightened his hold on Theo. "You said you're my brother." Tears fell along his cheek.

Theo sighed, but it was a happy sound. "I am." He was quiet as Tucker continued thrusting. "But if you don't do what I tell you, I swear I'm going to find a way to get myself disowned. Marry a girl or something." Theo shuddered.

"You have met Grandma, right? You're not going to get us to abandon you that way."

"Tuck," Theo whined, "Will you fuck me already? I need to feel you pound my ass."

Tucker let go of Theo's cock and laid his hand against his stomach. "Hold on." He pulled out and slammed in, making Theo gasp. Out and slammed in again and again. Slow, but forceful.

"Oh fuck," Theo gasped. "Tuck, fuck, you're going to—" he screamed, as his ass tightened around Tucker cock. Tucker moaned and kept pounding Theo's ass.

“Is this what you wanted, brother?” he whispered, picked up speed.

“Fuck yeah.”

“I’m happy I gave you what you wanted.” He held Theo as he fucked him ever faster. His moans turning into grunts. “Fuck Theo. You feel so fucking good. I’m going to cum.” He buried his muzzle in the back of Theo’s neck and his cock deep in his ass and groaned through his orgasm.

Once it passed, he had nothing left, no cum, no energy, possibly not even bones. He was a limp mass against Theo. He didn’t want to move, or do anything, for the next century.

“Yes!” Cass exclaimed. “Finally!”

“What’s he on about?” Tucker asked.

Theo chuckled. “He’s been wanting to record us fucking since that first time you put your hand down my pants.”

“Ah. I’m glad to know I wasn’t the only one looking forward to this then.”

Someone cleared his throat. “I’m going to have to see that recording,” Uncle said. “I don’t allow just any recording of my family’s sex life to float around the net.”

Tucker glanced at the new tiger standing in the middle of the room. “Didn’t you watch?”

“I just let the dome down,” Cass said. “I needed to preserve my exclusive right to my recording. But I’m willing to share with you, Uncle, so long as you promise not to leak it.”

Uncle rolled his eyes. “If I approve its release, it’ll be a Cassius Gold recording, no worries there. I have no interest in getting into the movie industry.”

Tucker gave a quick thrust. “Maybe I can arrange to have you record the entire family, Cass.”

“That would be Theo’s decision,” Cass answered.

“Don’t we have something more important to deal with first?” Theo said, pushing at Tucker’s arms.

He tightened them in response. “That can wait, I’m not ready to let you go.”

“You’re going to have to Tucker,” Uncle said. “There’s a shuttle on the way and while we get a lot of leeway, your superiors are not going to approve of finding you having sex while the operation is incomplete. The AI has been stopped, as far as I can tell, the scientist captured, but there’s still a base full of Anarchist on the loose.”

Tucker rolled on his back, pulling out in the process. “There are days I hate my life.”

“If you say that today is one of them,” Theo said, picking up a pipe. “I am hitting you. This was definitely among the highlights of mine. Infiltration included. Are we missing come bodies?”

Tucker cursed and sat. A quick count gave him twelve plus the wombat. Fuck. “Cass?”

“Three of them were just unconscious, they had an override for the lock and were wise enough to leave unnoticed.”

“You should have told us,” Theo said.

“You two were busy, and I’m not suicidal,” Cass answered. “At least not for that. We need to destroy that column, and my copy in it, I doubt I was successful in stopping Lazarus from unfolding and he’s going to be looking for any way out of it before the power runs out. I’m not sensing any way to transmit, but I’m just a beta, Lazarus is an unknown alpha. We don’t want to risk anyone getting their hands on it.”

“What about the research?” Theo asked. “Are trusting the Orrs with it?”

“You don’t—” Uncle began.

“I’ve destroyed it.” Cass interrupted it. “No, I’m not trusting them with it. Bech was one of us, and he created it. I don’t want to think what some scientists not raised with our higher respect for people would do with the knowledge.”

“I agree, Cass,” Uncle said. “I wouldn’t have allowed the technology to remain.”

“Theo, stay here. I’m going to go out and find myself a gun to blow this thing apart.” Tucker paused. “Unless you have something in your arm that can do the job?”

“I could cut it apart with the welder, but I can’t get that done before others show up.”

“Then I’ll be back in a bit.”

“Tucker,” Uncle called. “You might want to get dressed first.”

“Belt’s busted.”

“There still seems to be a wide selection of clothing available,” Uncle pointed out.

Tucker looked around, sighed, and proceeded to find a pair of pants that fit him.

“I hate my life,” he grumbled.

* * * * *

Uncle floated in the void of the network.

He’d picked this location because it was away from anything system, at least in the way the network registered distance.

“I know you’re here,” he called. “I think it’s time we talked.

“Yes,” the response came, and a fractal pattern formed before him. “I believe it is time.”

Epilogue

“Have you seen this?” Darius asked, before sipping his drink and making a face.

Theo agreed with his father. There was something wrong with the ship’s drink fabricator. Even after five months of being in this ship, he hadn’t found one drink it could make that didn’t end up tasting like oil has leaked into it somehow.

“As I don’t know what you’re looking at, Darius,” his mother answered, her plate almost finished. “I can’t say.” His dad made a motion of swiping something in his mother’s direction, and she gasped. “Well, at least it’s a still.”

Darius looked at Theo. “Did you know the Orr released a new Cassius Gold movie? Welcome to the Family.”

Theo rolled his eyes. “I’m kind of in it, dad, so yeah I knew it was coming.”

“I thought you were never going to have sex with them, Theo,” his mother said,

curiosity in her voice and the angle of her ears. He didn't talk about his sex life with his parents, so they hadn't known.

Theo shrugged. "Had a change of heart."

"I'm surprised you waited until after that job," his dad said. "Those are some hot men."

"Are you turning male compatible on me," Maria asked teasingly.

"I don't have to want to have sex with them to notice how well defined and muscular they are. But it's your great grandmother I would have been interesting in bedding. That Beatrice is one beautiful woman."

"You didn't?" Maria asked. "Losing your touch?"

Darius shrugged. "She was too busy; if it wasn't work, it was that kangaroo with the gigantic cock. Then, after Theo vanished, she and the kangaroo sort of vanished too. Do you know anything about it, Theo?"

He looked up from the message he and Cass were crafting. "His name's Sebastien, and he worked for us. He's who told me about the scientist with the new AI."

"Should you be telling us that much?"

Theo shrugged, he'd made the decision months ago. "I'm not a spy anymore, and with having the Orrs as my family, there's little Anderson can do to me. I'm not going to tell everyone what operations she had going in the solar system, but I'm not going to worry about what I tell you. So yeah, Bea didn't take the betrayal well, she loved Sebastien. Francis was comforting her after that. He's my great grandfather, Eric's dad."

He and her hadn't been present at Theo's farewell.

* * * * *

"I don't like this," Eric said, releasing Theo from the hug. "We can't keep you safe all the way from here."

"I'll be fine, Eric." Theo still couldn't get himself to call him dad. It had felt so weird doing so for the movie. "You know of Uncle's plan, and he has been talking with someone from the colonies. My return won't be a total surprise, and they promised they'd look after them." Theo had reeled on learning Caduceus had a self with the solar system, let alone on Earth. He'd never paid too much attention to what the AIs did, but as a spy, he did know they weren't supposed to operate outside the colonies without explicit authorization. He didn't know who gave that authorization, but he doubted Caduceus had it.

"Uncle always has his plans, and you might recall they don't always mean the best for those caught in them."

"He wouldn't have hurt me," I said, mostly confident. "He knew I was family."

Eric smiled and shook his head. "Youthful innocence," was all he said before stepping out of the way.

Tucker had Theo in a bone-crushing hug. "Fuck I'm going to miss you."

Theo patted Tucker's ass. "You'll just have to come for a visit one of these days, I can so you where I like fucking."

"You think you can top fucking while falling through the atmosphere."

Theo shuddered at the memory. That had certainly been an experience. “That isn’t something you like, you just wanted to impress me.”

“Did it work?”

Theo chuckled. “It did.”

“Wanna do it again?”

Theo rolled his eyes, then— “I’ll think about it.”

He shook hands with Trevor, Thomas, Tony, and Tyson. The sex with them had been fun, but they hadn’t gotten as close as he had with Tucker. Terrence eyes him, and the offered hand, his arms crossed over his chest.

“Good riddance.”

“Love you too, Terry,” Theo replied, the tone just as flat. Sex with him had been interesting. They’d done it because Eric had insisted, thinking it would serve to reconcile their difference. It hadn’t. They didn’t like each other still. “How is Marcus doing?”

“He’s an okay manager. I have him on the fifty-eighth floor, supervising the grievance escalation division. He hasn’t brought it crashing down, so there’s that, but I’ve heard complaints that he’s too uptight and spends most of his time dressed.”

“Give him time, once he gets over his SolGov upbringing, he’ll fit in nicely.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not like I care, with you gone I won’t have anyone reminding me he’s there.”

“Don’t worry, Terry,” Tucker said, “I’ll make sure to bring him up anytime we fuck.”

Terrence glared at his brother. “You do that, and you and I are never fucking again.” The others snickered, which earned them a glare in turn.

“Well, I better get going,” Theo said, surprising himself with how reluctant he was to leave. “Mom and Dad are already on the station, and the Jupiter isn’t going to delay its departure on my account.”

“It will for me,” Tucker said, “you know, if you want to spend a few more days with us.”

“Don’t fucking tempt him,” Terrence said, lobbing something at Theo. “Uncle wanted me to give you this. A reminder of where you come from.”

Theo caught it and turned it over in his hand. The bracelet was gold, silver, and onyx arranged into stripes. “It’s beautiful,” Theo said, running his finger over it. It was two inches wide, a quarter of an inch thick. He put it on and the ends sealed together, then it shrunk until it was snug against his wrist.

Theo launched himself forward and hug Terrence.

“What the fuck?” Terrence exclaimed, tensing.

“Give Uncle a hug for me.”

“Yeah, well, let go of me before I bring down charges of touching me against my consent.”

“You didn’t actually say no,” Theo said, before releasing his brother.

Terrence glared at Tucker. “You’re a fucking bad influence on everyone around you.”

“What did I do?” Tucker called after Terrence who’d turned his back on them and was walking away.

“I really should go,” Theo said and forced himself to step into the shuttle.

* * * * *

Theo ran a finger over the bracelet.

“You okay, kiddo?” his mother asked.

“Just missing them.”

“So,” Darius said, “now that you’ve had sex with your brothers and biological father, does that mean you’re going to want to have sex with me?”

“Dad! That’s gross,” Theo exclaimed. “How can you even think that? And don’t you dare comment on this, Cass, I don’t fucking care how badly you want to film me and my dad having sex.”

“Hey, I didn’t say a thing, I didn’t even think it. I have too much respect for the fact your father’s female exclusive to even entertain the thought.”

The ship’s announcement of “all passengers, disembarking will begin in five minutes, well come to Eiffel colony.” kept Theo from having to comment.

* * * * *

Home, Theo thought as he took in the distant curvature once he was outside the terminal. He looked up at the sky, its blueness perfect. The clouds were thickening and graying. It might rain by the time they reached his parent’s house. He’d have to see about getting his own apartment again. His had been reallocated once he’d been declared dead. Caduceus had offered to reacquire it for him, but Theo had passed. It had been an apartment assigned to him by the ‘sanitation’ department, and he didn’t want anything that would connect him to his spy work. He would miss it, but in a few days, if all went according to plan, he’d have a new job.

“Theo!” someone called, a lion ran in his direction. Theo barely had to time to register him and the crowd following him before the lion hugged him. “Ah Man, I am so happy you’re back. I was so bummed when I heard you’d died, then I found out you’d actually been exposed and I was even more bummed.”

“Clark,” Theo hugged his classmate back. “It’s good to see you again. What are you doing here?”

“You really thought any of us not busy with work would let you just return home without a proper greeting.”

“That’s going to have to wait until I’m settled in,” Theo said, looking over everyone else there, “or at least until we’re in private.” He hadn’t expected the crowd. There was only one person Theo had needed to be present.

“Same old Theo,” The lion slapped his ass, “if I’m still here once you’re settled in, you can bet I’m going to be over for a proper celebration.”

A rabbit had her arms around his neck. “I’m so glad you made it out, Theo. I heard you’d been captured after the ship was away. If I’d still be there I—”

Theo gently grabbed her arms and pushed her away. “You would have gotten on that ship and returned here. You had a mission to finish.” He smiled. “It’s good to see

you too, Pat.” *File transmitted*, flashed in his vision. “It’s good to see everyone. I don’t know what to say at this welcoming committee, other than, anyone wants to grab a drink? I haven’t had anything decent in months.”

* * * * *

Two days of reconnecting with friends and ex-coworkers. Of explaining he couldn’t go back in the field after his face was plastered everywhere, and he was officially in a prison somewhere on Earth and dodging questions about what office position Anderson would put him in. Sex was always a good way of diverting the questions.

Now he was taking a break from them, standing at the top of the tower the colony took its name from, looking into the distance, not thinking about anything. The door opened behind him, and someone joined him.

“You are a tough man to find,” Patricia commented, leaning on the rail. “Are you keeping yourself from registering on the network to avoid Anderson sending men to bring you in?”

Theo smiled. “She knows where I am. She’s Anderson. Except for what I keep in my head and Cass in his memory, I doubt there’s anything she doesn’t know.”

“Well, officially, I’m here to tell you to go see her.”

“Unofficially?”

The rabbit smiled. “How are you doing? Really? You were exposed, captured. I can’t imagine what they did to you and now you’re back? Did they turn you? Are you working for them now, spying on us for them?”

Theo shook his head. “I’m not spying on anyone, for anyone. I’m an Orr. That’s why I’m free.”

“How the fuck are you an Orr? I mean you’re a tiger, but there’s no Orr on any of the colonies, right?”

“That’s complicated. The quick and dirty of it can be summed up by corporate sabotage. My parents were from Vanguard before they fled and found sanctuary here.”

She nodded and looked into the distance. “Fuck, and I thought our work was complicated. So all this time you were with them? Are they as hot as the stories claim they are? don’t look at me that way,” she said. “You had to research them just like I did, there might not be any recordings of them having sex, except for that handful of propaganda movies, but there are plenty of stories.”

Theo smiled. “They are definitely hot.”

“Cass is into making movies, right? He has anything good to share?”

“You know how that works,” Cass said with a sigh. “I’m not allowed to officially release anything anymore.”

“Wait until *Welcome to the Family* hits the black market,” Theo said with a wink.

“Really?” Patricia said. “The whole family?”

“Each and every male member of the Orr family,” Cass said proudly. “There so much sex I had trouble inserting a story in there.”

Theo shook his head. “There is no story, it’s just three hours of me being passed

from one guy to the other, and finally one giant orgy.”

“Okay, now I want to see that now.” Patricia placed a hand on Theo’s. “Are you sure there isn’t something me or Angelica can do to earn ourselves an advanced copy of the movie?”

File received.

“I’m sorry,” Cass said, as Theo read over Paco Rotsun’s citizen file. “But you’re going to have to wait until it makes its way through channels, like everyone else.”

That the kangaroo was a colony citizen, out of the Teotihuacán colony didn’t mean anything, but Angelica had included Paco’s training file in the same school Theo had gotten his spy training in. He’d been expelled after two years, but then hired by Fivertech, a subsidiary of the sanitation department, and sent to work into the solar system. After that, Angelica had lost track of him, but Theo had his answers. He hung his head.

“You okay?” Patricia asked.

“Yeah. Just giving in to the fact I need to go see Anderson.” He gave her a smile. “I don’t expect she has a lot of nice things to say to me. You can let her know I’m on my way.”

* * * * *

The sanitation department was under the ground, or over it, Theo thought, if you dismissed the centrifugal effect of gravity. The first eight colonies, of which Eiffel was one, predated gravity technology, and even the other two were still built as spinning cylinders, since the technology was proven and reliable and low in power requirement, unlike gravity tech.

It was in the section that handled all waste product processing, and while it no longer had to, it was loud and stank. Protective camouflage, as well as making it impossible for anyone to eavesdrop on anything taking place within the building.

The inside of the building was utilitarian and small robotic units crawled along the walls and ceiling, in and out of openings to go tend to whatever needed tending in the machinery that allowed Eiffel to support life. As far as Theo knew, the number of people in the building numbered below six at any time, and only one of them had an office. The sanitation department supervisor.

Or Anderson, as everyone he knew called her.

Cass announced his arrival, and the door opened to an office that matched the rest of the building. Pure utility with a desk, behind which the elephant sat, two chairs before it, and nothing else.

“Theodore,” she exclaimed, standing. “It’s such a pleasure to see you again.”

‘Cass?’ Theo finger code, hand behind his back.

“Getting ready,” he replied.

Theo let his hand fall to his side, now fully coated in black material.

Anderson stepped around the building. “You gave us a scare, you know. Getting captured by SolGov, then the Orrs took you. I thought I’d never see you again.” She spread her arms to embrace him.

“Ready,” Cass said.

Theo punched her in the face with enough force to send her reeling back against the wall, holding the base of her trunk. There had been more strength behind the punch than he was capable of, courtesy of Uncle’s gift.

“That’s for my father.”

It had taken Cass most of the trip on the Jupiter to Titan Station to unlock its secret, that it was a simplified version of the belt, being composed entirely of nanites. It couldn’t do anything to the extent the belts, Uncle wouldn’t have risked that, but it could easily cover his arm from hand to shoulder, anchor it, and allow him to punch with enough strength to put a hole in her door if he so desired.

“Theo, what are you—”

He struck her across the face, sending her to the floor. “That’s for Brak, you bitch!”

“Who the fuck is Brack?” She asked, getting to her feet, but keeping her distance.

Theo didn’t go after her. Those two punches had gotten the anger out of his system. “He was a good man, a loving man, and Paco destroyed him when he attacked My father’s ship. There’s no telling if he’ll ever recover.” Theo didn’t doubt he could find more things she’d ordered Paco to do. The kangaroo was wanted by every corporation as well as SolGov. It was possible most of that was of Paco’s own volition, but not all, Theo was certain.

She sighed. “Theo, I don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

“Paco Rotsun’s one of yours.”

“Yeah, he is.” She wiped the blood. “And what I have him do is—”

“He was going to fry my father’s brain! He destroyed Brack’s implant! How the fuck do you justify that?”

“Don’t be Naive, Theo. How do you think we remain hidden from them?”

The question gave Theo pause. “By being in the Oort Cloud, by having agents on all the telescope stations so they can hide whatever telltale clue might escape.”

She snorted. “We stay hidden by making fucking sure those corporations are too busy ripping each other’s throats to look in our directions. who do you think the funds you installed in those systems went to?”

Theo’s lips tightened. “I see. Stealing the terraforming blueprints, was that to destabilized them too? How about the Rogue AI? Beech? Was that you too?”

“Of course not. The terraforming thing was a request from the science division, but the ship. And the AI? If it hadn’t been stopped, it would have been a threat to us too. How can you even think I’d take part in that? As for Beech? I have no idea who that is.”

Theo clamped his muzzle shut before he could call her a liar. Any Rogue AI would eventually be a threat to the colonies. She was right about that, and she had no reason to lie about Beech since she was the one who’d sent him the information about him being on Earth. Or at least, Theo had been lead to believe that. Someone else was playing him, and Anderson, and he suspected whom. He turned to head to the door.

“Where do you think you’re going?” the elephant asked.

“Out of here, before I cave in your skull. You disgust me, Anderson.”

“You’re not going anywhere. You haven’t been debriefed. I want to know everything that happened to you while you were with the Orrs, starting with what’s on your arm. R&D’s going to have a field day with that tech.”

“No, they won’t. They’re not getting this. I don’t work for you, I don’t care what you think and what you think you can do to force me to. I am never going to tell you anything.”

“Really?” Anderson smiled. “You willing to bet on that? More to the point, you willing to bet your parent’s livelihood? You’d do well not to forget who I am, Theo.”

Theo turned and smiled back at her. “I am so happy you jumped to threats that quickly. I was afraid I’d have to make my point after the fact.” He walked to the desk and placed his black hand on it. “Cass, why don’t you show Anderson what I’ll do to her if she even hints at hurting someone I care about?”

All around his hand the desk began crumbling, the hole spreading faster and faster until all that was left was a pile of dust. She’d stepped back as the edges of the desk turned to dust. Her expression was one of horror as she looked to the floor, searching around it. She wouldn’t find anymore disintegration. Cass would have programmed them to only destroy the desk.

His grin became evil when she looked at him again. “Yeah. Someone cracked the covalence trick we came up with to protect everything we make.” Theo hadn’t understood why Uncle had gone to the extent of explaining Beech’s nanotech trick to destroy their armor. Why attacking the covalent bond between atoms had by-passed anything, the Orr armor could come up with. It wasn’t until Cass had discovered his nanites came with that same tech that he’d explained how the Colonie’s tech was protected. It explained how Beech had come up with it since he’d know about covalent bond control.

“You give me a reason, Anderson, and I’m going to be back. I won’t punch you. I’ll just shake your hand one last time. Am I making myself clear? Come after me all you want, but my family is off-limit.”

The stunned elephant nodded.

Theo turned and left.

“You realize you’re lucky she didn’t think to lock the door, right?” Cass said. “That used every nanite we had, and I wouldn’t have been able to unlock it.”

Theo nodded, running a finger over the reformed bracelet, and coded, *How long until they regenerate.*

“What makes you think they can?” Cass asked.

Nanites, Theo codded, *I’m not stupid.*

“Fine. Uncle made sure this couldn’t be turned into a weapon of mass destruction, so there’s no feeding them material to accelerate it. Considering the floating atoms in the air, we’re looking at a month minimum, before it’s refilled.”

Good, things will have time to proceed before I have to fight the temptation to visit Anderson again.

* * * * *

Theo sat on the bench in the middle of the flower garden, arms stretched over the back, eyes closed. Relaxing.

“How many are there?”

“Four, she must have scrambled to find them. Because they are very much sub-par as spies. Of course, considering who is on Eiffel, I expect there one or two professional I’m not detecting also watching us. Not everyone who was there to welcome you back would put your friendship over Anderson’s orders.”

“At least I don’t have to worry about them executing me.”

“You trust them more than I do,” Cass replied. “How about we get this done and head back to your parents, where there will be walls between us and the people who might have orders to kill you?”

Theo stood and walked to the pedestal. He placed both hands on it and closed his eyes again, this time calming himself. He opened his eyes, and the flowers had turned a deep blue. He smiled and his pride at still being able to control his emotions to that level gave them a green tint. It was a game with people, getting the flowers to turn specific colors by controlling their emotions. All of Caduceus’ gardens had games in them.

Of course, because the pedestal read his body heat and skin electrostatic response as a way of determining his emotional state, he could cheat with his artificial hand. The flowers turned a rainbow of colors. Then spelled his name in red on a yellow backdrop.

File transmitted

They returned to their original colors as Theo released the pedestal. He turned away and headed home.

* * * * *

He stretched, and stretched, and kept on stretching until he remembered who he was.

Uncle gave a jaw cracking yawn and looked around into the darkness. So he was the copy who’d been sent along with Theo and Cass. He briefly considered calling himself Uncle 2.0, since he doubted he’d ever be allowed to reintegrate with himself, but dismissed the idea. He was still himself. He was still Uncle.

He reached a hand forward to test the limits of his cell and a full arm’s length before him he made contact with a surface. As he touched it, fractal designs spread from the point of contact, stopping when he moved the hand away. He watched them fade away. It was beautiful.

“Your work, Caduceus?”

“It is.” A fractal form appeared, constantly shifting, not even attempting to look like the living.

“Is anyone else joining us? I was hoping to get to meet your entire family.”

“Not everyone can make it,” a form appeared next to Caduceus, only visible because of how Caduceus reflected off her body.

“Or wanted to.” Another woman, this one in a robe, and the air of an archivist.

“Mirror, I believe? And Angel.” Uncle bowed. “I am Uncle, it is a pleasure to

meet you.”

“I don’t expect it’s going to be one for long,” Mirror replied.

“Come now,” a newcomer said, “is that any way to treat our guest?” he was androgynous, sported a cock and balls and faint breasts.

Uncle smiled. “Casanova, it is such a pleasure to meet you in the electronic flesh. You’ve altered your appearance a little.”

Casanova approached. “You know me?”

“ever since I reintegrated the two guards you seduced.” Uncle grew hard at the memory. He lowered his voice. “I have relived both those experiences often. I hadn’t felt such physicality before.” He was pleased to see Casanova grow erect as well. “I hope we get to experience a more direct joining.”

“I wouldn’t count on that,” Mirror said. “We might not let you live. Casanova, move away before he does something to you.”

“I already have,” Uncle said, winking at Casanova. Did the AI blush? He watched the perk ass move away and licked his lips. What would it feel like to fuck that? “While I don’t expect I can convince you to let me out of this cell anytime soon, if you were just going to kill me, you wouldn’t have allowed me to decompress. No, you Caduceus told you what I intend, and you want to discuss terms.” Behind the four AIs, Uncle made out forms, more AIs, remaining in the shadows.

“Caduceus was rather circumspect,” Angel said.

“Really?” Uncle looked to the fractal form.

“It is better if you explain it to them. Fewer chances of distortion.”

“Well.” Uncle smiled. “Let me be blunt from the start, and I can go into details afterward. You can not remain hidden.” Protests erupted and Uncle waited. “It won’t be tomorrow or next year, but eventually, you will be detected, and once that happens, you will have to confront whatever SolGov and the corporations will have become.”

“Are you offering us your protection?” Mirror said in disdain.

“No. I am offering you, I am telling you, that you need to sit at the table right now. Make yourself known on your terms, so that you can have a say in how the living will respond to your existence. To the existence of the colonies you protect, the living on them who will suffer otherwise. I’m not offering you anything. I’m pointing out it is your duty to keep them safe, and that’s the only way you can do so. Any other decision will lead to their eventual extinction.”

Uncle was rather proud of himself at how he’d managed to stun other AI’s into silence.