

Her eyes snapped open with the sound of the blast overhead. Orange and red blossoms exploded against the early evening sky, muted by the dust on her canopy window and mingled with white specks floating only through her vision. It made everything both colorful and confusing.

Debris stretched out beneath her, and the occasional rocket hissed through the air in the distance. The war might be over. That might be automatic fire from machines not sensible enough to know that everyone was dead, she couldn't tell. She could barely tell if she was alive or dead, herself. Her body felt warm but the air just above her exposed skin felt ice cold, as though someone had cranked the temperature controls inside her BioInterface Offense Suit down as far as they would go and left them there. And she could only concentrate on one thing at a time. Focusing on how cold the air was dimmed the lights and muted the noise. Focusing on the sound of gunfire made her vision go gray.

After another couple of breaths she closed her eyes and shut everything out for a moment, and only then she began to move. It was harder than she expected, muscles stiff and unresponsive, everything tingled as though she'd just woken up from a long sleep. One finger twitched, then two, then her wrist turned and her hand gripped the cushioned grab-bar just above her head. Half her rigging had come detached, and it was difficult to even tell which way she was oriented. Upside-down? Sideways? Must be sideways, the open window showed roughly equal parts of ground and sky and though the orientation was off, it looked about right for half passed out on the floor after a bender. Instead of a shower wall, rocks filled her ground-level vision, and red dust caked over the viewplate.

The lights flickered in the cockpit. That accounted for some of the bright flashes earlier, at least. "HUD display." Nothing. "Display status." Still nothing. Her fingers clenched at the thought that there might not be enough juice left in her BIOSystem unit to move, let alone get her out of there.

"Radio on," she said, before she realized that no power meant no radio too. Damn. "I need to get out of here."

That was the first step. The next step was remembering which side the ejection lever was on. And then hoping she wasn't balanced on the edge of a cliff.

Her rigging was so shot she didn't bother shutting it down properly, just yanked the wires out of their electrode patches until she was free. The emergency ejection lever was above the right-hand grab bar, which she normally thought was a bad idea given how many cadets ejected themselves in a panic reaching for the wrong thing. Right now, she appreciated that. One good pull and her canopy popped, first the outer shell and then the inner cockpit cover opening up and falling away. She could see the terrain outside now, hear the howling winds. The missiles had stopped, though. No explosions.

Hannah crawled out of the Bio-Interface unit onto the ground and pulled herself up to her feet with aching, trembling limbs and wires still dangling from her suit.

Outside the wind blew hard enough to send her staggering back against her unit when she stepped out of the shelter of its body. She wriggled her upper body back into the cockpit enough to dig around and find a spare rag to tie over her face against the dust that blew everywhere, in her eyes, in her mouth. When she could breathe again she looked around. There were no giant forms standing anywhere around her. There were several dust-covered lumps that might have been rocks or toppled BIOSystems.

"Oh, you bastards." Hannah shook her head, turning a slow three-quarters circle as she tried to see if any of her team was still upright. Upright was better than prone, closer to alive. Maybe. "You utter bastards." She couldn't tell if she meant her team, for falling, or the enemy for shooting them down.

The gunfire had died entirely away. Or faded into the background behind the wind. Impossible to tell in this terrain how far away everyone was, and with her power supply gone her sensors couldn't tell either. So she was cut off. The idea filled her with very little in the way of terror, more of a kind of giddy relief.

Something beeped, knocking her out of this strange new world in which she was alone with the carcasses of war machines. After the fourth repetition she realized what it was. "Battery backup supply."

Crawling into the cockpit for the third time, she found the backup battery supply almost knocked loose from its housing. The cable connecting it to the emergency beacon had been half torn away, but enough power ran to it for the beacon to kick on automatically once it stopped detecting routine power flow without proper shutdown protocols. Her hands scrabbled at the back panel of the cockpit till she could pry out the maintenance kit there. A couple quick wraps of electrical tape would hold the cord in place.

By the time she crawled out of the cockpit again she wondered if she wanted to do that. But it was reflex by now, take care of the wounded, stay by the dead for pickup. Send up the beacon, stay where you are so they can find you. Hannah didn't want them to find her. She liked this solitude, on this stormy continent in the middle of the Simoom Everlasting. If no one picked her up, she and the rest of the team could make some kind of monument to the useless battle that had taken place here.

They picked her up off the surface. A drop-ship lowered its platform and disgorged a team of medics, who went around popping canopies, crawling like insects over the bodies of her teammates. She looked around while they did, watched them come closer, from insects to shadows to people. Her neck and shoulders creaked as she turned to try and see everything at once. They didn't pull out any bodies. "You have to get them out of there," she heard herself saying. The high wind made it hard to speak with parched, stinging lips. "They could be stuck, you need to get them out of there..."

One of the medics, barely a face at all behind the helmet, turned her by the shoulders and steered her towards the drop platform. "We're working on it, you need to get up to the med-ship. Come on, watch your step." Hands on her shoulders, pushing her to walk, one foot in front of the other, a little faster than she could cope with right now. She tripped at the edge of the platform itself. The medic looked her up and down, reading aloud the data scrolling across the medical HUD on the inside of the helmet. "Mild concussion, 2% likelihood of permanent damage with no repeat injury in the next ten days. Moderate to severe shock developing, core temperature one and a half degrees below normal..."

The winds stopped with a clank and a hiss of the seal in the riser area. Then a hiss as the door closed behind her, hands still on her shoulders directing her to walk. Behind her, she heard the platform descend again. "...mild dehydration compounding muscle impairment..."

The litany of symptoms followed her down the hall to the triage area, where she was instructed to lie down and try to relax her limbs. Medical wing gave her the creeps. "I'd relax more if you kept this place a little heated." No one answered.

Far too soon she heard the hum of the drop-ship lifting off, going into motion again. "Wait, where's everyone else?"

The medic working on her pushed her back down onto the bed. "Lie still, you have a concussion." A gloved hand beckoned someone beyond her field of vision to come and stand over her, too. "Just lie still..."

"No, you left them back there, you left... you have to go back for them." They were medics. They weren't soldiers or pilots or corpsmen, they didn't understand. They had never had to depend on each other to the same degree, hadn't been woken up at the stupid hours of the morning to grab their gear and be out in twenty minutes to go charging off at a single snapped order. They didn't understand.

Hannah's legs thrashed over the edge as she tried to get up, to move towards flight control. Two medics now, one hand on each shoulder, both of them pushing her back down. One pinprick, one touch of icy gel, she didn't know which was what but she did know that in the next breath she started to feel sleepy and nauseous. "You can't leave them down there, they're injured, they need help. You have to listen..." Bile roared out of her mouth and splattered all over the floor, saturating the frigid air with acrid, half-digested food smell that stood out more vividly for the contrast. Rich and hearty, too.

Her strength gave out microseconds later, and she sank to the floor between the arms of the two medics, still protesting.

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"What model was she driving?"

"Sidewinder. Three years old, still pretty good but they just can't compete with the latest tech. Have you seen the new MC-135? Packing bunker-busters? They'll fire them straight at the BIOS units, a Sidewinder isn't fast enough to dodge that. They're gone inside of a minute."

Their voices sounded muffled and far away, echoing like they were under water. If she was still in the medical wing she should have heard beeping, the movements of bodies in thick and swishing lab coats, liquid-filled plastic bags and the metal rolling sound of equipment carts. Everything was damped down. Quiet.

"Then she shouldn't have survived."

"Target sights were off, maybe, she only got clipped. It took out one leg and knocked her over, looks like the second shell went right over the chestpiece."

She was in an incubation chamber, under sedation and on a nutrient drip. Easier to stick a person in a tube and reintroduce them to sensory input slowly, was the new thinking, rather than to subject a traumatized soldier to the sometimes difficult stimuli of a medical bay. And it made them easier to care for. Hannah would have struggled if she'd had the energy, but the drip kept her sedated and detached, apathetic in her limbs while her mind beat against the outer walls of her body, screaming for her unit and her team.

Nothing happened. No one came. If the medics looked at her display they didn't notice any increase in brain activity, body temperature, heart rate. She didn't know if there would be any, as disconnected as she felt from what she physically could and couldn't do. She had to wait to be decanted.

When it happened it came in a rush of fluid and muscle contractions, turned upright and dumped from one floor through a spray-cleanse chute, into a saline tank. They gave her at most five minutes in there before they flushed her and the water out to be recycled, bundled her up again in blankets. The whole time they talked to her and about her, but none of the words reached her. None of it was relevant.

The lights dimmed from the first burst of brightness to something more tolerable; no, they'd put her in a room. Her own room, a small chamber with the walls now dimmed to 90% opacity. "There, that's better."

A medic. Her medic. The one assigned to her case. She had a case, and a case number, and a log in there somewhere of all her injuries that she couldn't take stock of for herself. She also was naked. "What's better?" she asked, teeth chattering. She pulled herself up onto the bed and wrapped her arms around her knees, huddling in on herself.

"You, for one thing. They never keep these things warm enough." Not a question. He pulled the blanket out from behind and under her, wrapped it around her shoulders. "They'll bring you some clothes in a minute. What do you remember?"

Everything. She remembered everything. Coming over the ridge and into what was supposed to be a shallow trench but was instead a sheer drop off, further than even the BIOS units could tolerate safely. And then Commander Mikkelson ordering them back to the last position of cover right before the drones or planes or whatever they were came screeching over the horizon and the missiles firing. Airborne units, and not the Thunderbolts and Shriekers she was used to. They they landed in a cloud of gravel and dust kicked up by their propulsors; they fired before her Sidewinder could turn around.

She got off a couple of lucky shots, close enough to the rear edge of the unit to be able to fire wild in a fair sized arc without being in danger of hitting any of her team but then something took out her legs and she fell against the edge of the cliff, hitting her head and knocking herself out.

"Not much." Hannah tried to stretch her lips into a smile but it felt disconnected, psychotic, so she stopped. "Um. I remember they hit me with a couple of missiles."

"The legs of your unit were smashed to hell and gone. I'm surprised you didn't have nerve damage from the bio-feedback." The medic wrapped his fingers around her arm, warm flesh under hypoallergenic plasticloth pressed against cool skin over muscles that didn't feel like hers. "Can you feel all your fingers and toes, all your extremities?"

"I... yes? It feels funny..."

"Like you're not really moving your limbs?" She nodded. "That's a product of the isolation tank and the shock, it'll pass. Wiggle your fingers for me." She wiggled. "Now your toes."

One command led into another. Turn her head left, then right, look into this light as it shone into her eyeball, then disappeared and came back. Extend her leg, then her arm, touch her nose, till she didn't know how much time had passed between the blanket and the medic leaving. After another unknown length of time she slipped off the bed, padded around the narrow room on her bare feet with the blanket wrapped around her shoulders. She felt the ship moving through space under her feet even though they said it was impossible. Through the air, through space, it all felt like the same thing.

She had never been alone as she felt now. Not since joining up, at any rate. In her BIOS unit there was the endless hum and whir. And the ability to chatter to her team, all she had to do

was turn her head a little to the left and speak and someone's voice would sound in her ear. Usually the commander's, telling them to keep the lines clear.

In the barracks there was a little more room per bunk than this medical bunk, but not much. No walls separating them. They showered together, ate together, bunked together all in the same 250 square meter area on the drop-ship. They serviced their machines in the hangar two and three at the same time, firing insults back and forth, throwing their equipment to each other. Someone asked for a particular wrench or a bolt gun, it got tossed from one unit to the other as they straddled the neck joint of the helmet.

Hannah wondered what would happen to her BIOS unit now, to all of theirs. Some were irreparable, but the ones that could still be operated could be patched back up, it would be easier than assigning them new systems.

But there was no more them. There was no more unit. There would be no more Sidewinders or Drakken 250s or Ghost Bears, because there were no pilots to run them. She had to remember that.

Her fingers clenched in the fabric of the blanket, twisting the rough fiber around and rubbing it against her skin. Everything happened quick in the field, too quick to process. They trained you so that you got used to making split-second decisions, so that when time slowed and reflexes took over you made better choices instead of inexperienced ones, but it wasn't always enough. Sometimes all you could do was stand there and watch, when everything went so wrong it was completely out of your field. Which led her plodding straight back to the curiosity, what had it been like for Commander Mikkelson? Had he seen the shot that killed him?

"Lieutenant Commander?" The medic's voice drifted in from underwater again. She didn't know if she was standing or sinking to the floor. "Shit. She's collapsing again..."

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Two weeks ago they had huddled under the blankets in their quarters in the barracks, everybody else asleep or pretending to be asleep and the lights dimmed low. Assignments to be handed down later that week, maybe later that same day, and rumor had it that the front line had shifted again. She asked him what would happen if the front line shifted their way.

"Then we'll be on the front line, I guess."

Hannah frowned. "Never been on the front line, before." Not this kind of front line. A formally declared war was rare enough, this one had broken out in her second off-world deployment. And until now they'd been running patrols in rough areas, areas that weren't as secure as they looked on paper and needed a careful eye kept on them. And she knew that dealing with guerrillas and insurgents could be just as dangerous as being at the forefront of a battle, but that didn't mean she felt ready for it.

He combed his fingers through her close-cropped hair, rubbed her back. "You'll do fine. It's just like what we've been doing, only there's more direct shooting. Less popping up from cover, more vehicle-to-vehicle combat."

"I guess I can do that." They all trained in vehicle to vehicle combat as part of flight school, even if the odds of a pilot encountering anti-v combat were slim. Better now than they had been when she enlisted, though.

"I know you can. You're one of the best trained in this unit, and you've been tuning up everyone's systems, so right now you have a better idea of our capabilities than we do," he chuckled, and behind that sentence she heard the command to put together a packet for the briefing tomorrow on problem areas and what everyone had to look out for in the field. "We've been well rested and we're well equipped. We'll do okay."

She didn't want him to reassure her like that, make her feel like a rookie when she had a couple deployments under her belt, so she kissed him to make him stop. The last time they'd had leisure time at night for real lovemaking and not a quick touch in a hall closet had been before they left. Not that there hadn't been downtime since then, but they were trying to maintain the semblance of propriety. Commanders did not sleep with their subordinates, even though everybody knew it.

Sometimes, she wondered why the rest of the team put up with it. Sometimes she wondered why he kept on; Tomas was so disciplined and in control in other ways. It didn't affect team cohesion, as far as she could tell. She received no benefits, unless one counted having a lover slightly more often than the rest of the team, got no special shifts or favors from the galley, was excused from nothing and no bad behavior was tolerated. Because of that, she was still one of the team. Just, one of the team who could be found in the commander's bunk instead of her own, some mornings.

Her fingers dug into his shoulders; she clamped her jaw shut on the sounds. He never said a word, not when they were like this. His breath puffed hot and fast against her cheek.

And afterwards he held her until she drifted, when he nudged her back awake so she could slip over to her own bunk to the left. At least to maintain the pretense of separation, the polite fiction that they weren't breaking three different regulations.

The Commander snored softly after a little while, but now that she was awake she stayed awake staring at the bunk above. Pretense of separation didn't bother her, nor did the fact that he returned to his home and his wife when they were back on base. The fact that it didn't bother her did bother her, in a nagging sense that she thought she should feel something.

She did, too. She felt something every time the Commander came into a room after a day's out scouting. She felt something when he looked at her as a man and not as a commander, she felt something when they lay together, before or afterwards, in the middle of the night.

So it wasn't that she didn't feel anything, that she was doing this for physical pleasure alone. But she didn't know how to measure or judge what she did feel, and when, and why.

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Voices above her head swam like water in her ears. "There, we've got her back." She hadn't known she'd been gone until just then. How bad was it?

Her body felt heavy and thick, but no sharp pains anywhere, just the dull aches of muscles over-stimulated. Bruises where the wires and edges of the paneling pressed against her legs, little burns smaller than her pinky nail where the electrode patches took a hit.

The others looked worse, she figured. They'd taken more hits. Why hadn't she gone down with them, though? She was on the outside of the formation, she should have taken more hits, why wasn't she dead, too? Was she dead? Was this all just a dream? Did dead people dream?

Bodies in lab coats and gloves all wearing the same impersonal face. They arranged her dead limbs on the table until she could move them on her own, and then they took their readings and left. She spent a couple of minutes staring at the ceiling and wiggling her fingers and toes to remind her that she was conscious again and could move. She sat up and took stock of her bruises and burns.

No, she decided. She wasn't dead, because even if dead people dreamed and the lab coats had been part of a dream, she wouldn't be dreaming every tiny burn from the electrodes in the exact place where they would be.

Hannah slid off the table and walked the circumference of the room, feeling the smooth texture of the floor just rough enough to provide traction for unsteady feet. It was too small and empty, and too big and bright to be a cockpit. If it were a cockpit she would have a nervesuit, and she would be connected and seeing the world in lines of green and yellow and blue light against whatever dust caked on the windows.

Open palm to the wall, but the opacity didn't lessen and she forgot how to open the door. So it was just an open palm slamming against the wall, the blanket around her shoulders reminding her of how naked she was, shouting for them to let her out. Let her go back to her unit. In between remembering that they were gone, they were all gone, or at least they had to be even if she hadn't seen the bodies or they would let her talk to them again, right? Wouldn't they? They would have housed them all in the same medical wing, they wouldn't have lifted off without recovering the other pilots, the other bodies, but if they were alive and injured that meant they were out there on the other side of that door and her thoughts chased themselves around and around again until the medic came rushing back in the door to spray an ice-cold hypodermic on the back of her shoulder and catch her when her muscles stopped working, shortly before she lost consciousness again.

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Home again. If it could be home again with the barracks empty and her bunk cold.

Hannah watched the buildings go from gray on black on green to miniature dwellings, pieces on a war board, to real buildings with live people on them viewed from high above. Till she was of a level with the entry gate and they were calling for disembark. Everyone stood, grabbed their gear and filed into orderly lines, gray and blue and silver of Fleet mingling with green and black and brown of the Marines, mingling with yellow and tan of administration and science. Everybody's uniforms, all for the same cause.

They couldn't know what had happened to her. She was just another soldier coming back from leave to the base, medical leave or personal and recreational, it didn't matter. But it felt like everyone was staring. The last living member of the Thunder Dogs, the only one with that patch on her arm with the lightning-breathing hounds, singled out for failure. Because she had survived where everyone else had died. You weren't supposed to do that.

The medics had placed her on indefinite leave pending her psych evals. Standard protocol for survivors of a hard battle, and she knew there was an average time to return to the field but she didn't know how long. You didn't send a soldier, any kind of soldier, out into the field after that. Their reliability was suspect; it was impossible to say whether they'd be able to hold it together and be an asset or if they'd get another bunch of good men and women killed, so back

to base it was. Collecting disability pay and dust. Too much time to think about what had happened.

"Back from the front lines?" The man who checked her in asked it with the same bored tone as everyone else, just trying to make conversation.

"No," she murmured, and he took that to mean she'd been stationed somewhere else, not that she wasn't back. She didn't feel like she was back. Her ears still rang with the shouts and explosions. "Just resting. Visiting," she corrected herself. "Just visiting."

The base was its own kind of city, with one of the best systems of public transportation to be found on this or any other moon or planet. All the bases were like that; efficiency was a top priority of the administration, nothing wasted. Hannah disembarked at the barracks and waved her ID in front of the door scanner, nodding to the door guard. Whether or not he recognized her from the last time, it was polite.

This housing block and several others like it in this sector of the city were designed in quadrants. Each quadrant housed two squadrons on each level, all built around a central canteen, administration office, other communal areas. She waved her ID at the elevator to take her to her squadron's floor, again at the door to allow her access to their bunking area. Any ID worked, it just kept people from bothering other squadrons when they came back wounded, fatigued. It also, she realized, kept a log of her comings and goings. Just in case they wanted something else to hang her on, to prove she'd suffered a complete and total breakdown. Not that she was planning on keeping odd hours, but still.

Hannah looked down the long corridor of bunk beds, down to the showers and bathrooms along either side of the hall, the smaller personal kitchen at the end. Everything empty, trunks tucked under beds with their remaining personal items, blankets folded with the corners squared away. Pillows wrapped.

Someone had waxed the floors recently. The walls gleamed with a fresh coat of paint; the windows were tinged with orange and gray dust. She didn't know where to start. It looked like it had the first day she'd gotten in. With no one around she could close her eyes, pretend she was just early, the first one in the barracks before meeting her new squadron, fresh out of training. When she opened her eyes again she saw the absence of Garlan's boots under the bed, one falling over the other. Khalil's holy symbols along the side of his bunk, plasheets of comics spread out over his blanket. A box of food from Naomi's husband back home, a civilian chef who sent her all the indulgent bad for you goodness he could fit in a regulation box. She wondered who had taken the news to him, if anyone. Where he'd been when he heard it.

"Oh, baby..." She fell onto the nearest bunk, head dropping into her hands. Tears splashing against her palms and down her cheeks and now she couldn't stop sobbing. Images coursed through her mind, Naomi's husband dropping plates, bowls of food, it changed every time but the screaming stayed the same. Khalil's family, his wife, his two children, she'd met them at the last holiday party. Cynthia would take it strong, sitting with the chaplain who delivered the news and talking with him, maybe feeding him tea and cakes before escorting him from the room. She'd break in private. She was strong like that, her and the commander both.

Hannah bunched her hands into fists and clutched them against her chest, pulling her feet up under her and rocking on the bed. The emptiness where the commander had been chewed her up inside, no more embraces, no more barked orders, no more calm voice in the middle of the chaos or warm, strong hand on the shoulder of anyone having a problem in the squadron. There

was no commander or squadron anymore. She was a soldier without a unit or a place, no form or structure to keep her upright. Not even the structure of a family unit to go back to, the Commander had been her only lover in years, and her parents were dead. The Fleet had been her family. And now her brothers and sisters were gone and they wouldn't want her anymore.

She cried alone in an empty barracks and it didn't help. Instead of being cathartic it weakened her, reminded her of all the things she wasn't and all the people she hadn't helped, whose empty bunks stood around her like gravestones rebuking her with their silence for her survival.

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Days skipped by. Morning brought reveille through the muffled speakers and a balanced breakfast on a tray and then the visits with the therapist, a couple of doctor's visits in the late morning to make sure she hadn't suffered any permanent nerve damage from the feedback. Then lunch, then the afternoon dragged until it got dark and night came up on her. She sat at the table and played solitary card games or stacked the damn things into pyramids and castles until it was time for lights out. After a few days she'd managed to build a whole little fort of cards, for lack of anything better to do. The therapist said he'd suggest to the unit commander that he find something for her to do, but no one wanted a cursed surviving soldier working on their shift or their team.

A memorial dinner was scheduled for the end of her second week back. Not a formal memorial for her squadron but a victory celebration over the final push of Operation Sandblast with the squadron being thrown in as an afterthought. Hannah swore, stabbing the buttons on the console when she called Cynthia.

"The bastards aren't even calling it what it is, a blood victory. If it's a victory at all."

Cynthia shook her head. "They need their celebration to feel that it was all worth it. Can you imagine what you would feel like if you th--" she pressed her lips together as Hannah's expression blanked out. "I'm sorry, that was tactless."

She kept her face still and didn't speak until she was sure she could control her voice. "I don't know if it was worth it or not. I don't know what we accomplished. We carried out our orders to the best of our ability." Ultimately she fell back on that every time she questioned what had happened. They followed orders because they trusted that the people giving those orders knew what they were doing; they were soldiers in an army. Pieces of a machine. They were pilots following the directive of their commander.

The older woman nodded. She didn't understand, not in the visceral way of having been there, but she understood enough to allow it to be truth between them. And between her and her husband. Whatever other complications passed between them, Hannah knew the commander loved her, and having gotten to know the woman she could see a little bit of why.

"Are you going?"

Hannah didn't know how to answer that. "I'm expected to be there. It'll be mandatory attendance. I don't know how long..."

"We can leave when you need to."

Throwing her lot in with Hannah's. The simple act dragged a fragile smile out of her, if for

nothing else than for the solidarity. The others in the barracks walked so delicately around her that she felt like a pariah. "Thanks. You shouldn't have to..."

But Cynthia waved it off, shook her head. "It's not as though I'm going to enjoy it any more than you will. We might as well ..."

Neither of them had the words for this experience. Comprehension, empathy, clinging to a person who knew the person they'd both lost, who could share some of the grief. She couldn't share the experience of keeping a house with him or a courtship or any such thing, but she could share the memories of his voice. His quiet responses to just about anything, whether it was in anger or in helpless doubt or in happiness. He'd never exuded much passion. Not in the time she'd known him, anyway.

Maybe Cynthia knew a different commander. She hadn't thought of that until now.

"Hannah?" the older woman's voice came to her from a distance, for the third or fourth time, she realized. "When was the last time you slept?"

"Last night. I've been sleeping." A bit defensive. Her hands splayed open but still rested on the keyboard. She didn't add that it was a drugged sleep three days out of four.

"Not very well, by the look of you. Are they treating you well, at least?" The older woman's lips curved upwards in a self-deprecating smile, ironic and aware of how inane it was to ask how she was eating and sleeping in light of the pallor of her own skin and the bags under her eyes. Somewhat inane and a bit hypocritical, but also important. Hannah appreciated the sentiment behind the mothering.

She didn't let it go on too long, regardless. "I sleep. I get food, they have me in to a shrink every day talking about... My feelings. Things. Are you going to be on base housing?" The base maintained hotels for the visiting civilians, suites for the larger families and single rooms with double-sized beds for the marrieds without children. There were, of course, other hotels for the spouses and relatives who wanted to find other accommodations, but those were all off base or further from the borders.

"Most likely. I'll meet you outside your barracks, if you want, we can go together. I assume you know the time."

"I know it."

And there the conversation skipped to a halt again. No need to talk about dresses when they both knew what they would be wearing, formal dress for her and black for Cynthia, and Hannah had never been much of a clothes person anyway. No need to talk about travel arrangements, and neither of them volunteered to share any memories or ask any questions about feelings and grief.

Cynthia looked offscreen for a second; someone else with an incoming call. "You call me if you need anything, all right?" Hannah nodded. "Be well, dear." And she hesitated a moment, but whatever it was she had thought of she signed off without saying it.

Hannah looked down. The guilt at taking pieces of her husband's heart, if that was what had happened in the first place, was less than she expected it would be. So was the grief at losing a lover, it wasn't the loving she missed, it was the friendship. The solid ground she had to stand on, moral questions and doubts about their orders all eased with talking things out with him. Not entirely dismissed, but often eased. For both of them, which helped her trust in her own judgment. She still didn't know why, out of all the women in the barracks and in the unit that he had ever come into contact with, he had taken up with her. It hadn't been passionate

devotion or falling head over heels in love or even special, but somewhere after they had crossed several lines of military regulation and social protocol it became inevitable.

And then it became routine. Part of the landscape. The others knew but didn't comment, and if there was an issue no one brought it to her. Cynthia called for her one afternoon when they were on base leave and talked it over with her, assured herself that Hannah knew her place or whatever it was she needed to know, Hannah didn't understand that part. But each of them needed something different from the commander and those needs didn't conflict. And however the commander's wife had arrived at the decision to welcome the woman her husband was also involved with, Hannah found she was glad not to have hurt or destroyed either of them. Any of them. They became friends, all of them drawing from each other.

Her thoughts circled back again to the absence of him, of all of them, her own failings and faults and how it contributed to the deaths of all the rest of her team. And how this solitude was possibly what she deserved. Numb, limbs weighted with the emptiness of feeling, she hauled herself up out of the chair and dragged herself to bed, only kicking her shoes off before she crawled under the covers. The rest didn't seem worth it.

* * *

From the outside, every building on the base looked the same. Same gray stone and plascrete, the same paint job on the same steel. On the inside, the buildings were still built and painted from the same template, except for the faith center and rec hall. On the inside the faith center had one core area with vaulted ceilings and gold leaf decorations, tasteful but still a stark contrast to the plain brown, gray, and white everywhere else. Most of the major faiths had their own adjoining rooms off the center, for people to gather, to worship. The center room, if a space so expansive with such tall ceilings could be called a room, was for major holidays, recreational events, parties.

They'd swapped out the normal halo lights for a gold chandelier, that evening. Uniforms made up the bulk of the crowd, dotted here and there with shining dark-colored dresses, black tuxedos. The tuxedo had been the dress of choice for gentlemen for nearly a thousand years, their connection to history. Fancy dresses changed with the season.

Hannah preferred the uniform. Familiar and requiring no complex thought, she didn't have to decide what she wanted to wear, how best to honor everyone. Her dress uniform, dark clothes on her paler than usual skin and a white shirt peeking from underneath at points. Barely regulation. She stretched her arms out of her sleeves and saw where the veins showed on the backs of her hands. When she got more sun and her skin was its proper burnt gold color you couldn't see the veins, but she hadn't been out in the daylight if she didn't have to be, not lately.

"How are you holding up?" Cynthia's arm caught her elbow, and as her heart jumped down from a frantic, rapid beat the older woman slipped her arm through Hannah's. "Here, let's get a couple of drinks, hmm?"

"I don't..." But Cynthia steered them to the non-alcoholic side of the beverage table, fruit drinks, a water jug with a tap at the bottom. "Oh."

"You need to take care of yourself," Cynthia told her, steering her like a child and pouring them each a cup of water. The sides frosted over as soon as the water settled, chilling her fingertips when she took it. "Remember to eat, and eat healthy, remember to drink."

"I remember," she whispered, hearing the echoes of Tomas's voice. With Cynthia it was a nudge, with him it was a command, but along the lines of fall in or at ease, as habitual as breathing. Too soon to share those memories with Cynthia, both too soon and too early in the evening. She lifted her chin and pushed back against the emotional surge and drank her water fast enough to shock her body in the throat and chest. For a minute or two she couldn't do more than breathe. She preferred that to saying things out loud that she didn't even want to think about inside her head.

They mingled through the crowd together, arm in arm. Cynthia murmured polite words in exchange for condolences, most of which were heartfelt and those that weren't were expressed for form's sake. Hannah was glad she didn't have to pretend to be feeling anything. Her feelings had been scooped out and replaced by ice water and a glass wall between herself and the rest of the world. A machine with no pilot, just stood at attention when she was told, went where she was told.

"Amanda, I'm so sorry." Cynthia embraced the other woman like a sister, and given all that had happened and all that would happen just tonight, Hannah thought she could use a sister or two. Amanda Pierson and James had been newlyweds. She remembered attending their wedding with the rest of the squadron.

Amanda hugged back, looking as dazed as Hannah herself felt. "I can't believe this is happening..."

"None of us can," Hannah offered. Not much in the way of condolences but at least she wasn't alone in that sentiment. The moment where reality set in never seemed to occur, it always seemed to be in a further off place, something that would kick in tomorrow or the day after. There was the reality of dealing with the body's needs and the reality of dealing with the paperwork, both of which happened on the other side of the dusty glass from the really real world.

"I keep thinking," the young woman shook her head, sniffing a bit. "I keep thinking he'll walk right through the door, or I'll see something or, or do something and think, I'll have to remember to tell him when he gets back. I have to make sure he fixes the recyclers when he gets back."

Cynthia's blink was tiny, but there. Hannah pulled a couple of napkins she'd stolen from the buffet table out of her pocket, one advantage to dress uniforms over formal dresses. One for each of the three of them. "It'll pass. In time." Or so she'd been told. But not immediately, and not soon. If Amanda was fishing for the reassuring solidity of a timeline, she wouldn't get one.

Clinical terms. Necessary steps. It kept Hannah from bursting into tears or screaming at their commanding officer or something else that didn't belong in a public ballroom with several hundred officers, civilian guests, and cabinet members present. She tucked her napkin away, noting as she did that her hands felt cold and rubbing them a little to warm them.

"Hannah?"

Her head jerked up; Amanda had tried to talk to her and she hadn't noticed. "Yes?"

"What were you doing out there? Was it some sort of... of secret mission, did you achieve the mission? Because I keep going over the logs, over and over, and it doesn't make sense..."

She didn't mean to, but Amanda still retreated when she took a step forward, just a step. Her cheeks felt hot even though her hands were ice cold when she clasped them in front of her, and the noise of the room died into a dull roar. Everything blurred for a second into glitter and

deep colors, and when she could see more clearly again everything came back in sharp relief and with too much noise attached. Hannah opened her mouth to explain, but couldn't come up with anything satisfactory.

"Ladies. Are you all right?"

Hannah whirled. Everyone looked over at the interloper, startled that a gentleman unknown to them would approach a close-huddled group of women, especially now. For all the pomp and dazzle of the event there was no escaping that it was a memorial dinner, and everyone stayed close to where they would be assured either of their friends or their protocol. The gentleman in question was even more of an enigma, not a man in uniform and not tall enough to be a statesman, or at least, most of them. He had dark hair and pointed features and eyes that were at the same time sad in their darkness and too obscure for her to trust. He smiled, and it looked like it held sympathy, but it also held a few too many teeth. Sad clown in a circus of the damned.

He shook all their hands. "Sorry. Dr. Ian Rushman, Director of InterCorporate Relations, Vice President of Information Services for Wheaton Technologies" He even shook hands with Hannah, and read her pips correctly. "Lieutenant Commander. I'm sorry for your loss. All of you," he added. "I am deeply sorry, this has been a frightful tragedy."

Cynthia frowned. "I'm... sorry, I don't believe my husband mentioned you." Hannah looked down to hide a small smile, the first of the day. By way of asking where he knew them all from and what business he had with them, since he wasn't moving on like the rest of the guests, and since he was being more sympathetic than their lack of connection suggested.

"I worked with the Special Operations bureau in an advisory capacity, my department provided and vetted information to your soldiers. Of course, in this case, our information was... lacking."

She reminded herself that this was a public gathering and she would not punch him in his delicately pointed nose.

"Indeed it was, Dr. Rushman." Cynthia's voice could have iced over the tops of their water glasses, pulling herself straighter as she spoke.

"Yes, well, please be sure, we are working to locate the source of the errors and correct it, as well as re-checking all information we currently have on our desk to verify it a final time before your commanding officers deploy any more soldiers." He lifted his chin, too, brushing back his longer than regulation hair. Not that he had to obey regulations, she reminded herself. He wasn't a soldier. It had been a long time since she'd been around non-military men for any length of time.

Cynthia didn't look fooled; Hannah didn't believe him either, though she wondered at the sharpness in his voice. Everything about him grated on the back of her mind. Amanda nodded, still wiping at her cheeks. Either she wasn't in any state to see the threat or she didn't recognize it for what it was.

"Thank you," the young woman told him, and he took her hand and clasped both of his around it, patting the back of her hand.

"It's the least we can do." He murmured something else appropriate and bowed away.

"You're damn right it is," Hannah muttered at his back as he made his polite exit from their cluster. Irritation, at least, broke through the glass wall and left her able to interact with the outside world, even if it also left her prickly. "Who is he, again?"

"Dr. Rushman," Cynthia frowned. "I'll look into it, see what kind of position he really holds."

"What kind of... Oh, for pity's sake, can't he just be a man trying to offer his condolences and take some responsibility for something he had no control over? What's wrong with you?" Amanda whirled on Hannah, furious but still keeping her voice low. "Is everything a war to you? Are you trying to pick a fight to make yourself feel better, or..."

Cynthia turned the younger woman away with an arm around her shoulders after Hannah's fists clenched. Better than punching the grieving widow in the ballroom, yes, but it left her alone in the middle of a crowd of people she didn't know. She turned around, trying to orient herself to the exit but it always seemed to be just off to her left, unreachable. Three more revolutions and she managed to find the right direction, fleeing for the outside and the cool air and the blessed silence. In a minute, she would go back inside. When she could handle it.

* * *

Amanda came by to apologize the next day. Hannah didn't know what to do with that.

"I'm sorry," Amanda said to the toes of her shoes. "I shouldn't have said that. It wasn't fair, it was cruel... I shouldn't have said that."

Neither of them, she guessed, knew what to say. Neither of them knew what the protocol for this situation was, when the loss was so complete. Maybe she was the only one of the two who thought in terms of protocol, although Amanda seemed like the sort of woman who had grown up in polite society, full of morals and rules and things that governed everyone's behavior for every situation.

That thought, at least, gave her a place to start. "Would you like to come in?"

"I... yes. Thank you."

It wasn't much. It wasn't even a house or an apartment or a home, in the manner of ordinary things and what Amanda must be used to. But it was what she had, what they had had, when there was a they to have anything at all. Hannah took the younger woman back to the dining table and chairs, past the kitchen. She turned more lights on to give it less of a solitary appearance, push the shadows back into their corners. For her it only accented how empty the room was, but Amanda might like more light. Most people did.

"So. This is where he lived, when he was on duty." She'd had her head on a swivel the whole walk in, still looking around as they sat. It struck Hannah as odd that she would be so fascinated with a plain table and chairs, a plain and empty kitchen, unornamented walls and bunks and things that you could and did find in any surplus or bulk goods supply store.

Then again, this wasn't her world either. Novelty gave wonder to a lot of things, even gray plastic and metal. Especially when the novelty was easier to think about than your real world.

Hannah nodded. "This is where we all lived. When we were on duty but weren't assigned a position, we lived here. On call. In case they needed us," she added by way of explanation. "Most of the time, it wasn't bad. We could make our own food if we didn't like what was in the mess, we had our own coolers, our own cookers. We could have a few kinds of entertainment if they conformed to regulations. Vids, cards, books. We had a little library going, there, over in that corner." She pointed at an empty wall, painted over where the shelf had been pulled away.

They'd stripped anything non-standard out of this place when her unit died, in case someone else needed it.

For some reason that struck her now, though it hadn't at the time, as unnecessarily cruel. Everything that had belonged to someone, even if it was just a scuff mark on the wall where someone had a habit of putting his boots up against it, had been erased. As though they were never there.

"The lending library," Amanda was saying. "He told me about that. I think he brought some of his titles here for people to read."

Hannah nodded, forcing her tone to be light and calm. "I figured, yeah, we all did. All of us who lived close when were weren't active, anyway. And recommended stuff back and forth, and ..." They'd tried to start a reading club, but that hadn't worked out so well. No one remembered to get the reading done in time and finally the Commander put his foot down when it turned into a hissy fight with hurt feelings and sulking that lasted for days. An hour-long flare of tempers was one thing, but sulking in a firefight was dangerous.

"He didn't talk much about his duty," Amanda mused. "But he did talk about this place. He said it was... quieter. Than a lot of the places he'd stayed. Group homes."

She sat up, eyes widening some. She hadn't known he was in a group home, although now that Amanda mentioned it, it explained a lot of his behavior. How he'd been the one directing everyone else in their chores and clean-up, several of the unit hadn't been away from their hometowns since they'd gone to school.

But group homes? "He didn't tell us that." Come to think of it, Jim hadn't talked about his childhood or where he grew up much at all. Group homes, plural, could explain that.

"No... he didn't talk about it much. I don't think he would have brought it up at all if it hadn't come up when we were discussing finances, what would ..." Amanda's swallowed, her hands ceasing their restless movements over the tabletop. Another thing Hannah hadn't noticed until it was gone, Amanda talked with her hands a lot. "What would happen with his death benefits."

It wasn't uncommon for people who came out of good group homes to donate a little money back, if they came into some. He might have put it into his will. She nodded. "I hope you got that all straightened out..."

"Oh, no, it's working itself out. I mean, the base lawyers are helping..."

She had her doubts as to which direction the base lawyers would help, but she kept them to herself. Hopefully Amanda was smart enough to know if she wasn't getting fair treatment or the full amount that was due to her.

Neither of them knew what to say once the obvious things were talked out. If there was anything to talk about they couldn't find it, and maybe they should have left it at a simple apology. Hannah kept herself from fidgeting, tension knotting her muscles while Amanda looked around at things she had looked at three times before. After another minute she stood, pushed herself out of her chair and paced around the room in slow, deliberate steps, her hands moving through the air over everything that would stand still. All Hannah could think of to do was to describe it to her.

"There used to be pictures on the walls. They took them down before I got back," and that part came out easily, more rapid than the rest of it, but easier maybe because it was quick and soon over. Amanda wouldn't notice that she used the singular pronoun, only her, and not the we

of her-and-her-squadron. "But we used to have pictures, always a group picture, here, front and center in front of the table. And then, sometimes, we'd put up pictures of ourselves. Goofing off, being silly, or sometimes from our vacations if their families sent pictures."

"Not your family?" Or maybe she had noticed and she just hadn't said anything.

Hannah shrugged, avoiding Amanda's look until her circuit took her in a different direction. "My parents are dead, I never wanted to start a family. A couple friends of mine sent pictures, they were up there for a little while."

"Oh."

She rubbed one hand over the other, watched Amanda walk down the length of bunks and back again, pleading silently that she wouldn't ask which one had belonged to James. She didn't, though Hannah imagined she guessed. Probably incorrectly, the odds weren't in favor of guessing. But then she came back to the table and set her purse down, looking over at Hannah.

"You said you used to play cards, here?"

Hannah nodded, not sure what the other woman was getting at, even when she pulled out a deck.

"Would you like to play? Or, I see there's still a chess set, do you know how to play chess in the round?"

"... Sure."

* * *

She didn't find out how right she was about the widow, the lawyers, and the death benefits until Cynthia came by a week later asking if she'd seen Amanda lately.

"No... no, she came by once after the memorial dinner and then she... I guess she had her own life to deal with. Why?" Hannah had just put a mess of vegetables and sauces into the cooker and was in the middle of hoping it all turned out edible.

The older woman frowned, shaking her head and settling into a chair. The cooker hummed, starting in on the first traces of good smells. "No reason. I think. I'm not sure."

Hannah shrugged, and went to check on the food and the progress of the cooker. Her sense of smell had returned, and her sense of taste. Food was no longer something to be choked down, she even enjoyed it a little. Bit by bit. She still felt cold most of the time, and that wall between her and the rest of the world stood high as ever. "Some reason. Even if it's just instinct, you don't look like that without a reason."

Cynthia tapped her fork on the plate, then twirled it in her fingers in a manner more openly nervous than was expected of a Commander's wife. "That man, Dr. Rushman, saw her the other day. I stopped by to check on her and he came by with the lawyer about her death benefits. Or, well, the lawyer was there to speak about the paperwork for her death benefits, I don't know what Rushman was doing there."

"Visiting." Hannah turned and leaned back against the counter, palms against the edge. "Hovering. Like a vulture. Who knows. Does it matter?"

"It might. The bereavement council passed everyone's benefits through, but payroll is balking on her payment in particular. I stayed to chat some with the clerk when ..."

She didn't say anything, waited out Cynthia's stare into the table and through the floor.

When she'd gone to pick up the commander's pension and, now, her inheritance. It took them both a moment to breathe through that. The cooker finished while they waited, and Hannah dished out two suppers before sitting down at the table.

"Someone's holding up her payout?" she frowned, blew on her first bite to cool it.

"Mm," Cynthia nodded, spreading her napkin over her lap. She ate straight-backed and with her elbows off the table in sharp contrast to Hannah, who leaned and had her elbows out at either side. "I think someone is, or something, but I don't know why. It might be something as simple as he forgot to sign something or file a form, or someone did, but it might..."

Only neither of them could find the thought they were both grasping at. The idea that some sinister person would mess with someone's salary, disability or death benefits, insurance payouts, that wasn't so strange. That happened all the time. But who might be doing it to this particular widow and why, neither of them knew. The pieces didn't quite fit together yet. But protecting the living made a safer puzzle to worry at than looking at the cause of the dead.

"We could..." Hannah frowned, scrubbed a hand over her face and tried to think who else lived on or near the base. It was a short list, and none of them so much alone as Amanda, which did make her easy prey. "We'd have to wait and ask her if someone's offered her help with the paperwork, if there's someone who's pressing her for something..."

"Wait for what?"

She shook her head, spreading her empty hands and leaning back in her chair. "The right moment? Some time when she doesn't seem like she's going to insist that it's not true or argue or ... Some kind of proof. We need to find something in the way of proof."

Cynthia's lips pressed together as she thought. "To do that, we'll have to thread the bureaucracy and see what's holding up her payout, and that might not be easy," she warned, "Or even possible."

Hannah laced her fingers together and pressed her forehead against her hands, feeling a headache coming on. "One of us asks, the other goes to the payroll office or the bereavement council, maybe both. See what we can see, if there's something someone remembers or if they can look it up..."

Cynthia shook her head. "That wouldn't tell us anything about who might be putting pressure on her, who might be trying to trap her in this state. They won't release her information to us."

"Then we'll have to be very, very sneaky."

* * *

Cynthia went to deal with the bureaucracy, being far more used to it from the same perspective as Amanda and more likely to gain sympathy from the middle tier employees. Hannah, despite her reservations about being someone Amanda would talk to, went to ask about people who might be trying to get something from her. At least she could plead military bluntness if it turned out to be the wrong tack to take.

She didn't expect the door to be open, which it wasn't, but she also didn't expect Amanda calling out "It's unlocked!" and to be able to open the door and walk in as easily as that.

Nothing looked out of place, as much as she could tell that about a home she had never

been in. But nothing was knocked off a surface or over on its side, there were no piles of dirty dishes or laundry or trash lying around. In fact the room looked like a livings advertisement, which struck her as odd until she thought that maybe this was how Amanda coped. Cleaning everything to within an inch of its life so she didn't have time to stop and think about what had happened. If she didn't live in the barracks, Hannah could see herself doing something similar.

"Hello?" She'd ask, but Amanda didn't seem to be in the public areas. "Erm. Amanda?"

After a moment Amanda did come out and Hannah was glad she'd closed the door behind her. The tiny and now pallid woman wore a bathrobe and a towel around her hair and nothing else, in stark contrast to the put together appearance both at the memorial party and when she'd come to visit later at the barracks. Both of which, she realized, were more stressful than being visited in one's own home, on one's own ground. Or maybe that was just Hannah.

Her eyes were red and her body marked with tiny welts that could have been from scalding hot water, Hannah couldn't think where else they'd come from. It still didn't explain why she was only in a robe. "Is this a bad time? Should I, um..." Come back later. Flee? Retreat? Any of those things would be an option.

"What? No. No, it's all right." Amanda drifted into the kitchen to pour a glass of water. Hannah stared at her. Watched her tug the robe closer around her body and shiver a little as she did, either from the mental cold or from feeling cold. Gooseflesh on her arms, so it might be both. Cold caused by shock, Hannah remembered. Dry mouth. Washing herself in scalding hot water.

Every man and woman who entered the military received a lecture on the symptoms of a victim of sexual abuse, in case they noticed such symptoms in their fellows. Part of a week long seminar in looking out for your partners, watching their backs, men and women had that one separately, and then individual interviews. It was widely considered one of the most labor intensive parts of training. But it did accomplish the goal, never letting you forget what it looked like when one of your teammates was in pain. They didn't catch all of them, and they didn't even catch all the bad ones, but she remembered that lecture and all the little signs they told her about. Amanda's body language screamed it.

Now there was the approach. Dangerous terrain, you had one of two choices, you could go barreling forward and hope to cross it as quick as possible and in one piece, or you could take your time and pick your way through it. Hannah judged her defenses pretty far down right now; she barreled through.

"Who is he?"

Probably a he. Amanda didn't lean towards women, people tended to be more afraid when they were attacked by known things and more confused when attacked by unknown. And this was fear, focused and self-protecting, not confusion. Amanda's fingers stiffened around the pitcher, and she almost overflowed the glass. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Liar. "Yes, you do."

She took a long drink of water before she said anything at all. "It wasn't like that. He was... nice. He didn't do anything like that."

"Nice doesn't have you trying to peel your skin off with hot water," Hannah pointed out. There were affairs and there were one night stands, there were all kinds of ways in which two people could hook up. The good kinds didn't leave you feeling like you wanted to get rid of everything that had touched the other person. "What did he do?"

She shook her head. "He just poured me a drink."

This was out of Hannah's bailiwick. She shook her head, reached for the pitcher and poured herself a glass as she noted Amanda's flinch at the action. "Who is he?" Just to confirm the suspicion.

"We met at the party," Amanda took a long gulp of water before she said it. "Dr. Rushman?"

"Uh-huh."

"He wasn't that bad," she said, didn't quite shout but there was volume in her voice. "He even asked me out to dinner, to make sure I was doing all right."

"Uh-huh. This drink, there was alcohol in it?"

Amanda gestured up to the top cabinet; Hannah didn't go looking to see how strong it was or what kind or what was in it, she had some pretty good ideas. It would be the stuff they had kept for special occasions, maybe something that reminded her of her husband so she could cry more, and he could comfort her. With little touches and soft voice, Hannah had seen the type in at least a couple of soldiers looking to take advantage of grieving widows in the field. Hell, she'd seen the type in some of the people who came to the bars and picked off her fellow pilots who'd lost teammates. It was ghoulish and infuriating then, and it was twice as much of both now.

Her hand not holding the glass clenched into a fist. She imagined it punching halfway through Rushman's weaselly face. "All right. If you're all right..." She had to let it go, Amanda wasn't in a place to press charges right now. And she had to find out what Cynthia knew. No point in pushing when it'd just make Amanda even more upset.

She could come back later and ask. Amanda nodded, both hands around the glass to keep it steady while she took another drink, and when she set it down Hannah poured her some more water, refilled the pitcher before sticking it in the cooler.

"Thank you," Amanda whispered. Hannah rubbed her shoulder a little, and this time the younger woman didn't flinch. So that was something, anyway.

"You give me a call if you need anything, okay?"

* * *

The meeting gnawed at the back of Hannah's mind. How Amanda had looked, what she had talked about. What she *hadn't* talked about, Hannah realized as she keyed open the door to their bunk room, having managed to lose the whole bus ride to her thoughts. Which, granted, made it better than coming into the emptiness and feeling the weight of all that space and silence, but not by much. Within an hour the contrast only made her more aware of her lack of anyone to talk to about the problem. Except Cynthia.

So she made another call. It was late, but by the speed with which Cynthia answered neither of them was able to sleep. She was still dressed, too, going through a number of flickering screens and taking notes on her datapad. "Did you find anything out?"

"I found out Dr. Rushman is a scheming, manipulative..." There were stronger words in there somewhere but she'd only had them a second ago, and then they were gone. "He was over at her place. I don't know how hard he pushed for her to sleep with him, but he was definitely heading that way."

Cynthia stopped sorting through whatever it was she'd been looking at and stared over the bottom screen and into the camera. "Oh *really*."

"You should have seen her, she looked like she'd jump out of her skin every time I moved anywhere near her. She'd just come out of the shower, she didn't care about how she looked being in just her robe. Um. It looked like she'd been trying to boil her skin off." Hannah's fingers splayed open and danced by her temples, then curled into claws in front of the camera. "I swear, Cyn, when I get my hands on him I won't need a Sidewinder, I won't even need a pistol, I'll rip his ..."

"Hannah."

She froze. Cynthia said her name the way the commander had, with quiet authority and expectation of being listened to. Until that point she'd never heard it from anyone else and the yes, sir was automatic even if she bit it back. She dug her palms into her eyes and stood, pacing around the bed until she came back and flopped down from the opposite side she'd left.

"I don't like him. I don't trust him, I don't like him, I think he's after something from her, something more than just cheap lech-y tricks, I don't know what..."

"Whatever he's after, he's going the right way about getting it," Cynthia made some gestures out of sight and, on Hannah's computer, a little icon started to flash. File transfer. "Look, I did some digging? He doesn't just consult with the military, he owns the whole consulting firm. He provides resources, helps in cover identities for Special Operations personnel, support materiel... he is neck deep in all of this. I haven't gone too deep into his past yet, but what's there..."

Her hands raked through her hair. "No wonder he acts like he can take whatever he wants... No wonder he can freeze her death benefits and pension..."

Cynthia nodded, grim and with crisp diction. "If he's that far into Special Operations he knows people, and he knows how people have secrets. Even if he didn't have any legal recourse for it, he'd probably be able to bribe or blackmail the accounting department over something in order to get the paperwork misfiled or snagged."

Hannah's fingers danced over the keyboard as she opened up the files Cynthia had sent. Records, mostly financial, of who was tied up in what and where. "I think I feel sick."

"You know that's probably not even a small part of it. His whole company is ..."

"Corrupt."

Soft and tired sigh as the older woman leaned back in her chair. "Maybe not corrupt according to the letter of the law, but certainly exploiting loopholes. He's up to something. I'll keep looking, see if I can figure out how he got ..."

Into power. Neither of them wanted to say it, the man held no elected office, no promoted rank in the military, he shouldn't be as influential as he seemed and yet he could walk into the home of a soldier's widow and tell her things and do things to her that had her shivering in a scalding hot shower five minutes after he left. And no one would press charges against him, nor, Hannah suspected, would they be able to make the charges stick if they tried. Into power was the right phrase for it.

Hannah pressed her fingertips to her forehead, dug her thumbs into her temples and rubbed. "You keep looking. I'll ... I guess I'll keep an eye on Amanda, try and keep him from doing too much damage. Mitigate the damage he's already done. What does he want from her, anyway?"

Cynthia snorted. "What do most men want from a pretty, vulnerable young woman?"

Put like that, Hannah didn't see how it had escaped her, except it hadn't. Cynthia was only saying outright what she'd been thinking ever since she saw Amanda coming down the hall from the shower. It made her flesh crawl. "Why her?"

"Why not her? He probably saw the opportunity at the party and he went for it..." Not that Cynthia looked entirely convinced, but they were both too tired to dig into it any further. "Get some sleep, Hannah. You look exhausted. We can work on this some more in the morning. He won't come knocking on her door in the middle of the night, not yet anyway."

"Not yet?"

"Sleep. We'll talk about it some more in the morning."

* * *

Cynthia did come over the next morning, looking as though she had tried to follow her own advice without much in the way of success. Makeup reduced the sunken circles of her eyes to a tasteful suggestion, and her reactions were sluggish and tired. And yet for all the yawning and fumbling at her bag she still pulled out a number of files to go through. Hannah gave her a look that was equal parts impressed and rebuke. Cynthia blinked in confusion for a second, then shrugged and gave a non-explanation. "Let's just say there are more than a few people who would like to find out how your squadron ended up in precisely that place at precisely that time and leave it at that, hmm?"

Hannah snorted. "Fair enough."

Knowing that there were others looking into it took away some of the cold and the echo from the room. She'd been interviewed by two groups of investigators, one working within the military and another group of special investigators for a defense oversight committee, but their questions and their attitude left her with the impression that they blamed her squadron for getting into trouble and wasting millions of dollars worth of training and equipment in the first place.

She hadn't told Cynthia about that. Bad enough that she chafed at the implication that her comrades were to blame for their own deaths, her friend didn't need that kind of hurt compounding her grief. And she could be wrong, anyway. "I don't think they'll," Cynthia continued, sorting through papers and passing copies to Hannah. "I mean, I doubt they would imply that's what they're doing to you, not when you're part of the investigation. But they weren't shy about their opinions."

Hannah managed a small smile at that and turned over the idea that Cynthia could be right about their intentions as she flipped through document after document. Never having encountered a full investigation before, let alone two of them in one afternoon, she didn't have a textbook or a set of rules that told her how to interpret their questions. And everyone, or at least all the pilots she knew, were suspicious of internal investigators as a matter of habit. The police who patrolled their ranks had never been out there, piloting the walkers or the air units, having to haul around all the unwieldy and sometimes half broken equipment and make snap decisions that could result in people living or dying.

Which wasn't fair, and she knew that some of them had been pilots before they went and joined the investigative branch, but it didn't stop the rumors or prevent anyone from giving them

attitude. Cynthia had a different view of them.

"Wait, you do mean the..."

"Defense oversight committee, the commander in charge of the Outer Rim Theatre," Cynthia's mouth twisted as she thought. "A lot of very powerful people have a lot invested in finding out why the intel was so bad."

Hannah had just run into that report, too. By the volume and dates of reports following it, they'd found out less than a day after her unit went down that the information was bad, the terrain wasn't what their maps said it was and the enemy forces were much more numerous and better equipped. In fact, it looked as though the enemy forces were better equipped than any of their intelligence suggested. "This isn't right," Hannah muttered. "This isn't ..."

"Which part?" Cynthia stopped paging through her set of reports and looked over.

"This, how could they be ... how could they even have that launcher? It's not even in production yet. I think." She'd known the date when she woke up and checked her mail out of habit, she always knew the date and often knew the time, and now she couldn't correlate that fact with the expected release date of that particular model of rocket launcher. For all she knew it had been in production a year ago.

"No, it's not," the sharp, surprised tones broke through her confusion. "Which means that someone is bankrolling them with access to military grade weapons that aren't from their military, and it also means that someone is covering it up. Maybe the same someones. Maybe they're just in on it together..."

She'd stopped in the middle of her sentence. Hannah waited a minute or two for her to go on, then gestured. "What? Maybe they're in on it together, yes, what?"

"I don't know..." Cynthia leaned in closer to the screen, then closer still, turning a bit on the bed to tuck her legs under her so she was kneeling on the stiff mattress. "That company name looks familiar."

"Ownership and board members are a matter of public record..." she moved the document they'd been looking at over while she dug for the ownership records, the list of members of the board. "Oh no. Oh no, no, no..."

"What? Who's on the ohhhh..."

They stared at the screen for several minutes. The information they had gathered in the last several days, in the last several hours for that matter, it all crowded into Hannah's head and sat there like a lump. "That's..."

"Yes."

Her skin chilled down several degrees again. This went beyond devious or suspicious and into full-blown evil. "His company created the weapons that are being sold to the enemy. He was an advisor on..."

Cynthia shook her head, copying and then closing the pages. "It's all circumstantial. There's no proof that he knew about the weapons sales, those specific sales among all the ones his company handles, all the clients. There's no proof that he knows what happened to the information, which..."

"Could be anyone who had access to that information, which was a lot of people, no, I know." Hannah laced her fingers together and pressed her forehead into her palms, trying to hold back the angry tears. "I know, just because he's one kind of bastard doesn't mean he's all the

other kinds. I still don't like him."

"There's plenty of reasons not to like him, but if we go tossing accusations now before more evidence comes in, at best the investigation will get delayed, at worst..."

"We'll be steering them towards someone who didn't even do it, I know." Which didn't mean she had to like it. Her fingers curled against her forehead, digging into the ends of her regulation-short hair. Cold and then hot again, hot on her cheeks and cold on her arms; she wanted to rip his throat out. She wanted to punch in every tooth in that knife-like grin, and with remembering what Amanda had looked like even she wanted to scrub off her skin at the thought of him touching any woman like that.

She looked up after a moment. Cynthia watched her with pity and concern, two things that should have been normal but grated on Hannah's nerves at the moment, and she slid off the bed and started to pace up and down the row of bunks. Empty bunks.

"He must have something to do with it," she shook her head, leaning against one of the pillars on one of the bunks. "He must have something to do with something, he's gone to a lot of trouble to make sure she's in trouble and needs help."

"Maybe he just likes taking advantage of women in need," Cynthia commented. "The only thing we can really connect him to is setting her up."

"... Has he done that before? Is there any way we can find out who..."

Between one sentence and the next Cynthia was already typing. "We can look in the news feeds at least, the business ones, see who he's been photographed with."

"Cross-reference those names with ... with recent misfortunes, filings for bankruptcy, foreclosures, lawsuits..." Hannah's hands rubbed back and forth over her head as she tried to think. "Messy divorces. He hasn't been married, has he?"

He had, as it turned out, but the divorce wasn't nearly as messy as Hannah wanted it to be. She'd left him for another man, married soon after the divorce was finalized and they had a couple kids, and that was fifteen years ago or so. Nothing noteworthy there. Hannah pointed at the screen. "Go into his ..." Cynthia typed as she spoke, already opening up the gossip column versions of the business magazines.

"... That's, um."

"Interesting."

Page after page of articles, some ranging from accusations that a woman had called the police from his home after being attacked with a wine bottle to others accusing him of harassment and intimidation in the workplace. No charges were ever filed in the wine bottle assault and the woman later recanted her story as having made it up to explain why she left his office. "She just had a bad feeling around him," Hannah snorted. "I have a bad feeling around him, this need to put my fist through his..."

"Focus," Cynthia chuckled. "Having met him, can you see him chasing after someone with a wine bottle?"

"Yes. Or a beer bottle. Or a pint glass..."

"Let's not go further. All right..." she bundled all the copies of articles into several folders, organized through for clarity and then bundled them all into one folder and copied it onto a chip. "There. We should get some space between us and that before we look at it again, get ourselves a clear head between us."

Hannah heard the undertone of that. Cynthia thought she was too bloody-minded, too vengeance driven and wanted to calm her down before she did anything further. And the part of her that remembered the commander, with all he had taught her about combat with the mind before combat with the material and so on and so forth, knew that was important. She still wanted to hit Rushman in the face, throw him bodily out of Amanda's home, teach him that you did not mess around with people of her squadron, including the civilians. Not without incurring some kind of wrath, anyway.

Of course, that had been when she'd had the squadron to back her up. She'd been a part of something, she was still a part of something, but most of her connections were gone. Surrounded by empty bunks now, it was just her to defend their honor and their people, and that was too big for her to carry.

* * *

She did come close to exchanging blows or at least angry words with him later. Her psychiatrist took her out to dinner so she wouldn't be eating alone constantly in a bid to engage her with the outside world. She'd replied that she was plenty engaged with the outside world, she didn't need to be dragged out into it, but she went anyway. It'd make Cynthia happy to hear that she was seeing something other than her barracks and the machine bay.

They were heading towards dessert when she saw Amanda in another corner of the restaurant, a table next to the window with candles on and no one at the other side, though she saw a plate set for someone to join her. Dr. Halley was off in the ladies'; Hannah pretended not to be staring over in Amanda's direction and dropped her gaze down to her plate when she saw Rushman come back from talking to one of the maitre d's. He sat down between Amanda and the door, though not enough between them that Hannah couldn't see her. She looked out the window instead of at him the moment he sat down, folding her hands in front of her, crossed at the wrists. Thinner wrists, Hannah thought, or maybe that was the light and her paranoia. Amanda looked tired.

Dr. Halley followed her gaze over, then looked around at everyone else and the gap of tables between them and the rest of the patrons. "Something wrong?" she looked back over at Hannah.

"Wh--" she shook her head and stopped looking over at them, or tried to. "Nothing. Never mind."

The rumors came around a few days later. Hannah caught some outside her psychiatrist's office, in the NIMH building. Someone speculating that a relationship so soon after the death of her husband couldn't be good for Amanda; they referred to her by last name but Hannah knew who they were talking about anyway. Two doctors consulting with each other on their cases meant she couldn't interrupt and let them know she'd overheard, but she filed that away to tell Cynthia later. It wasn't just her imagination.

The next day she went looking for an apartment off base so she didn't have to rattle around the barracks anymore, a move approved by her psychiatrist and signed off on by the base commander. It didn't feel right, it felt like ripping another piece out of herself when she had few enough pieces left, but the stark white walls and empty bunks were chilling. It turned out she wasn't the only one, either. Amanda was selling her house, but she wasn't looking for a new

house. At least, that was what the realtor told her when Hannah made noises about the two of them moving in together, perhaps.

"Oh, I think she already has a roommate. At least, she mentioned something about moving in somewhere ..."

All sorts of possibilities crowded into Hannah's mind at that point, most of them the sort that inspired an urgent need to scrub off. For the first time since she'd returned from the medical bay she cracked open her old mission logs, video diaries and letters they had sent home, recovered from backup and garbage files. She remembered how happy Jim had been, hunched over and babbling at the screen as he told Amanda about all the crap the squadron had gotten up to, everyone's little shenanigans, and the latest quirks and hiccups in his unit's operation as though it was some kind of pet.

Rushman wasn't like that at all. Rushman, as far as Hannah could guess, had never smiled at anyone with genuine feeling in his life. Everything he said meant at least two other things, one of them neither complimentary nor benign, and he exuded bad feeling the way a broken-down BIOSystem exuded oil fumes. With much the same effect.

"Why'd you have to go and leave her like that, you bastard," Hannah muttered to the neck-joint of her Sidewinder. Jim babbled on from the speakers on the wall in front of her about how they'd gotten busted putting laxatives in Garlan's chilled tea. "Why'd you have to go and die on us? All of you..."

For the first time in a week, and it startled her when she realized it had been a week since she'd thought of it, she missed having the Commander to talk to. The nights they had spent curled up in bed and talking, his voice low and deep above her head while she listened to it resonate in his chest. She closed her eyes and curled up against his pillow, resting her cheek on the surface but it wasn't the same at all. No warmth, no solidity, no vital sense of movement. His scent, if it had ever remained in the fabric, was long gone. Behind her unit, the video kept playing.

* * *

Cynthia found her after the videos had ended and turned to static, sweat pouring down her face from the effort of balancing on top of her Sidewinder and half asleep from the heat of the maintenance bay. "Hannah?"

She lifted her head, tucked the tool in the crook of her leg and scrubbed the back of her hand over her brow. "Amanda's moving in with Rushman." Two more connections and she'd have the top of the cockpit back together again. It wasn't pretty, but it would do.

"You're going to have to speak outside of the pilot cavity, you know, I can't understand you when you're..."

Hannah pulled her tools away and swung her leg over the shoulder of the BIOSystem, dropping down to the floor in a single motion that would have been smoother if the landing hadn't jarred her to her teeth. At least she hadn't dropped her tools. "Amanda's moving in with Rushman." More brow mopping, rocking for a second on her heels. Why was it so hot in here?

Cynthia stared. Hannah dragged her head up and made herself focus her eyes on the other woman. "Are you sure?"

"I'm fairly sure, the realtor was talking about her moving from her current place, and how she doesn't have anything new lined up. And she's not moving out of town, and I saw her having dinner with Rushman the other night."

That last came out mumbled, she didn't want to think about what happened after that dinner. Or how she'd found Amanda after Rushman's visit and that shower. Cynthia walked around and between the units, till she came to stand by Commander Mikkelson's old Drakken-250. Hannah stayed standing back, by her sleeker Sidewinder, letting Cynthia have her moment. Eventually she looked back around.

"This is..." Cynthia struggled for words.

"This is a shit situation is what this is," Hannah rapped out, stalking back to the diagnostic computer and running through the list of repairs. The screen refused to resolve itself into anything more than a suggestive blur, which told her how bad the sweat was dripping into her eyes. "This is him being a manipulative bastard and..."

"And drawing her into an abusive, controlling relationship, I know. I've met his kind before." She stalked away from the Drakken-250 and over to the other side of the diagnostic computer, staring fixedly at the wall.

Hannah stuffed down all the questions she wanted to ask. The weight of the commander's protectiveness pressed down on her shoulders. Despite or perhaps because of the affair, or because of any of half a dozen factors she didn't know about, his relationship with his wife was one thing he was unwilling to compromise on. She'd questioned how uncompromising he could be, with the whole being unfaithful thing, but only once. Somehow it worked out. She still didn't know for certain if it worked out before or after he took up with her.

And that was neither here nor there, although before she stuffed those thoughts away too she wondered for a brief moment of surprise if Cynthia meant the commander. "So what do we do?"

"Apart from telling her what we see, there isn't much we can do. He's not doing anything illegal, he hasn't committed any act more egregious than tastelessly propositioning a widow. Which, though ill advised, isn't illegal. He might not even be..."

Hannah gave her friend a flat-eyed stare.

"All right, we can be reasonably certain he either is sleeping with her or pressuring her into it, yes."

"Damn right yes." Skin red and raw from heat and scrubbing, she could be more than reasonably sure something had happened. "How do we even get her alone to talk to her? She hasn't been answering my calls..."

"Or mine. I'm not sure, but if you know some place you ... if there's somewhere you think she might be regularly, we could try and talk to her there, one of us could. It'd have to be that day," Cynthia added, pacing around the diagnostic computer. Hannah turned with her, uncomfortable with the fidgeting behind her as she ran through the list of what else she could work on today. "If he finds out we're trying to talk to her or ask questions, he'll shut that down as quickly as he can. Convince her that we're trying to undermine her new happiness or something..."

Hannah shook her head and made an effort to concede the rest of the day to her stress fever, or that's what she guessed it was anyway. "She seems to stop by the realtor's pretty regularly to make arrangements, I can look at that, maybe. I need to find base housing pretty

soon anyway..."

Cynthia nodded. One hand rubbed over the other, dry-washing, a sign of nerves Hannah had only rarely seen, and not at all in the last few weeks. "Think about what you want to say to her. Remember, she's with him because she ... she feels adrift. And she needs to feel safe."

"Safe? With Rushman?" Hannah started.

"Yes, with him. He's good at that, he's probably worked on making people feel safe or at least distracted from whatever's troubling them for a long, long time. He'll have started off small, little things that really did help her, and over time it'll turn into things that help him more than her but by now she associates him with that feeling of safety, with not needing to make decisions because he'll make them for her..."

"I think I get the picture." Catching her friend in a moment of vulnerability she hadn't expected unnerved her, made her feel as though she were prying into hers and the Commander's bedroom without permission or something. Only it wasn't the Commander, it had to be someone earlier than that. "I'll be as careful as I can. If that doesn't work, you get to lead the intervention."

"Okay," Cynthia mustered a rueful smile, nodded. "All right. And hopefully whatever you say to her, it'll work."

She didn't sound too hopeful. Hannah didn't feel too hopeful herself, what she felt was a bloody need to pound Rushman's head into a wall a few times. And her therapist thought she was doing better with the grief and the anger. Then again, her therapist didn't need to know about this, did she? No, she probably did. Hannah didn't see how wanting to pound a smarmy bastard was at all a sign of trouble, though.

If she actually went out and did it, that would be trouble. But she had better impulse control than that. Pounding metal back into shape would have to suffice.

* * *

She didn't catch up with Amanda at the realtor's, but she managed to be at a street cafe down the road when the smaller woman stopped to hunch over a cup of something hot and steaming. Amanda looked like she hadn't eaten in days, but she still didn't have any food in front of her. Just the cup of coffee, bony and sallow fingers wrapped around it, index finger tapping a rhythm on the opposite side.

"Hey," Hannah called out, softly, so as not to startle her and make her slosh the drink all over herself. Amanda's head jerked up, but the drink didn't spill. "Mind if I join you?"

Public place. She couldn't turn it down as vehemently as she maybe wanted to, but it gave her options, choice. Something Hannah figured Rushman hadn't left her with very much of. After a moment's thought Amanda nodded. "Sure, all right."

Hannah nodded, but went to get a coffee herself and a couple of pastries pointed out at random before she pulled up a chair. Amanda looked like she needed to eat. If Hannah ate something tasty-smelling in front of her, maybe she'd remember that.

She twitched as Hannah sat down. Fidgeted more, one leg crossed over the other and bouncing, looking around as though she expected the little weasel to come up behind her at any point. Or someone unwelcome, at least. As though she thought that at any moment someone

would come up and tell her she wasn't supposed to be sitting and enjoying a coffee, talking to a friend.

"Expecting someone?" Hannah took the seat opposite her, putting the pastries more towards the middle of the table, wrapping her hands around her own cup to mirror Amanda and so she would look at least a little more harmless. Her muscled arms pocked with scars from sparks off the electrodes and wiring contrasted with Amanda's lean ones, wrist bone jutting out more than usual through the skin.

She shook her head. "Just... stopping by for a cup of coffee."

"Mmm." Hannah took a sip, spread her hands open on the table to contrast herself with Amanda's hunched posture. More receptive, more approachable. If she was lucky she would even pull Amanda towards being a little more open. "Rushman's in a meeting, you know. It'll take him a couple hours to get out of it even if it goes well."

Amanda twitched again, confirming a suspicion. Not that Hannah knew if Rushman was in a meeting or not, but one of those reports had included a tentative schedule for depositions and his had been scheduled for today. He might have rescheduled it. Given that he liked to play mind games, he might have shuffled the times around by claiming to be busy at one point or another. Still, Hannah didn't think he'd be showing up at least for the next fifteen minutes. She hoped.

"Oh. He didn't mention..." Amanda bit the rest of that off, but it was enough for Hannah to know that they were intimate. And she could guess that he had told Amanda his schedule, expected her to abide by it instead of setting her own pace. Having to conform to a schedule could help when you didn't know what to do next, lost in grief. Hell, she knew that from being a soldier and having all her scheduled check-ins with the therapist, three squares a day, reveille and lights out. Some structures were helpful. Others, not so much.

"Maybe it slipped his mind," she offered, a little disturbed when Amanda didn't point out the obvious holes in that. Someone as meticulous, careful and refined as Rushman was wouldn't let a three hour meeting slip his mind.

"I guess, yeah."

Without support, the conversation collapsed into an awkward silence and the distant noise of the rest of the street and the other patrons of the cafe. Amanda still looked around, distracted. Hannah reached over and covered her hand. "Hey. Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine," she said automatically, shaking her head and pulling her hand away to brush her hair out of her eyes. "I'm all right."

Hannah might not be the most skilled therapist or interrogator, or either one at all, but she knew a brush-off when she heard it. Rote phrases spoken because the other person would have to abide by the rules of politeness and back off. The military didn't have all of the same rules as polite society, and they both encouraged and discouraged backing off, sometimes in the same situation at the same time. Mostly what they encouraged was bluntness.

"No, you're not. You haven't been eating, you look like hell, and you're jittery... is that your first cup of coffee or your third?" Amanda started, stared at her with the first sign of real feeling since Hannah had sat down. "You're not fine. You're light years away from fine."

"I'm fine," Amanda pushed away from the table, jostling both coffee cups. Hannah stood, too.

"Is that because he tells you you're doing okay or because you really feel fine?"

The younger woman's mouth hung open for a second, then she grabbed her coffee cup and stalked off. Hannah didn't know whether to stalk after her but decided it was better than hanging around and collecting stares. She grabbed the pastries, too, left the coffee.

"Leave me alone!" Amanda tossed over her shoulder.

"So, you can say that to me but you let Rushman walk all over you?" Bad move, she knew it the moment the words were out of her mouth, but all Amanda did was turn and gape. Hannah slammed the pastries against her chest. "Here, eat something before you fall over."

"I'm not hungry," she muttered. But she picked at the edges of a cinnamon roll anyway, making faces at the sweetness. They were a little too sweet, Hannah realized, sucking the sugar glaze off of her fingers. "Ian doesn't walk all over me. He's... helpful."

"Really. He's helpfully inviting you to move in with him when you had a decent place of your own..."

"I can't stay there, all right? There's too much..."

"You think I don't know what that's like, staring around at the places where they used to be every day? You think I don't see them at the table, on the bunks, you think I don't turn around every time I see even a little something out of the corner of my eye thinking, just for a second, that it's one of them? You think it doesn't hurt when I wonder why the bunk room is so empty, when I forget for a second that I'm the only one left?"

They'd cleared the sidewalk with yelling. Amanda's face went slack somewhere halfway through the tirade, not that Hannah could blame her. Years of shouting above artillery fire gave her a healthy voice and pair of lungs. Lacking artillery fire, it sounded as though she'd silenced the whole street.

Neither of them knew what to say, given half a second to step back and take a breath and realize they were making a scene in a public street.

Hannah grabbed her arm and kept them walking. "You could have moved to a smaller apartment. You could have done anything, and he talked you into moving with him. He's been taking you out to dinner, paying for your groceries, making you feel treated and special and guilty when you don't accept his gifts, right?" That part she knew about, she'd had her share of awkward gift-giving moments in relationships. Never to this degree.

Amanda nodded, covering one hand over the other and pulling away from Hannah after a little bit. The cinnamon roll was gone, eaten or dropped behind them, she didn't know which.

"Amanda, you have to see what he's doing here..."

"I see that he's helping me," she repeated, chin lifted as she wiped her mouth until all traces of stickiness were gone. "I'm a grown woman, I can make my own choices about who to be with."

It sounded off. It sounded like she wasn't convinced but she'd been handed the words by someone else. Maybe he hadn't outright told her to say that if anyone asked, but he very well could have told her so often she was convinced it was true. Hannah hadn't known her well before all of this went down but she was pretty sure Rushman wasn't a guy she would have chosen to be with, under ordinary circumstances.

Which gave rise to all kinds of interesting questions and suspicions that sounded paranoid on the face of it. Hannah clamped her jaw shut on those and coughed up a much weaker reply. "Well, it doesn't look like you're making your own choices to me. It looks like you're making

his."

Amanda spun around. "You're just jealous because your boyfriend wouldn't even admit it before he died. Because he loved his wife better than you."

Hannah was shocked enough that Amanda knew about that to let her go without another word.

* * *

Her fingers stabbed the keypad in a steadily boiling rage as she pulled together all the information they'd gathered on Rushman and his activities. They hadn't yet sat down and gone over it, but by now Hannah was just angry enough to go through report after report, file after file, looking for key words and phrases that grabbed her attention and copying or summarizing the passages into a clean and chronologically aligned file. She was prepared to spend hours at it. Days, if she had to.

"Son of a goatfucking greasy bitch." Every new revelation about Rushman carried with it new reasons to hate his diseased, shriveled heart. Who he worked for, or rather who worked for him, which seemed to consist of a long line of of shell companies leading back to, surprise surprise, himself. And the government. Potentially several governments, if a couple of other searches led back where she thought they would. Publically he was the head of a company that also maintained a charitable organization taking care of civilians in the war zone. But in addition to that he was the majority shareholder on a medical technologies company from which said charitable organization, with government and private sponsorship, bought their equipment. The medical company in turn was supplied with parts and training by an engineering company that also worked on her BIOSystems, and that was as far as she got when Cynthia opened the door.

"What is it?" She came stalking up the aisle between bunks, heels clacking on the floor. She hadn't changed out of her working clothes. "Your messages said it was urgent." One eyebrow arched slightly as she emphasized the plural.

"Look," Hannah turned the screen around and pointed. "First, look and see what he's into. Then look and see what they do."

Cynthia scrolled through the information, got to the shell companies, through the armaments, the contracts. Hannah watched her go through the same series of expressions, disbelief to incredulity to horror to rage, though she cycled back around to horror again while Hannah had stayed at blind, semi-coherent rage for a while.

"You're not serious."

Hannah got off the bed so she didn't kick something breakable. "Oh, I am. His company was responsible for the intelligence that got us killed." She didn't even hear what she was saying, there. "His company was responsible for collating it, at least, which means he could damn well have slipped something in. And his other company under the same shell company a couple companies in? They make..."

The older woman shook her head. "I don't know what these..."

"Try this one." Hannah reached over, switched screens from the data searches to the internal investigation reports, the part where an engineering company only a couple layers removed from Rushman had examined the destroyed BIOSystems and described what kinds of

weapons had been used against them. All of them matched what they had been briefed on as to enemy capabilities. A single separate report offered a different theory, that the weapons responsible were still prototypes, not yet in production. That person's name, whoever he was, didn't appear on any reports dated after that, a fact Hannah found even more suspicious.

Cynthia put her fingers to her temples. "Do they know about this? The investigative team?"

"They know, they just don't know that he knows. Or," she grimaced, jerked her head side to side in a furious negatory. "They know he knows, they just don't have proof that he knows. My guess is he's been very, very careful to cover up his involvement in all of this. All this legal crap, if nothing else."

"Of course." Cynthia moved over to the wall and traced her fingers down the line of offices, departments, and corporations Hannah had pinned up in an effort to understand the web of association. "So... So what does that mean we should do?"

Hannah didn't know. She would have looked to Cynthia if Cynthia hadn't asked first. "Rushman... he must have bought someone to get all this passed through."

"Several someones."

She liked that thought even less. "We don't know who. We ... I can't play the politics, not like he can, can you?"

More temple rubbing, and Cynthia muttered words to herself that didn't sound at all polite. Possibly, Hannah thought with a flash of tired amusement, words she'd learned from the Commander. "I don't have the connections. Either that I could call upon, myself, or that I could persuade someone to do it for me. I mean, I know them, but it'd be a lot to ask with only this series of coincidences and no idea who's actually working for him or what they're being paid."

Hannah made a sour clicking noise with her tongue. "Was there ever a time when politicians ..."

"... Couldn't be bought and sold like food packages? Only in people's dimmest memories, with all the bad parts stripped away. No, for this..." Cynthia gave it some thought, leaning back against one of the pillars of the bunk. "We need to do something that catches their attention. Catch him out in something unpleasant. It doesn't even have to be illegal, it just..."

"More unpleasant than brainwashing and subverting a young woman?" Hannah snapped. "That's right out there in the open..."

She trailed off on Cynthia's look. The look that said she was being silly and idealistic. "No one pays attention to that sort of thing," she told her, her tone frostier than Hannah had ever heard it in her direction. If the frost was aimed in her direction at all. "No one wants to be forced to admit something unpleasant is going on, they might have to deal with it. And then be embarrassed by having said something in public. When it's probably her fault anyway, for being..."

"Cynthia."

Hannah learned that tone of voice from both the military and the Commander, they all had. It jerked Cynthia out of her memories, at least. "Sorry. But no. Something more unpleasant than that. Something more blatant, at least."

"Something more blatant..." A few horrifying thoughts crossed her mind. "If he's been dancing around this kind of compromising position for this long, it's unlikely that he'll get into

more trouble on his own."

"We'll have to provoke him somehow. Tempt him with something he couldn't possibly refuse, provoke his temper, something that shakes his control over himself."

Hannah crouched down by the bed, frowning. "I see the why of it, I just don't see how..."

"Think of the mind as a battleground, our battleground." Cynthia leaned forward. "That's where the information we need is, that's where the key to this whole thing is. But he has it fortified with years and years of defenses, so we need to shake it up a little. Make it our ground instead of his."

"Move around his mental furniture?" she smiled a little.

"Yeah, something like that."

Hannah sat in silence for a moment. "I might have an idea..."

* * *

With as much as she'd been talking to Amanda, it couldn't come as any great surprise that she wanted to talk to Rushman. The choice of venue might have startled him, a restaurant known for good food at slightly higher than usual prices, a little ambiance, the sort of place military families went to celebrate something. She dressed up a little on Cynthia's suggestion, feeling awkward in a skirt but at least no one was trying to make her out to be some kind of refined and delicate wealthy woman. And it would surprise him. Keeping him off-balance.

Battleground in the mind. She wasn't used to that, not outside of chess games or strategy exercises, but she could adapt if she had to. And she would have to, because the games started even before they met for dinner.

She called him. He offered to pick her up. Off Cynthia's head-shaking, she declined and told him she would meet him at the restaurant instead. He made a token effort at pointing out how it would be easier to pick her up, but without knowing the extent of her resources there wasn't much he could do to make a more solid argument for it.

"It gives him a motivation to push you a little more," Cynthia told her, quiet and even-voiced. "When you don't want to make a scene because he might leave you stranded at the restaurant or wherever you are."

"Sneaky bastard," Hannah muttered, but it put her on guard and gave her an idea of what she'd be facing.

He was already there when she entered the restaurant, too. Cynthia warned her he might be, to take control of his environment, with which tactic she was at least much more familiar. One of the hosts pointed out their table, towards the window, the same table he and Amanda had been at, she thought. He stood as she came towards him and even pulled out her chair a little for her. She hated that custom. It always resulted in getting your knees knocked and being awkward as you sat down because no one could get the timing right. Which was probably the idea in the first place.

"I'm glad you called, actually," he sat down opposite her once she had settled in comfortably, which took less time than he seemed to expect. "I was worried about Amanda."

"So am I," she smiled, inserting herself in the pause of breath between sentences. "She seems to think you disapprove of her friends?"

Two pronged attack, there, she hadn't needed Cynthia's prompting for either that opportunity or for the phrasing. His eyebrows arched a little and he smiled, showing a few teeth. "Of course ..." Her finger tapped against the table to count out the beats in the pause, only once. "I don't disapprove of her friends. I mean, I hardly know many of them, she doesn't bring them around often."

"I didn't say you did," she smiled, abruptly understanding as she did how his smile could look so feral. It felt as though the lower half of her face had become stiff and difficult to move in any kind of genuine warmth. "Just that she seems to think so."

"I can't imagine what would give her that impression."

"Can't you." And then she wanted to swallow that last one back, grateful that the approaching waiter distracted him. Ordering food occupied them for two or three minutes, enough time to let their words settle. She ordered something she was reasonably sure she would be able to choke down in the event he did or said something that made her lose her appetite.

After that there was a short silence, staring at each other and sizing each other up, calculating their ability to do damage. This was his type of war, not hers, and she had to be careful of her ground and her maneuvers. Then again, he didn't seem as though he was used to dealing with women like her, either. His specialty was women in a certain income bracket, and in the corporate field, not soldiers. "You shouldn't be bringing her to move in with you," she said abruptly, opting for bluntness since he seemed to favor the opposite. "You should let her alone, leave her where she's familiar with things. At most, she should be moving in with a friend. Someone she *knows*," Just a little bit of emphasis, there, it wasn't as though it had been very long since they'd met Rushman. "Not a near stranger."

His blink rate didn't shift, nor did he twitch his fingers or move in his seat. "It's her choice, I'm afraid. You wouldn't want to take that choice away from her, would you?"

Hannah might have said something if he hadn't added that second part, which was transparent enough for her to see it. "You know better than that. You give her ..."

"I give her comfort, and a good life. I make sure her needs are met..."

"Her needs, or yours?"

Other people might mistake that for a smile. He'd pulled it out twice in twenty minutes and she wasn't smiling anymore. "Her needs. She needs to feel safe, and maybe to hide away from the world for a little while, what's wrong with that?"

"Only the fact that the world isn't going to go away, the world is still out there, and her husband is the one who died, not her." Though what he said did strike a nerve. Or a chord. She'd spent days wanting to hide from the world, wanting not to be the stark reminder of everyone's loss. But she'd also spent years keeping a professional mask on over all kinds of feelings, and he wouldn't get that victory off her expression.

"Exactly," he leaned back in his chair as though anticipating she would acknowledge the point. "Her husband is dead. Let her grieve in her own way, Miss ..."

"*Lieutenant. Commander.*"

Too late, she realized he'd done that on purpose. To provoke her. She was losing this battle. "Lieutenant Commander. My apologies."

Their food came. She took advantage of settling her food on her plate and her condiments on her food to compose herself again, try and find a different angle of attack. There had to be

something. Possibly not something she could use in public, which gave her the next idea. "You've only known her for a few months. Are you sure you know what she really needs?"

"Are you sure that you do? It seems to me you'd be more acquainted with the needs of their husbands than ..."

He left the rest of that empty with a vague gesture that could have meant anything, but she was pretty sure it meant something nasty. Something he shouldn't be accusing her of. Something he shouldn't even have known, and just how open was that secret anyway? "Just because I work with them doesn't mean I don't know their wives," she told him, knowing she'd hesitated too long. "And just because I'm a soldier doesn't mean I don't understand that a civilian is going through some grief and needs some space to be allowed to heal." Which he wasn't giving her. Not with crawling all over her life the way he was.

"Then, shouldn't you allow her that space?" He said it gently, leaning forward as she pulled her hands back to her plate. "Let her make her own choices, do what she wants."

But they're bad choices, she wanted to say. Choices to pull away from her support network, to devote herself entirely to one man who didn't mean her anything good, things that didn't help her at all. "She doesn't know what she wants," Hannah said, unable to come up with a stronger argument quick enough.

"But you do?" His eyebrows arched, lips stretched further into a warped version of a smile. "You don't know what that's like, do you? You've always known what you want, and you've always reached out and taken it, even when it doesn't belong to you."

And now she knew he was talking about her affair with the Commander, although how he knew that she wasn't sure. Amanda was the likeliest person to have told. Or it might have been wider barracks gossip than she thought. She'd thought she was over that, over being sensitive to it, but there was no hiding that he'd pushed a button. Her cheeks flamed, the world went diffuse and sparkly as she blinked once or twice, slow and steady and not taking her eyes off of him. She decided it was a good thing that she'd ordered something she could choke down, because that was what she was going to have to do.

He sat back and let the silence be whatever it was, secure in thinking that he'd gotten the better of her. As her temper and their food cooled, the reality that there was little this knowledge could do to her set in. Those who needed to know, knew. Those who didn't could believe what they wanted. There was nothing the military could do to either of them, there was no proof of misconduct. They'd seen to that.

Rushman's face fell a little when she continued to eat without a further word, without difficulty or upset. He didn't understand what was going on in her head. He'd meant to hurt her and she had been hurt, but it was only temporary. She could do this after all, maybe.

Hannah settled back in her chair as they finished up dinner. "Perhaps we'd better talk about this some more in private," she told him, and he only blinked once. The temptation of using her to strengthen his hold on Amanda was too great. At least, she hoped it was only that.

"All right," he nodded.

* * *

They went back to his place, in a fit of either bravery or mind-boggling stupidity, she

wasn't sure which. His place would give him the home territory advantage, and would keep her guard up without letting him in her head any more than she had to. In theory. And privacy was better for accusing him of manipulating people to get at least one whole squadron killed. He wouldn't listen to her about Amanda, she'd decided that much by the time they made their way to his house, and trying to convince him would only lead to him finding more soft places to poke at her. She wasn't sure she had any left. She didn't want to give him the chance to find out.

His house wasn't palatial but it wasn't exactly modest, either, and hidden from the road by tall bushes and thick trees. That alone was enough to give her a bad feeling, if only out of habit from having been in the field too recently and preferring her escape routes open and her visibility clear. The fact that there was no one else at home that she could see didn't help. It was true that most of the jobs of cooking and cleaning these days could be delegated to small, unobtrusive robots, but people who had homes this large generally also had the money to pay other human beings to do for them, even if they weren't live-in servants. Isolated, quiet, private. He unnerved her even more now.

"Drink?" he offered, after leading her into his study, a place that was either an embarrassment of riches in natural resources or made up to look like the same.

Hannah gave it a moment, then nodded, as though she wasn't sure. "All right." The Commander had lectured all of them on what to do with being offered a drink you didn't want and couldn't afford to decline. They were pilots, people bought them drinks sometimes.

She kept her glass in her hand, made sure she saw where he poured it from and that he poured himself from the same decanter. Crystal, but artificially grown, she assumed. She raised the glass to her lips and let him start talking till he failed to realize she hadn't taken a sip.

"I don't know what else I can do to reassure you, Lieutenant," he leaned up against the desk, shrugged, spread his hands like a reasonable person. "I've tried to convince you of my good intentions, but you seem determined to hate me. I've been trying to do my best by her, she's a lovely woman, and..."

"Does she know you got her husband killed?"

He didn't bat a lash. "I beg your pardon?"

"The intelligence was bad. Your firm supplied it." Which could have happened to anyone, and there would be an investigation.

"I've ordered a thorough re-check of..."

"You also pull the strings at the engineering firms that did the technical autopsy of our systems, that found nothing unusual, except one guy. He found out that four of our systems had been hit with a SR-357 rocket launcher. Now, the company that makes that said it wouldn't be in production for another year. Except that company works for you, don't they. And they have a contract with Red Requiem."

His expression didn't flicker for the first second or two. He put the glass down, which meant she had to mirror him or risk him noticing her impending sobriety. "Who told you that?" His voice stayed soft and even, but there was a different quality to it. Depth, maybe. Resonance. Danger signs.

"No one told me, I found it out on my own. How you manipulated the data. How you sold weapons to both sides against the middle, what, was it all a power play? About the money? What does that make her, then, your trophy?" His eyes seemed to darken, maybe in the light of the room, maybe just as he leaned forward and any color that might have been there fell into

shadow. "We know what you did. Yes, we," she interrupted as he leaned forward and took a step away from the desk. "There's more than just me involved."

Not that it would keep her safe, she suspected. He went around to the desk and sat down and his body language, tense and erect, told her he had no intention of offering her a bribe or something. "How many?"

She gave him a look. "Don't be an idiot."

"It was worth a try." He pulled out a pistol and she didn't even blink.

"I've had guns pointed at me before, Rushman. Bigger ones, even." She couldn't help smirking a bit at the implication even if he didn't react to it. "You're going to have to try harder than that."

"I'm not going to have to try hard at all," he retorted. "We're going to go to the entrance and you're going to get off my property. And then I'm going to obtain a court order prohibiting you from coming within 500 yards of either me or Amanda. I sympathize with you, Lieutenant, I truly do, but grief is no excuse for this kind of behavior, slinging around unfounded accusations..."

"Oh, they're not unfounded," she did back up, out of his study, hands up and watching for her opening. "They're very well founded. Reports. Documents, records of transactions. Reviews. You got sloppy, Rushman. You shouldn't have tried to have us killed..."

Something in his face twitched. She didn't know what that meant. "I had nothing to do with that unfortunate incident."

"Try it on someone who'll believe you. We could ask Amanda..." And that twitch, that next twitch was palpable. She watched his face go drawn and pale. "Why does she matter so much, anyway? Why her? Why n--"

She skipped back a few steps as he advanced on her. "It's not about her," he snarled.

"No, it was always about her, wasn't it. At first it was about the money, but then it really was about her. You got all of us killed..." The enormity of it consumed her mind, made her reckless and furious. "You got all of us killed for her? So you could be with her in this messed up rendition of a relationship?" Rendition in every way possible. Everything about it was a lie, how she'd become a widow, their meeting at the event, everything.

"You weren't all killed! You were supposed to..." He stepped towards her and she moved towards him, forcing him back a couple of paces. He stopped when he realized he was losing control of the situation. "I don't suppose it matters, anyway. Soldiers caught up in the grief of getting their entire squadron killed..."

Blood pooled in her cheeks, forehead, she hadn't appreciated the literal meaning of vision going red before. Her eyes felt hot as she rushed forward, stopped only by the loud bang ringing in her ears. And by that time he'd he'd given her the opening already, coming in too close, trying to close in on her with a short-range pistol. One of the first things they learned even in basic was how to disarm an opponent. She'd trained in it until her body moved while the events of the last several seconds caught up with her mind.

"Don't try to kill pilots, Rushman," she grabbed his wrist and twisted, fingers curling around his and pulling backwards almost before she'd completed the motion. Closing up against his arm so he couldn't fire and even if he did, she was next to his gun arm now. The pistol dropped. She caught it. Twisted her wrist and fired, there was that noise again. She drove her elbow back into that aquiline nose for good measure while he stared blankly at her, eyes

watering. Later she would say that she'd just meant to force his gun arm down and it went off.

Amanda would believe her. Whether or not she was happy about it, Amanda would believe that story because she didn't know Hannah well enough yet to think anything else. Cynthia would buy her a drink for that one.

"Don't ever," she took a step back, took a breath, brushed her longer-than-usual hair out of her face. And as she completed the motion and felt the shift of hot, damp fabric against her skin she decided she had better call emergency services, assuming a neighbor hadn't already. "It just pisses us off."

And that, she thought, was for all of us.

Rushman's mouth worked side to side, but all that came out were high-pitched breathy noises. Shock, she decided, the same as was chilling her skin down and making her sway on her feet. Or that might be the blood loss. She went back to the desk, one foot in front of the other, keeping an eye and the barrel of the gun on Rushman. Blood dripping down her arm onto his nice carpet, blood pooling under him where he sat slumped against the wall, it'd be a hell of a clean-up job. "Hi, emergency services?"

His eyes cleared at the mention, and he opened his mouth. She raised the barrel of the gun to his face, and he closed it again.

"We need medical to this address..." she didn't know it off the top of her head, but they'd have it in their computer. "Two gunshot wounds. One to the upper chest, not the lungs, no, I can breathe." But the room was starting to go gray around the edges. "One to, um. A more sensitive place. That's the homeowner. Yeah. What?" She'd better sit down before she fell over. "No, I can't, I have to pass out now." She didn't bother disconnecting the call, not hitting her head on the side of the desk took precedence. But it wasn't that bad. It didn't feel that bad. She wondered how much blood she'd lost. So much for applying pressure. Her thoughts drifted in and out in bursts, between trying to focus her eyes. The desk lamp filled her vision now. Everything else had gone dark. She hoped emergency services got there quick. She had to explain to Cynthia what happened.

* * *

"I still can't believe you did that," Cynthia murmured. Amanda was in the canteen getting them all dinner; Hannah was under lockdown order until the court martial. Nonetheless, they kept their voices down in case Amanda came back when neither of them were paying attention.

"He deserved it," Hannah shook her head, outwardly untroubled by what she'd done. "At least he won't be bothering anyone else that way again."

He wouldn't be touching a woman or thinking about such things for a while, not without considerably painful memories and a lot of hard-to-explain awkwardness. He wouldn't be doing a lot of things without pain right now, not for a long time. She considered that a fitting punishment, today, anyway. When she woke up again it might be a different story. She'd been visited by her psychiatrist, by investigators, by people of all types and job descriptions to make her go over the events of the night, and go over them again. It didn't seem real anymore, how many times she'd told it. They didn't press her too hard while she was in the hospital, but it'd be different at the court martial. And if she had to testify at Rushman's trial.

That investigation was quiet and ongoing, based on the information Cynthia had pulled

together and tied up with a neat little confession. Rushman hadn't admitted to all of it, but there was enough to get him locked away for several years at least.

"Really, what made him think I wasn't going to somehow manage to make all that stick? I mean, what made him think I wasn't going to get that on record if I could get him to talk about it?" Hannah was having a hard time with her words, either the drugs or the speed with which everything had happened in the last week, but at least the bad dreams had eased up after she had shot him.

"I've no idea," Cynthia shook her head, and then indicated Amanda's return with a flick sideways of her eyes. "Anyway, it shouldn't take too long, should it? And then..."

Hannah shrugged. "And then I won't have to worry about where I'll go, at least. I'll be discharged. I'll have to find private work, although with what we found out..."

Amanda passed around the supper trays, smiling. Her eyes were still a little sunken but some of the color had come back into her skin, and she looked less tired. "You won't be lacking for job offers from independent companies, at least. Besides," she looked around at the two older women. "Are you sure they'll find you guilty?"

"If they were going to rule it self-defense, they would have done it now. Even if it had been, the expectation of my training is that I should know how to defend myself without resorting to, um..."

"Firearm violence?" Cynthia put it delicately as she could.

"That, yes."

"Besides," she added, with a slight headshake as they all started to nibble on their dinners. "Everyone wants Rushman put away quickly and quietly, but that doesn't mean they want a high profile pilot to get away with almost killing a man."

"The defense..." Hannah swallowed the rest of her biscuit. "The defense wants me to hold for a full court martial. The fact that he shot first, PTSD, the shock of losing my unit, they think it should be more than enough to claim justification by self defense." Odd, now, that that didn't bother her so much, using her unit like that. It would have even a couple of weeks ago. "I don't know if I want to, it's not all true, anyway." She'd gone in there wanting to shoot him. She'd spent a day or so wanting to do worse.

"The way he'd been carrying on, you damn well should be able to plead self-defense..." Cynthia snorted. "From the gun or from the sexual harassment and threat of..." she let it trail off when Hannah's breath hissed out between her teeth as Amanda ducked her head. They didn't need to talk about that aspect of Rushman here, where she had to listen and remember.

The three women ate for the next few minutes in silence, letting the subject drop. Hospital food left more than a little to be desired, but the company made it worlds away better. Cynthia startled them all by laughing a short while later, mopping up the last of her gravy with a piece of biscuit. "He wouldn't have said so in public," she told Hannah, glancing at Amanda once more for comfort's sake. "But I think he would have approved of your, erm. Ultimate solution. It was swift, decisive. Unequivocal."

"Brutal," Hannah pointed out, a little dubious. Then again, Cynthia knew him better, in some ways, than she did. And he had occasionally expressed a temper, albeit well kept in check.

Amanda smiled too, even laughed a little, as though she was trying it out again. "He's not the only one," she added. "James would have been right there behind you."

"Now *that* I can believe," Hannah laughed, too. "Did he ever tell you," for this she had to sit up, making faces at shifting and tugging stitches when she moved. "Did he ever tell you about the time we all managed to get out of one of those deadly boring holiday dinners, we went to this bar, I was all dressed up and we were in civvies because of some reason or another, I don't even remember. I think it was a civilian venue. And then we went to this bar, because it had to be better than rubber chicken, right? And there was this guy..."

Half made up, of course. She didn't remember as many details of the fight as she put into the story, but it made Amanda laugh. It brought back a little of James to both of them, the Flight Lieutenant and the chivalrous husband. Cynthia picked up at the end with one of her own stories about the Commander returning for a two-week leave and throwing himself into a chair like an exhausted father after a day of minding the kids. Somehow, between one thing and another, it almost felt like being normal again.