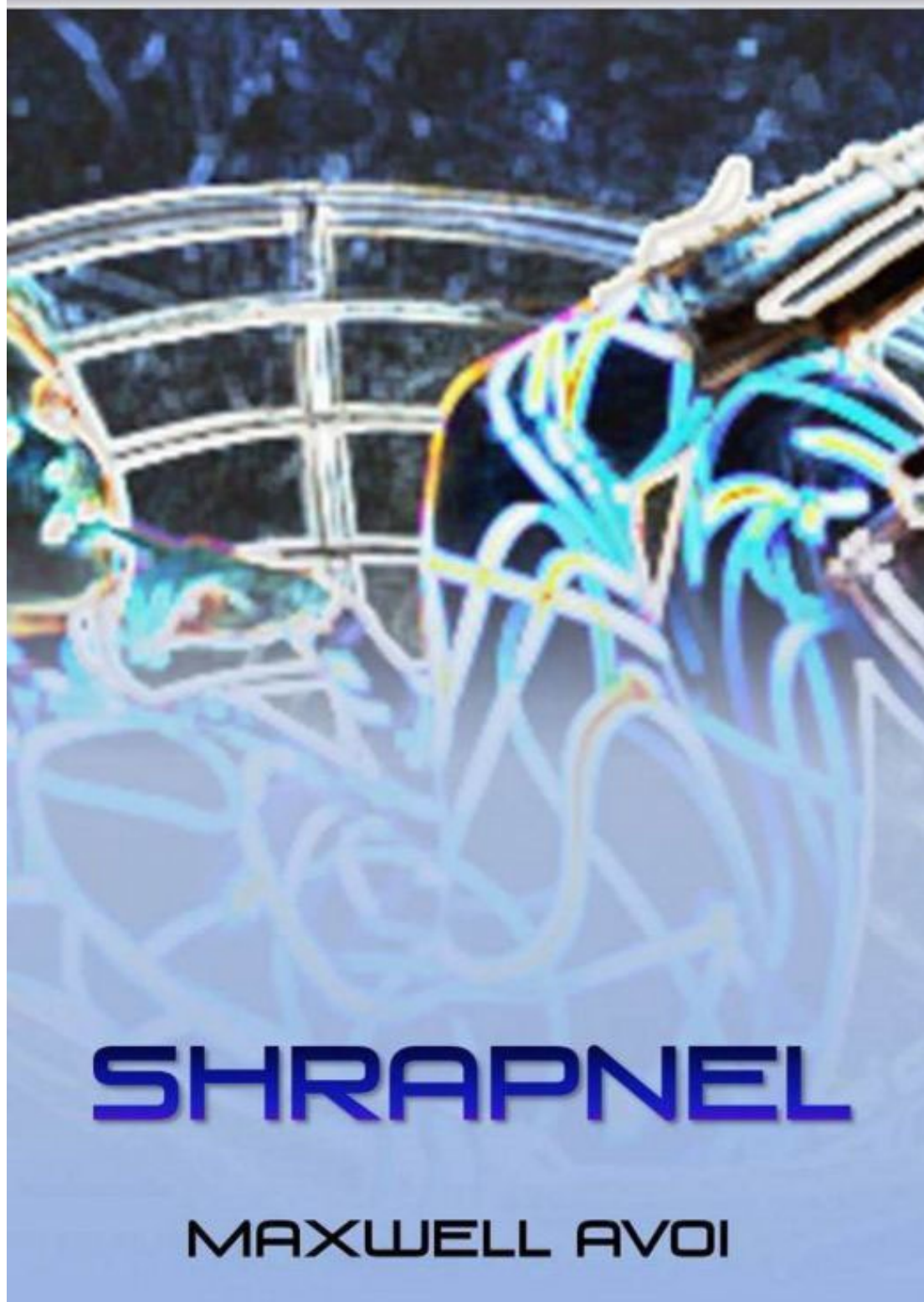


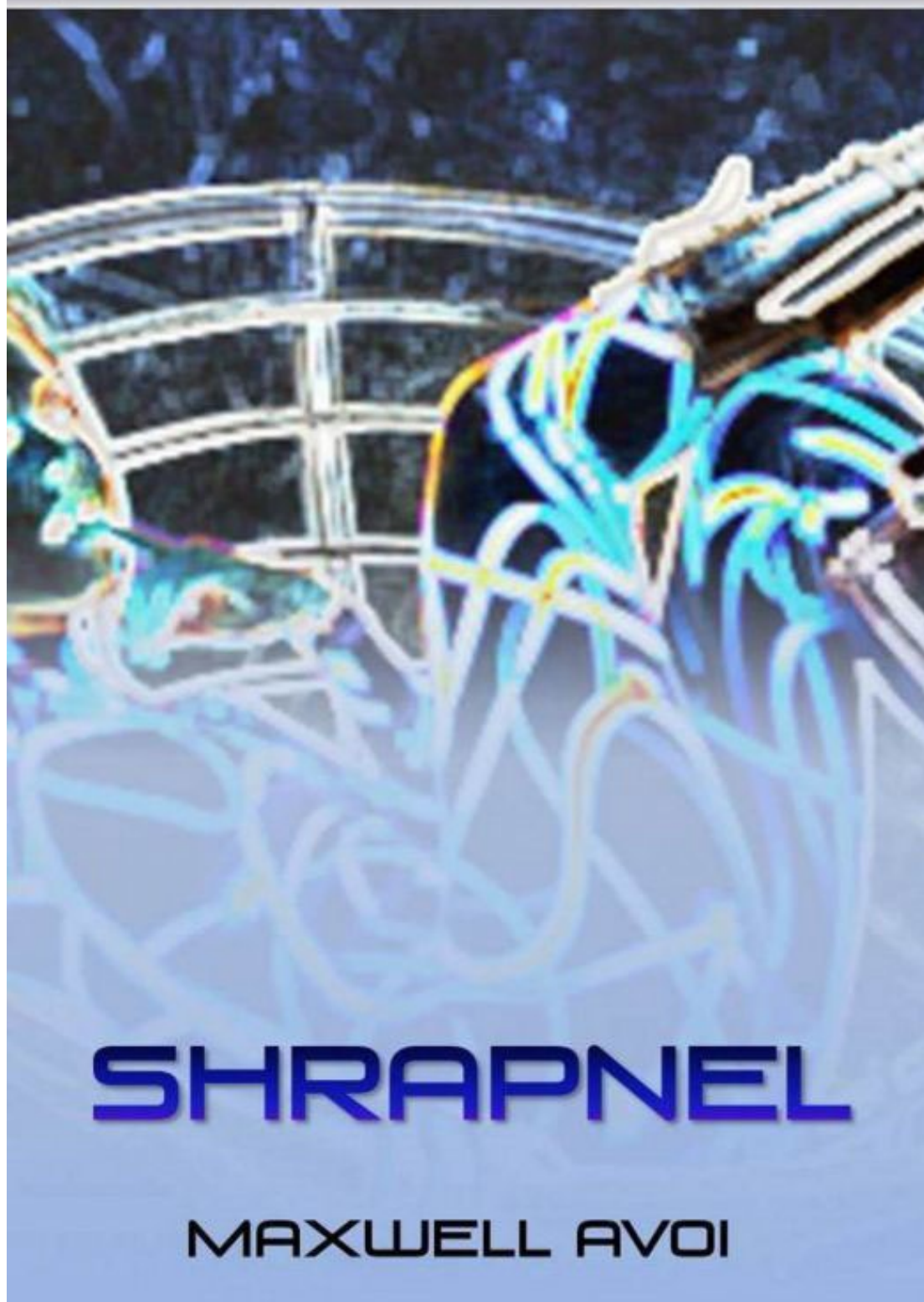
PLANETARY UNION



SHRAPNEL

MAXWELL AVOI

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Planetary Union: Shrapnel

By Maxwell Avoi

Smashwords Edition

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Jesse Highground, first officer of the UNS Philotes, surveyed the area below the shuttle. Through its wide windows he could see acres of jungle broken here and there by the remains of ruined buildings. The buildings were mostly some form of plastic, though here and there concrete and weathered metal appeared.

“The extent of these ruins is amazing,” he said. “I swear the Jiqu built something on every inch of soil.”

“That would match up with the readings that I’m getting, sir,” said Lieutenant Hrrok. He kept his golden eyes on the panel in front of him, his slim fingers dancing over the keys as he adjusted their flight from moment to moment. Highground had almost gotten used to thinking of Hrrok as male in spite of the Lieutenant’s decidedly feminine form. An accident in the quantum hoppers had changed Hrrok’s body from a male Ogroth, a hulking blue-skinned wall of muscle, to a female Spathian. Now Hrrok was almost petite, though he had gone to great lengths to regain as much strength as he could in spite of what he viewed as his limitations. Nothing could help him with his proud breasts or his absolutely spectacular ass, sculpted through hours in the gym into something so glorious that it was probably illegal in some parts of the galaxy. He had cut his sky-blue hair short, but even the severity of it and his set expression of irritation did little to change the fact of the sensuality of his full lips and smooth, charcoal-gray skin.

“It appears that everything that isn’t paved was built upon,” Hrrok continued, his voice hoarse. He worked hard to keep his speech pitched as low as possible, which in his new body ended up sounding like an aroused woman purring at her lover more often than not. The crew had learned to simply go with it; Hrrok presented himself as a male as much as he was able and Captain Zerkoth had made it clear that they were to honor his wishes. Highground found Hrrok to be visually distracting but he had learned to keep his eyes to himself around the altered security chief. There had been no threat of violence, but Hrrok’s aura of barely-contained rage implied that it was an option.

“How are things on the security front?” said Highground.

“Scans have shown nothing out of the ordinary for a jungle area,” said Hrrok.

“So the scientists were right about it being a dead world?”

“Given what small percentage of it that we’ve scanned, and adding to it what the scientists have done themselves, that seems like a safe enough statement to allow us to land.”

Highground shook his head. “It’s amazing to me. The Jiqu converted the entire planet into a marvel of self-sustaining technology, but they didn’t move on when they exhausted all their resources.”

Hrrok shrugged. “Many races don’t. We find ruins like these with depressing regularity. Some simply don’t reach for the stars.”

“Mm. Lieutenant, are you up to finding a spot to land? The scientists wanted us to take closer readings if we could, and I’m pretty curious about what we’re seeing.”

“Of course, sir.” Hrrok frowned at the readouts, his lip pooching out slightly in a pout that Highground would never tell him was adorable.

Highground keyed open a channel to the Philotes. “Eros to Philotes, come in.”

“Come in, Eros. Is that you, Commander?” Highground recognized the voice of Derisa V’Sa, Transportation Chief. Apparently she was pulling double duty as a communications officer while Hrrok was out on assignment.

“It is, Mister V’Sa. Lieutenant Hrrok and I are landing to take some readings.”

“Roger that, Commander. I have your current coordinates registered. Be careful out there.”

“We’re going to do the best we can. Highground out.”

Captain Prreth Zerkoth of the UNS Philotes made a deep purring noise in the back of her throat. A casual Human observer would probably have remarked on the Captain’s catlike appearance, with her high pointed ears, slitted eyes, and the fine coating of fur that covered her slender body. Her tail intertwined with her partner’s, both of them twitching together as their owners stroked one another.

Grris Hsao, a male Nellick, purred back in a slightly rougher tone. They were

engaged in the Nellick practice of mra-ssar, a combination of foreplay and mutual hypnotism that was designed to put them into a state of higher appreciation for one another's touch. Some other races achieved the same state through telepathy or an analogue, but Nellicks relied on their highly sensitive tails, ears, proto-whiskers, and fingertips to reach it.

Prreth sighed quietly, her mind quiet and her body softly glowing with shared pleasure. She had a more casual attitude toward sex than most Nellicks, and certainly more than most Humans, enjoying sexual encounters with multiple species on a regular basis. Her husband did the same, sometimes in her presence and often not. Mra-ssar, however, was theirs alone, something that they only did with one another, lending it a heightened intimacy that went beyond mere coitus. Their daughter, Rref Zersao, was a result of one of their mra-ssar sessions. The memory of that happy event lent another layer of joy to their union.

Outside observers would have seen little to be excited over beyond the nude forms of the Nellicks themselves. Those who watched mra-ssar often reported feeling embarrassed by the sheer intimacy of the situation; mra-ssar partners saw nothing but one another's eyes, regardless of what their bodies were doing or who else was in the room at the time.

After an hour they were so in tune with one another that they could sense the slightest movement in their partners, matching it with one of their own. This was the connection that allowed Prreth to be the captain of a starship, allowed her to fully relax with another living creature; no one else knew her as Grris did. There was pleasure from his touch but ecstasy from his eyes. Without these times with her husband, she wasn't sure that she would have been able to handle the pressure as well as she did.

Their joining proceeded apace, as natural a part of the ceremony as their intertwined tails. They aided one another, her inner muscles as much under the control of his cues as his were of hers. Prreth sometimes felt that she melted, both of them blending their bodies together until the perfection of their union alone drove their release. His eyes widened when they reached that point, their pleasure just as much a mutual experience as the rest.

The relaxation after the climax was just as important as the foreplay in mra-ssar, and they wound around one another as they both reveled in their joy-filled bodies. Sometimes, when there was time, they would stay in mra-ssar. During

their early days it had been more common, the two of them finding a small room and turning it into a cocoon that shut out the rest of the world as they melted into one another for a day or more. Those times were much rarer now but the depth of their feeling for each other had only grown and enriched what time they had together.

Prreth knew that some of her crew wondered how she and Grris could keep a marriage working with all the outside temptations; the Nellicks onboard simply nodded and went on with their duties. Humans and Callypians would never understand, though Spathians might have some idea thanks to their inherent telepathy. Humans tended toward monogamy, and Callypians lived in large communes of enthusiastic lovers. She simply made sure that everyone understood that the marriage worked quite well, thank you, and didn't you have a duty somewhere to perform?

As if it had kept track of their activities, the comm implant in her forearm buzzed against the bones there. She sighed quietly and rubbed her cheek against Grris's before she answered. "Zerkoth here."

"Captain, it's Aid. You asked to be made aware of the arrival of the project leader. Doctor Leten is in conference room two."

"Thank you, Mister Aid."

Zerkoth clicked the comm off and sighed quietly. She and Grris unwound from one another, a process that took a while thanks mostly to reluctance. He propped his head on the pillow and watched her long body flex as she headed for the shower. As was their habit, she left the doors open so that he could watch her clean herself. "I could watch that every day," he said.

"Your turn next time," she responded. Other races often felt that Nellicks were emotionless thanks to their relative lack of facial expression. They had evolved other means of sharing emotions; by the tilt of her ears and the way her whiskers twitched, he could sense her teasing. A human would have been grinning.

"You have a deal, dearest."

She leaned in and they brushed their cheeks together, their whiskers meshing for moment, and then she stood and straightened. Her transformation from his wife to the captain of the Philotes was visible, at least to his eyes. She put her

emotions away and squared her shoulders, ready to attack the day. Grris supposed that he went through a similar transformation when he went to work.

Captain Zerkoth strode through the corridors of the Philotes, nodding to her crew as she passed them. The Philotes carried a much wider cross-section of species than most duty starships; technically a subset of the Diplomatic arm of the Planetary Union, Recreation vessels had to deal with a wider array of races and situations than defense or transportation ships did. Exploration ships were the only other ships to match diversity of crew.

The door hissed slightly as she entered the small conference room. The person at the table stood. "Captain Zerkoth. I'm Doctor Enlet Leten." The doctor's orange-tinted skin and short antennae marked him as an Orgalian, though Zerkoth wasn't sure if he was male or the intermediate gender. He extended his hand and Zerkoth shook it, the feel of the Orgalian's extra knuckle joint strange beneath her fingers.

"Captain Zerkoth, doctor. Welcome to the Philotes."

"Glad to be here, and looking forward to availing myself of the, ah, the activities offered here."

"Of course. Please sit." They did so. "There is nothing to be embarrassed about. Recreation class vessels are new, but there is nothing wrong with the request for one."

"Ah, of course. I wanted to meet with you for a couple of reasons, captain. First, thank you for the loan of your personnel for the long-range scans. Jiqu'sa Nine is vast, of course, and we've not had time to catalog more than a small percentage of the planet's surface. Your shuttle will help us tremendously."

"Of course, doctor. Commander Highground and Lieutenant Hrrok are two of my best, and I am sure that they appreciate the opportunity to help."

"Yes, of course. Ah. And the second thing I wanted to ask you about is a bit more personal. I'm not quite sure how to phrase...are you familiar with Orgalians at all?"

Zerkoth tilted her head slightly. Doctor Leten presented as male but there was a facet of Orgalian culture that made such assumptions problematic. She said, "I

am aware of the trinary nature of the Orgalian genders, as are the members of my crew. I am sure that should any of your team require recreation of any kind, the Philotes will be able to fully satisfy those requirements.”

Leten nodded, his shoulders relaxing slightly. “Thank you, captain. I’ll...pass that along to the interested parties.”

“Of course, doctor. Is there anything else that I can help you with while we’re here?”

“If I think of anything I’ll be sure to let you know.”

“Please do not hesitate to contact me.”

“Well, we have heard some rumors of Vertias activity nearby. Nothing concrete, but it’s something that we worry about out here in the black by ourselves.”

Zerkoth nodded. “I will take it up with our security people. Rest assured, we will do our best to make this as pleasant an assignment as possible for all concerned.”

The shuttle’s radio beeped and Highground keyed the channel open. Hrrok kept finessing the controls, coming in for a landing in a relatively open area.
“Highground here.”

“Commander,” said Zerkoth. “We have received reports of potential Vertias activity near Jiqu’sa Nine. We have no way of knowing the veracity of these reports, but I think that you and Mister Hrrok should be aware of them. Please be careful of your surroundings.”

“Understood, Captain, thank you.”

“Zerkoth out.”

The comm clicked off and Highground settled in while Hrrok completed the landing. They wound up in what had probably been a clearing at one point, though the encroaching trees and vines had turned it into more of a small gap. The shuttle touched down with a small thump and Hrrok opened the doors. He took point, striding into the planet’s jungle with his blaster at the ready and his

belt full of scanners, rations, and other particulars. Highground followed quickly, similarly armed and as usual having a hard time keeping his eyes off of Hrrok's large, perfectly sculpted ass. "I don't think we need the blasters out, do you, Lieutenant?"

"Probably not, sir," said Hrrok. "I'm just thinking that the entirety of this planet hasn't yet been mapped and catalogued."

Highground looked around. The highest form of life yet discovered on Jiqu'sa Nine was a sort of proto-mammal who was known to occasionally use sticks to retrieve grubs from rotten trees. However, if it made Hrrok happy, he saw no reason to tell the security chief to put the blaster away. "Carry on, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir. The shuttle's scanners are set to continue into much deeper scan of the surrounding area than has yet been achieved. Bu the time we get back we should have a significant amount of data for the scientists."

"Sounds good. Let's go see what's on the other side of the mountain, shall we?"

"Sir?"

"Old children's song from Earth. Not important. Let's find a building we can search."

The two of them picked their way through the tree roots, Highground with his hand scanner running at full capacity and Hrrok with his blaster at the ready.

Most of the ruins were exactly that, gradually being reclaimed by the jungle in spite of being made of plastics and metals. The larger, taller buildings were gone, collapsed by the slow disintegration of vegetation and erosion, but many of their smaller cousins still stood. None of them appeared to be in perfect shape but some were hardly touched by the plants. It was to one of these that Highground and Hrrok made their way.

Highground stood staring at the oval door; it looked almost like an egg set on point, with a split down the middle to denote the opening. There were variations all over the planet and wherever the Jiqu ruins were discovered; it seemed that they had an aversion to straight lines in their aesthetics. Engineering-wise, they had known as much or more as any race about straight, level, plumb, and square, but when it came to appearance they preferred rounded edges.

The two of them walked around the building, keeping one another in sight at all times. Hrrok had his scanner out as well, though he seemed content to let it record while he watched for threats from the jungle. A complete circuit of the structure showed that it was relatively sound and unlikely to collapse in the next day or two.

Back at the closed door, Hrrok adjusted his blaster and aimed it. Highground said, "Whoa, hold on, Lieutenant. Let's see if there's a little less destructive way to open that."

They scanned the landscape around them until Hrrok found a bar about five feet long and made of a kind of metal that the jungle hadn't eaten. Hrrok sculpted the end of it into a wedge using his blaster, and then he jammed it into the crack in the middle of the door once it had cooled. The two of them heaved on the bar. Hrrok had insisted on taking the end closer to the building in spite of the reduced leverage; though he was arguably stronger than Highground thanks to his intense workout regimen, Hrrok wanted to be able to respond to any potential threats before they could get to the first officer.

The door opened without incident, though a lot of grunting and muffled swearing was involved. They were able to open a gap large enough to admit one person at a time; Hrrok went in first while Highground used his scanner to provide as much illumination as possible through the gap.

While the building had been largely spared from the ravages of Erosion and jungle, it was still a ruin. The two of them looked around, their scanners cycling. The room was obviously alien, at least to Human eyes; the ceilings were too low and the windows too narrow to be comfortable. A table set with various dishes and utensils showed that some things were universal, like bowls. Desiccated foodstuffs sat on the dishes, most of them just a spot of discoloration or a dried bone or two.

"Looks like they left in the middle of the meal," said Hrrok.

"I hear that most Jiqu ruins are like that. It's like the whole civilization just got up and made an orderly evacuation without any preparations. Some rising star on Jiqu'sa Four found out that they left at almost the same instant as the Jiqu on Jiqu'sa Eight. They're trying to find out if that's a commonality for all of their settlements."

“And this is to help add to that body of knowledge?”

“Well, that and I needed to get off the ship for a while. The Philotes is great, but the walls start to close in if I don’t get some downtime.”

Hrrok nodded absently, his wide golden eyes scanning the area. He stopped, his scanner aimed at a particular second of the wall. “Commander. How old are these ruins?”

“I’ve heard lots of estimates, but right now they’re thinking somewhere in the neighborhood of less than five thousand years. Why?”

“I’m detecting an active energy source on the other side of this wall. It just started up when I scanned the area.”

Highground blinked and then turned for the door. “Get out now, Lieutenant!”

“Captain, I’m reading a surge of protonic energy,” said science officer A27-4a.

“Location, Mister Aid?” said Zerkoth.

“Just off the port bow, sir. Energy readings are consistent with a post-relativistic ship’s arrival, but nothing’s scheduled from the Union.”

“Yellow alert. Scanners at full, please.”

“Yellow alert, aye.” On the bridge, sickbay, and in engineering, a soft alarm started to ring. Yellow alert wouldn’t stop or even slow down the various Recreational activities taking place, but it put the rest of the ship on edge just in case.

“The signature’s getting larger, sir,” said Aid, his voice controlled. “Multiple contacts.”

“Let me know as soon as you know what they are, Mister Aid.”

“Aye sir.”

“Captain,” said Second Lieutenant Vlerk Tgoth, a hulking Ogroth. “I’ve lost

contact with the away team.”

Zerkoth snapped her head around to look at him, all traces of calm replaced with steely concentration. “Find their last location, Mister Tgoth, and take us to-“

“Captain,” said Aid. “We’ve finished analyzing the post relativistic signatures. They’re Vertiash. They’re going to be here in less than fifteen seconds.”

Zerkoth sucked in a breath between her teeth. “Go to red alert, Mister Aid.”

“Red alert, aye.”

All around the ship, a louder version of the yellow alert began to wail. All recreational activities stopped, some of them taking longer to disengage than others. As soon as it was possible for them to do so, the crew started herding the bewildered scientists toward the heavily reinforced bunker portions of the ship, directly attached to the escape pods in case of trouble.

Captain Zerkoth stood, assuming a businesslike posture. “Mister Tgoth, keep scanning for anything from our away team, and have Chief V’Sa standing ready to quantum hop them back as soon as you find them. Ready the shields.”

“Aye sir,” the Ogroth rumbled.

On the main display, outer space went from mostly empty to suddenly crowded as the Vertiash ships started to pop into existence around them. None of them were exactly the same; they were grown organically, Zerkoth knew, leading to slight variations even among ships of the same size and kinds. Huge eyes studded along the sides of the ships whirled and focused on the Philotes, surgically-implemented weapons turning to come to bear on them.

“They’re hailing us, sir,” said Aid.

“Please open the channel,” said Zerkoth, squaring her shoulders.

The main viewer flickered and then filled with the image of a Veritash bridge. The walls there were slick, and they pulsed in time with the ship’s respiration. Though the room on the display was dark Zerkoth could make out the Vertiash as they crowded into the viewer. None of them were more than a foot tall. They had delicate, insectoid bodies with six legs each; like Earth’s praying mantis,

they walked on four and used the remaining two for manipulating objects. Most of the Vertiash in the viewer were wearing some kind of armor, generally exoskeletal strength multipliers. All of them wore small headbands that locked into place beneath their huge, multifaceted eyes.

“I am Vertiash Twelve Twelve Two,” said a chorus of voices. The translator gave the voices an irritating buzzing undertone. “State your reasons for agitating our hive.”

“I am Captain Zerkoth of the UNS Philotes, here on a mission of peace. We were unaware of any agitations. Can we render aid to you or your crew, Twelve Twelve Two?”

There was a pause as the insects chittered quietly. Then the voices came back again as they faced the viewer. “You expect me to believe that you are unaware of the lost Vertiash ship in this sector, Captain? You and the station below are the only living beings for parsecs. It’s unlikely that you have nothing to do with its loss.”

“Unlikely but not impossible,” said Zerkoth. “We would welcome the chance to assist you with finding your lost ship.”

“I will consult with my hive,” said the voices. “Stand by. Do not attempt to leave or arm your weapons. Twelve Twelve Two out.” The viewer returned to its previous display of the four Vertiash ships floating in the darkness.

“They cut the signal, sir,” said Aid.

“Yes. Charming. Mister Tgoth, keep an eye on the scanners. If the Vertiash charge up their weapons, please bring shields to full. Mister Aid, get into contact with the away team and bring them back.”

There was a chorus of acknowledgement. “I will be in my ready room.”

As soon as she sat down, she sent a message to Planetary Union headquarters. As soon as it was off she opened a line to Civilian Management. “Captain Zerkoth to Lieutenant Richards.”

“Richards here,” said a woman a moment later.

“Please collect Miss D’Kath and join me in my ready room, Lieutenant.”

“On our way, sir.”

Hrrok and Highground squeezed through the gap that they’d made in the front door as quickly as they could. The power surge had continued, gaining strength on the way, and neither of them wanted to be around when it accomplished its goal. They ran for the shuttle, leaping huge roots and dodging vines.

The shuttle sat waiting but the experienced officers noticed a problem right away. The running lights were off, when they should have been shining brightly. They slowed, approaching more cautiously. Highground pulled out this scanner while Hrrok covered the area with his blaster.

“Looks like the power surge is in the ground underneath the shuttle as well. How far down does this go?”

“I haven’t heard, sir. Is there a problem?” Hrrok’s hoarse voice was tense but she kept it under tight control.

Highground put his hand out and touched the shuttle door. Nothing happened. “Well, the automatic opener didn’t work. The Jiqu energy signature is starting to flood the shuttle, too.”

“You might want to step away, sir.”

“I’m going to try to open it up. Keep watch.” Before Hrrok could protest further, Highground slid the door’s keypad up and entered the code to override the automatic systems and cause it to open. Nothing happened.

“Ooookay, this is bad.” Highground pressed his scanner up against the door, leaving it attached by its internal magnets. He tried to key the display over to an internal scan, but it suddenly turned into a blaze of static before going completely dead. He pulled the scanner off the door and tried to turn it back on but nothing happened. “Scanner’s dead. See if yours shows anything, Lieutenant.”

Hrrok hesitated a moment and then handed his blaster over to Highground, who

took over watching the surrounding area. Hrrok turned on the scanner, waving it in a pattern that covered the entire vehicle. “Sir. The power surge...the energy that we were reading, it’s covered the entire shuttle. The systems are starting to power up, but they’re not...I think they’re overloading, sir.”

At that moment, Highground’s discarded hand scanner turned back on. The screen still showed nothing but static but it went brighter and brighter until the scanner burned like a tiny star, almost too bright to look at. As they turned their heads away, the scanner suddenly burst with a soft pop, the components melting into a puddle of slag.

“I think it’s time to go,” said Highground as the shuttle’s lights turned back on. They backed away as they glowed brighter, and then turned to run as the shuttle started to shake.

Zerkoth nodded to Richards and D’Kath as they entered. Both women were striking examples of their species; D’Kath a cute Callypian with full lips and wide golden eyes; and Richards a tall, extremely voluptuous Human with black hair and blue eyes. Richards saluted as she entered. D’Kath, being a civilian, merely nodded to the Captain.

Zerkoth nodded back and said, “Please sit. We are facing a problem, ladies, and I want to know that you’re ready to help.”

D’Kath blinked, surprised. “Of course, Captain. What do you need from us?”

“We have lost contact with the away team consisting of Highground and Hrrok. In addition, we are currently being held under guard by a contingent of Vertiash cruisers.”

D’Kath turned pale under her charcoal skin. Richards swallowed but held her ground. She said, “What can Kellera and I do, sir? We’re engaged with the Recreation activities for Station Muse 12 at the moment.”

Zerkoth nodded. “That is what I want to talk to you about. I want to be sure that you are not only certain that you are capable of carrying on but that you are going to be able to do so in the face of potential crisis. Right now I need the two of you and your division to keep the civilians from becoming unruly. The

situation with the Vertiash is delicate, and we do not wish to agitate them.”

“We’re here to serve, sir,” said Richards, half-saluting.

“We can do it!” said D’Kath, her ponytail bouncing as she gave a determined nod.

“I am glad. There may be a need for more counseling than is our usual during this assignment. The counseling section of Medical is at your disposal. With any luck we will not need the rest of Medical for anything while we are here. Dismissed, ladies, and thank you.”

They stood and headed for the door, but D’Kath stopped and turned back. “Um, Captain? What about Highground and Rocky?”

“We are making every effort to retrieve them safely.” Nothing in Zerkoth’s face or tone implied anything but confidence in her own words.

Kellera nodded. “Okay. If there’s anything else that we can do?”

“Quite enough, Miss D’Kath. If you will excuse me, I have other matters to clear up.”

“Right. Good luck, Captain.”

She and Richards left, heading for the lifts that would take them back to their usual haunts in the converted cargo area of the ship that housed the Recreation systems. They were already exchanging ideas in low voices, their heads together and their voices low to keep from bothering the bridge staff. Zerkoth approved of the way that they worked together; they were obviously comfortable with one another in spite of Richards’s recent assignment to Recreation.

Her thoughts were interrupted by an urgent summons to the bridge.

“Energy discharge on the planet’s surface, Captain,” said Aid as Zerkoth took her post.

“What do the scanners say?” said Zerkoth. It paid to be calm in situations like this one; though her gut twisted somewhere far below the layers of discipline, the crew would never see it.

“It resembled a shuttle’s post-relativistic drive exploding, sir. It fit the energy profile, though there were some discrepancies.”

“Can we find out more at this range?”

Aid shook his head. “We would have to be closer, sir. They...it was almost on the other side of the planet from us.”

Zerkoth took in a deep breath and let it out just as slowly. “And the Vertiash have us blocked in.”

Aid nodded. “There are too many of them to fight our way out, and since we’re technically at peace with them it would mean a potential interplanetary incident.”

“Has the diplomatic corps attempted contact yet?”

“They have, sir. Mister Hsao is speaking with the Vertiash now.”

Zerkoth had a brief flash of heartfelt desire for the sort of religious faith that would allow her to pray for help. She had never felt that the reasoning that had led some Nellicks to such beliefs was up to her own rigorous standards, but it would have been a comfort.

“The Vertiash don’t need your help,” said the speaker. Grris Hsao simply watched the screen, stifling his own desire to heave a sigh at the words. He understood the Vertiash spoken language passably well but it was better to have the automatic translator going to make sure that he didn’t miss the nuance. There was little to miss here: the Vertiash commander Twelve Twelve Two was irritated and not shy about showing it.

“I understand that, Commander. We simply wish to make our own scans and personnel available for any potential rescue efforts. Two of our own are also lost on the surface, and we want to rescue them. As I told you earlier, we need to be able to move closer to their location to-“

“You will not move. Your two crewmen hardly stack up against the loss of an entire Vertiash cruiser.”

“May we continue the quantum hop traffic between our ship and Science Station Muse 12? I assure you that it is strictly diplomatic. You and your people are more than welcome to monitor our traffic.”

Silence from the Vertias as they discussed his words telepathically. Finally the Commander said, “Our needs take precedence over yours. Your diplomacy ship is not heavily armed enough to press the situation. Do not move, and do not power up your shields or weapons. Your quantum hop traffic may continue as long as our scans show that it is not dangerous in any way.”

The channel closed with a beep. Hsao allowed himself to lean back in his seat and release the long-held sigh. After a moment he opened a channel to speak to his wife. She wasn’t going to be happy about how negotiations were progressing.

Highground woke in stages, at first aware of little beyond a high ringing noise. His surroundings were a blur at first, only slowly resolving into the ruins of the Jiqu buildings and the ubiquitous jungle. The ringing noise remained, his ears feeling stuffed full. After a while he figured out that he was on the ground and after that, that he was still on the Jiqu planet. He rolled over and pushed himself into a sitting position, a process that took more effort than he felt was strictly necessary.

He looked around and saw nothing left of the shuttle besides some blackened metal that had once been its landing gear. The jungle in the area was scorched; some of it still smoldered. The scent of ozone filled the air, prompting him to wonder if the explosion had put off any dangerous chemicals. He groped for the scanner at his belt for a moment before he remembered that it was in the same condition as the shuttle.

The thought led him to think of Hrok’s scanner, which made him remember that he hadn’t seen the security officer since waking up. He got to his feet, another difficult process, and looked around from the greater height he commanded on his feet.

Hrok’s leg was visible behind a tree trunk, and Highground made his way there as quickly as possible. Hrok’s delectable form was casually sprawled beneath a thin branch and other debris, unconscious. In this situation the Lieutenant looked like nothing so much as a spectacularly beautiful woman, and Highground

sternly reminded himself that he beheld not only an officer but also another man. He knelt and shook Hrrok's shoulder, calling out his name.

Hrrok's eyes snapped open and he sat up, only wincing when he was vertical. He pressed one hand to his head, where the blue hair was matted with purplish blood. "Gah. Commander, are you all right?"

"Just a little shaken up, Lieutenant. Let me look at that wound."

"We have to get to a safe place first, sir, we..." Hrrok tried to push Highground away and stand at the same time, but he wasn't able to keep his balance. He landed back on the ground in a sitting position. For the first time since the quantum hopper accident had turned him into a duplicate of Kellera, he was glad that his ass was so large and well-padded.

"You're not going anywhere right this instant, Lieutenant. Let me have a look."

Hrrok relented, and Highground started searching through Hrrok's hair. He felt more comfortable once he was focused on the problem in front of him. Hrrok sat quietly, wincing from time to time but making no noise. Highground found the wound quickly; it was a gash two inches long and matted with hair and dirt. It started bleeding again as he explored it.

"We have to get this taken care of. Give me your kit, Lieutenant."

Hrrok unclipped the first aid kit and handed it to Highground, then sat and concentrated on not flinching away from Highground's fingers as the first officer worked to close the gash.

"We need to contact the Philotes as soon as possible sir," said Hrrok.

"Agreed. Let me get you stabilized and we'll work on that part."

Highground's dressing was clumsy but effective, sealing the wound well enough that the blood stopped flowing. They found that Hrrok's comm unit was offline, along with the rest of the functions tied to the computer on his forearm. Highground accessed his and tried to open a channel to the Philotes, but no one answered.

"Could be interference from the explosion," he said.

“Possible.” Hrrok turned on his scanner and swept it around the area, looking for potential culprits. He stopped when it pointed at the building where they’d managed to open the door a crack. “Sir. The energy readings are much higher in there now.”

“What’s it doing?”

“As nearly as I can tell, it’s stabilizing. I think it might have absorbed some of the energy from the shuttle and its explosion. That might explain why we survived in spite of being so close.”

“Ah. Well, what’s it doing with the energy?”

“It seems to be in a standby mode.”

“Can we access the energy stored there? Maybe get your comm working again?”

“Possibly, sir.” Hrrok and Highground stood and headed for the building. Hrrok did his best to not let his anxiety show; the comm wasn’t the only system that the computer on his arm controlled. Without the computer, the small implant that fed his system carefully controlled doses of a specific tranquillizer would cease to function, leaving him at the mercy of his altered body’s hormones. He struggled to push the thought away; they would simply have to get the energy from the building’s reserves.

It took them an hour to rig an adapter from the building’s power supply to the computer that Highground wore. The Jiqu power conduits resembled stabilized crystals more than wires but they were much like the ones used by Spathian systems and the two of them were able to rig something suitable.

“Here goes nothing,” said Highground. He flipped the switch, setting the computer to draw power from the Jiqu building.

Immediately the computer started to glow brighter. It also got hotter, and Highground scrambled to undo the clips that held it to his uniform’s sleeve. Within minutes the computer was a small puddle of slag and burned components.

“Readings say that the building reversed the flow and sucked the power out of your computer, sir,” said Hrrok as he scanned the area.

“Well that’s just great. Okay, plan C or so. We’ve got to get away from here and find a way to contact the Philotes. If this building is the source of the interference, it’s probably not going to get any better if we keep feeding it power.”

Hrrok nodded. “There’s a rise that was probably a mountain to the east.”

“Any idea how far from here?”

“Twenty kilometers or so.”

They looked at the darkening sky.

“We can’t stay here. God knows what’s going to happen now that this place has a little power. It might leech off the rest of the charge on your scanner or blaster.

We have to save that power for signaling the Philotes.”

“We can’t make it that far at night, sir, certainly not injured.” Hrrok sounded pained, embarrassed at his body’s weaknesses.

“Well, let’s get as far as we can and then find shelter for the night.”

“Aye, sir.”

The jungle around them hummed with insect life, little of it interested in the two of them. It had been a long time since there had been anything larger than a pinhead on Jiqu’sa Nine; the bugs had long ago turned their attentions to each other instead. Even the ones that didn’t care could be annoying, however; clouds of tiny insects got in their eyes and ears as they trudged through the trees and vines, making an already uncomfortable trip that much worse.

Highground didn’t want to admit that he was slightly spooked by the ruins all around them. Many of the buildings were collapsed but some still stood and seemed to stare at the interlopers as he and Hrrok walked.

The only bright spot was when they alternated who was on point; walking behind Lieutenant Hrrok, who wore the same skintight uniform that Highground did, was a situation that many would have paid dearly for. However Hrrok tried to deny the reality of his altered body, he had managed to sculpt it into one of the most alluring forms that Highground had ever seen. He didn’t let Hrrok know any of this, of course. The Lieutenant’s mental state hinged on his being able to deny at least a little of the reality of his situation, and Highground didn’t want to add any more stress. Still, Hrrok walking through the jungle was absolutely worth watching.

Hrrok, for his part, spent the time silently. He focused on the world around him, searching for threats of any kind. Commander Highground was a fine officer but he didn’t seem to understand that danger could come from any direction in an unknown environment like this one. The focus helped Hrrok, as did the exercise; as long as he could turn his attention to the burn in his legs and the potential problems all around them, he didn’t have to think about the way that the sight of Highground in the tight uniform was starting to cause another, softer burn deeper inside. The computer on Hrrok’s forearm controlled more than the communicator: it also fed his bloodstream with the necessary chemicals to suppress his hated body’s raging Callypian sex drive, usually only used when he

was on away missions in an effort to keep his focus. Now that the computer was dead, the chemicals weren't flowing and the three days since his last sexual encounter with a Recroom-created partner were starting to make themselves known. He resolved to fight the desire by ignoring it as long as possible, setting his beautiful face in a determined expression.

"We have to find a place for the night," said Highground. "I'm sort of nervous about trying another one of these buildings, since they might do the same thing to my blaster and your scanner that happened to the shuttle. Any ideas?"

Hrrok looked around, scanning the area for potential shelter. "I could carve a space out of one of the larger trees with my blaster."

"Good idea. You do that and I'll start gathering anything I can find to keep us warm during the night. Do you think we should risk a fire?"

"Sensor scans didn't show anything here that would either attack or be drawn to a fire. I think it's worth the risk."

Highground nodded and headed into the jungle. Hrrok allowed himself one careful look at Highground's retreating behind before setting to work. He adjusted the blaster into a cutting beam and selected a sound tree with the use of his scanner. From there it was a simple operation to carve out a section of the tree large enough for a secure, if somewhat cramped, shelter for the night. The blaster burned the wood as well as disintegrating it, sealing it to make a watertight surface that wouldn't allow any sap to leak through.

By the time he was done sculpting the shelter, Highground had brought several armloads of fallen branches that were dry enough to burn. Hrrok started the fire with a burst from the blaster and they went to sit in the shelter, relatively snug. Each of them had a cache of emergency supplies at their belts along with first aid kits, and they munched on nutrient bars as the sun went down.

"I'll take first watch," said Highground. "You need some rest after your injury."

Hrrok was too tired to argue, his head reminding him of its recent damage with a throb that sent a spike of pain into both eyes. Hrrok nodded reluctantly. "Okay, Commander. Wake me for the second watch."

"Will do."

Highground stepped outside of the shelter and sat down on the ground next to the fire. It was comfortable for the first time since they'd landed, the air temperature falling and the smoke keeping the various insects away. He poked at the flames and stared out into the darkness, watching the moon rise. Soft snores echoed from the shelter as Hrrok slept. Highground hoped that things were going better onboard the Philotes.

"The question is, how closely are the Vertias watching the quantum hopper traffic?" said Grris Hsao. He sat in his chair as if reclining on a tree branch, all watchful eyes and deceptive relaxation.

"Quite closely, I'm afraid," said Engineering Chief Nello. "Three of the ships have moved off, but three more are in formation around us. They're trading off scanner duty at random times, so it's impossible to block it for long. They're keeping tabs on everyone who hops between the Philotes and Muse 12."

"What if we put together a team," said Petty Officer Nalk, an Ogroth. He looked uncomfortable in his chair, his bulging muscles and tall frame oversized for his seat, but he remained where he was. "We could hop out just as the scanners changed hands."

Nello shook his head. "We would never be able to mask the loss of so many Philotes personnel at once."

"Could you mask just one?" said Captain Zerkoth.

Nello rubbed his chin, then turned on the computer attached to his forearm. He tapped at the display for a moment and then said, "I think that we might be able to do that. Perhaps we could use a personal scattering array on one of our people when the scanner jumps from ship to ship, so that it would look like our crewman just vanished. I would be difficult to mask, though, thanks to my android physiology."

"How are they keeping tabs on who is a crewman here and who is not?"

"Well, they scan the life-forms, and then match them to a database. If it's anything like our scans, and I'm not saying that it is because we don't know much about Vertias technology, it'll be keyed to the biometric stamp for each

crewman.”

“What, they have access to our records?” said Doctor Vrelin.

“Just the ones that we make available to identify each member of the Union,” said Nello. “It’s standard protocol so that we can verify identities when someone is taken prisoner. Sort of like a bar code. Other biometrics are used for internal security protocols.”

Vrelin subsided, and Zerkoth nodded. “Doctor, would there be any way to alter a person’s biometric markers?”

Vrelin shook her head. “By definition, pretty much impossible.”

“If we only need to alter the ones used for personnel identification, and at a distance?”

Vrelin tilted her head and grinned. “You want to do a swap.”

“I do.”

“Well, it would have to be in a place with a lot of biometric signals moving around all at once. Pretty close together, too.”

“I think that can be arranged.”

Roger Hargrave, a biologist assigned to Science Station Muse 12, was surprised when he got the news that the Philotes had approved his tentative request. It took some doing, and he had to sign a few forms, but it seemed that they were set up to handle a wide variety of recreational activities. It wasn’t until a gorgeous Spathian woman led him into the Recroom that he fully realized what he had gotten himself into.

Muse 12 was a small station, with no more than a hundred or so personnel attached to it. Everyone got to know everyone very quickly, even if they were recluses like Roger. When he entered the Recroom, he immediately recognized Sheldon Decker and Jennifer Walper, both researchers from other parts of the station. They both seemed embarrassed at the sight of him as well. Apparently

none of them had realized that when they'd requested an orgy, they might run into others from Muse 12 who had the same ideas.

Roger stared at the floor, unable to meet their eyes, and he had just about decided to turn and go when the door to the Recroom opened again and the Philotes personnel entered. There were two for each scientist, male and female, and Roger felt his eyes widen as he took them in.

There was a Callypian male, and a Spathian. There were also two Callypian females, a Spathian female, and the most outrageously voluptuous Human woman that Roger had ever seen. All the officers from the Recreation ship were well-formed, but she was either the result of painstaking surgery or final proof of a loving God.

Roger was momentarily disappointed when the Human woman went to Jennifer, along with the Callypian male. Sheldon got the Spathian man and one of the Callypian women, and Roger got the Spathian woman with the remaining Callypian female. He hadn't known that Sheldon went that way, but to each their own.

His disappointment swiftly faded as the women came to him, smiling as if they were glad to see him. Short and overweight, he hadn't had that sort of reaction from women before. They worked together to undress first him and then each other, slowing the action with plenty of slow kisses and lingering touches. By the time he was out of his clothes he no longer felt like the shlub that he was in real life: he felt like a conqueror, the master of the manor and fully in control of life and everything in it. Their delighted coos and worshipful expressions kept the illusion going, and when he finally sank into them he found his release almost instantly. The Spathian doctor had given him something that made him hard again immediately, though he would have been just as happy simply touching the women and enjoying their charms for the rest of the day. Instead he was a stallion, indefatigable, and when he realized that he and his partners had gradually joined the pile of other lovers in the room he no longer cared. He even got to touch that bewitching Human woman a few times, though she seemed much more interested in Jennifer than she was in him. There was more than enough to go around, though, and he never felt the lack.

By the time the three scientists were exhausted, the personnel of the Philotes were glad to join them in a happy, wrung-out puddle in the middle of the floor.

They were all far too tired to notice that one of their group had gone missing.

Lieutenant Desirae Richards of the UNS Philotes turned on her comm long enough to send one tiny burst of static to the ship. Then she turned and faded into Science Station Muse 12. As far as the Vertiash sensors were concerned, Doctor Jennifer Walpner had returned from her appointment onboard the Philotes and had subsequently returned to the base. The breathtaking brunette strode through the science base as if she belonged there, attracting stares but no comments as she went. She was used to stares; all the women in her family looked like her, and they all had plenty of experience fending off stares.

At the motor pool she used Walpner's ID to check out a small runner, large enough for four. She also used it to check out scanning equipment. Walpner was a biologist, and her use of biological scanning devices wasn't worthy of special note. If the Vertiash were still watching, they would only see a biologist going out to take samples. Richards hoped that she would be unremarkable enough to their scanners to be boring.

By the time that Jennifer Walpner found out that she wasn't going to be heading back to the planet any time soon, Richards was already several kilometers out from the base and heading in the direction of what she sincerely hoped wasn't a fatal crash.

Highground groaned softly as he woke up. The injuries from the explosion had caused his muscles to stiffen overnight, and they were reluctant to follow orders. He tried to settle back into his previous semi-comfortable position, aware that Hrrok hadn't woken him, but something else prodded at his attention: another moaning noise, rhythmic and muffled as if uttered by something trying to be stealthy about it.

Highground forced his muscles to do his bidding, coiling him out of his sleeping position into a crouch that allowed him to look out into the darkness of Jiqu'sa Nine. He didn't see Hrrok anywhere in the small circle of light cast by the banked fire. The only movement that he saw was in the direction of the muffled groans, where something shifted and pulsed right at the very edges of his vision. He had no idea what he was looking at; the shape was charcoal on black to his

eyes thanks to the light from the fire. Whatever was out there would be able to see him if he moved any more, and if it was prepared to pounce on him he would be toast without his weapon. Hrrok had the only blaster.

Highground risked a soft call. "Lieutenant?" he said, hoping that Hrrok hadn't wandered far. With any luck he was just out for a bathroom break somewhere and had already snuck up on the creature at the edge of the fire.

Instead, the creature froze. There was the sense of shifting and Highground heard Hrrok's hoarse voice. "Sir? Are you all right?"

"I just...is there a problem, Hrrok?"

He was silent so long that Highground almost asked the question again, but finally Hrrok said, "Yes, sir. It's...it's a personal issue that might become a problem if left any longer, sir." Hrrok's voice was pitched so low that Highground had to strain to hear it, and it had lost its customary hoarse undertones. There was almost a purr to it that brought Hrrok's spectacular body to mind; Highground pushed the thought away. It was completely inappropriate in the situation.

"What's wrong, Lieutenant?"

"It's...embarrassing, sir."

Highground blinked. Sudden realization blasted into his mind. "Oh, this...ah, this has to do with..."

"My Callypian physiology, sir."

Highground now knew that Callypians had extremely strong sex drives, most of them requiring some form of sex at least once a day. On a ship like the *Philotes* it wasn't an issue, but to someone like Hrrok, Highground could see the potential problems. "I think I understand, Lieutenant."

"Not...not entirely, sir."

"Explain?"

Hrrok was silent for another long moment. "I resort to strenuous exercise and,

ah, self-pleasuring most of the time, sir, and other methods to keep this in check. On away missions like this, there are medications that can assist me. The problem is that they're governed and administered by my personal computer."

"Ah. Which is slag now."

"Yes sir, it's...the exercises help in the short term but actually make the urges stronger when they do come. I've been...trying to..."

Now Highground knew the source of the soft moans a few moments ago. "I see. Is there..." He didn't know how to end the sentence; any offer of help would sound like a proposition. Again, not an issue in most cases, but Hrrok steadfastly clung to his male self-image and mentally hetero orientation. The results of that kind of offer were unpredictable, and Highground didn't want to damage their working relationship.

"Sir, can I count on your discretion?" Hrrok's voice had a more pronounced purr, but it sounded as if he was forcing the words out through stiff lips.

"Of course, Lieutenant. Completely."

"My physiology requires me to...well, it has to be with a male to offer lasting relief. Humans are a close enough species to offer that sort of relief, sir, so if..."

"Hrrok. No one will ever hear about it from me. At this point, it could be a survival issue." The fact that it sounded like a premise for a bad pornography video made the whole thing just that much more ridiculous; Highground hated the sound of the words as they left his lips, but they had to be said. They both needed to be on top of their game in their situation and it wouldn't be good to have Hrrok distracted by his urges.

"Potentially, sir."

Highground got out of the tree and made his way around the fire to where Hrrok lay. The lieutenant was partially unclothed, his pants down around his ankles, and the sight of him with his hand buried between his legs made it nearly impossible for Highground to continue applying a male pronoun. Millions of adolescent males across the galaxy dreamed of a situation like this.

He was surprised when Hrrok rolled over and got up on his hands and knees,

aiming his magnificent ass in Highground's direction. "It's...it's the easiest position, for a Callypian, sir, it..."

"Quiet, Lieutenant." Highground's voice was not unkind, turning the command into something sitting between an order and a suggestion. Highground could smell Hrrok's arousal from there; surely this had been a problem for longer than just a few hours. He had to admire Hrrok's self-control, even as his own interest rose.

"So just..."

"Just get it over with, sir." Hrrok's breath came quickly. The words were harsh, but Highground could understand why. That same purr filled Hrrok's voice, adding another layer to Highground's arousal.

Without further questions he undid the front of his pants and pushed them down, settling behind the Lieutenant. He was careful not to make anything more out of the situation than was already there; there were no tender caresses, no fondling or kissing. This, he reminded himself sternly, was a survival situation. His body agreed happily, eager to grasp any reason that would allow it to couple with the glorious vision on its knees before him.

There was no need for artistry or tenderness; despite Highground's size, Hrrok opened easily and allowed effortless entry. The Lieutenant was soaking with arousal. Highground risked putting his hands on Hrrok's hips, using their majesty to steady himself as he started to pump in and out.

Hrrok responded quickly, almost eagerly, his groans returning as his own hips circled to bring Highground deeper. Highground was caught between clinical detachment and a completely visceral delight with what they were doing, and the sounds that Hrrok voiced made it harder for him to remain detached.

It wasn't long, thanks to his state of arousal, before Hrrok's breath started to hitch and his movements became jerky. His groans turned to soft cries and then a breathless gasp as if he'd been punched in the stomach. He contracted around Highground, his inner muscles milking at the invader in an effort to gather his seed.

Highground's detachment, however, meant that he wasn't ready yet. By the time Hrrok's orgasm passed and his bucking resumed, Highground was closer but still

not there. He marveled at the motions of the apparent woman beneath him, the way that Hrrok's muscles rippled underneath soft, smooth skin. Hrrok's movements were easy, practiced and talented; if Highground hadn't known better he would have thought that Hrrok was a woman born, one deeply committed to the art of pleasure. The idea of a man being stuck in that body was harder and harder to imagine, and he started to breathe faster as he gave himself over to the sensations.

Hrrok's body, unsatisfied, strove for an even stronger climax as Highground kept pumping away. The lieutenant kept his eyes closed, imagining himself in one of the Recrooms with a holographic partner. He didn't know how he was going to be able to look Highground in the eye after this. The orgasm was sweet, and the one coming felt as though it was going to be even better, but he had long ago stopped hoping that sheer physical pleasure would allow him to become used to his situation. Sex and ecstasy were a mixed bag for him now, a blend of relief, pleasure, and mockery of everything that his mind tried to be.

Both of them felt their inhibitions fall away as the pleasure built. Highground even reached around and cupped one of Hrrok's breasts, a delightful handful that he squeezed without thinking. The caress made the pleasure in Hrrok's body spike, causing him to clench up. The contraction set Highground off, finally, and he thrust as hard as he could to bury himself in Hrrok before letting go with a strangled grunt. Hrrok gave a short, sharp scream as he came again, his body welcoming every drop of Highground's seed and rewarding Hrrok for once again having given in.

Almost before they were done, Hrrok pulled away from Highground. Highground gathered himself and stood, pulling his pants back up. He wasn't sure what to say or do, and felt vaguely dirty. Hrrok pulled his own pants back up as well, stretching the stressed fabric over his spectacular hindquarters, and then sat back down.

After a moment, Highground turned to go back into the shelter burned into the tree. Hrrok said, "Thank you, sir. I feel better now."

Highground thought for a moment on how to respond. Finally he settled on, "Glad you're feeling better, Lieutenant. Again, no one will hear of any of this from me."

“I appreciate that, sir.” Hrrok felt awkward and wooden now, his hated body’s needs fulfilled.

“How about I go ahead and take the rest of the watch,” said Highground.

“Yes sir. I could use some rest.” Hrrok was suddenly exhausted; his arousal had kept him from being able to rest and now that it was gone the day’s events crashed down on him. Between the long walk, the explosion, and the desperate masturbation session with its three climaxes that he’d engaged in to try and dampen his arousal before Highground’s...assistance, Hrrok felt ready to sleep for a week now that he could.

Hrrok curled up in the burned-out tree, coiled around the deep warmth that filled him where desperate emptiness had reigned only moments ago. Soon a series of tiny snores echoed from the depths of the tree. Highground sat next to the fire and stared out into the darkness until daylight came.

“Incoming hail from the Vertiash, sir,” said Aid.

“Put it on the main screen,” said Zerkoth.

The screen clicked and showed the same interior view of the Vertiash ship. A half-dozen of the insectoid creatures faced the screen; dozens of others went about various tasks in the background, apparently unconcerned with the Philotes. “This is Twelve Twelve Two of the Vertiash,” said the chorus of tiny voices.

“How can we help you, Twelve Twelve Two?” said Zerkoth.

“Our sensors have detected your ruse, Captain Zerkoth. You have a crewman on the planet, and she is heading for the possible crash site of our ship. Are you sending her to finish the job, to kill any survivors?”

Zerkoth blinked. “Of course not. I sent her to find my people, the crewmen who are marooned on Jiqu’sa Nine.”

“Any further interference will result in your destruction,” said the Vertiash.

“What are you going to do?” said Zerkoth, her voice gaining an edge composed

of anger and honed by tightly controlled panic.

“The situation is fluid,” said Twelve Twelve Two. The image vanished from the screen.

“They closed the channel,” said Aid. “Also they appear to be sending out a jamming field. I’ve lost track of Lieutenant Richards.”

“Keep trying. Keep me apprised.”

“Aye sir.” Aid swung back to his station and started trying to find a way through the Vertiash jamming field.

Hrrok and Highground trudged through the jungle, neither speaking. They kept their eyes on the rise that was their destination and varied from their path as little as possible for the trees and ruins that seemed to cover every inch of the planet. Hrrok kept his face impassive; every time that Highground glanced in his direction, Hrrok seemed to be completely unaffected by the events of the night before or the situation they were in.

Hrrok did his best to hide his turmoil over the sheer embarrassment of what he’d been forced to ask the Commander to do. He felt that had to prove himself again, somehow, prove himself as something more than just a sex-crazed slut. He didn’t know how he was going to do that, particularly because he could feel the urges starting to whisper to him again, but he was determined to figure it out.

As the sun reached its zenith, they both stopped for a quick meal. Neither looked at the other until Highground said, “Do you smell that?”

Hrrok frowned and looked up, then sniffed the air. “It smells a bit like ammonia.”

“I haven’t smelled anything like that anywhere else on the planet. I thought it was my imagination but it’s been getting stronger.”

“My senses aren’t as sharp as they were before the accident,” said Hrrok. “But now that you point it out, I can smell it too.”

“Let’s go see what’s going on.”

The smell seemed to emanate from the same direction as the hill, so they weren’t forced to alter their vector very much. They crested a gentle rise and both of them stopped to stare.

A Vertiash ship lay smoking in the bottom of what had once been some kind of pond. It was surrounded by the same ruins and jungle as the rest of the planet, but the force of the crash had blown down many of the trees and structures around it. The ship shuddered weakly, its living tissue trying to do something constructive, but many of its mechanical components were nothing more than smoking slag. Highground and Hrrok recognized the results of Jiqu power surges.

The area was absolutely swarming with Vertiash. They seemed to be altering the structure of the ship, cutting bits of the living flesh off and attaching them elsewhere. Every time one of them completed a task, it would scurry back to a group of perhaps fifty Vertiash who were balled up together. The moving Vertiash would touch the ball and then scurry back to do something else.

“Back up slowly,” said Hrrok. Highground complied, and soon they were out of sight of the insectoids.

“What on earth are they doing?” said Highground.

“It looked like they were building a hive,” said Hrrok. “I’ve studied the Vertiash for some time. What we’re seeing there looks a little like the hives that they used to form before they were capable of space flight.”

“What’s got them doing that?”

“The Vertiash are connected to a localized hive mind by computerized components in their armor. It’s possible that the components suffered the same problems that our shuttle did.”

“It looks like their ship had those problems too. So what, they reverted back to a more primitive state?”

“That would be my guess. Which means that we’re in a lot more danger than I thought we were,” said Hrrok.

Highground thought back to what he knew from various briefings. “They’re a predator race.”

“Descended from scavengers, more accurately. But if they’ve reverted to a more primitive form of behavior we can assume that’s part of the package.”

Highground nodded. “Well, the mission remains the same. We just have to go around them. Once we get back to the Philotes we can figure out what the hell a crashed Vertiash ship is doing here.”

Hrrok nodded and stood, hunched over as he moved to circle around the crashed ship and its crater. Highground followed, trying to keep his mind off of the ass flexing and relaxing in front of him, trying not to think about Hrrok’s scream of pleasure or the way that it had felt to bury himself inside the Lieutenant. The rush of danger from the Vertiash seemed to make it harder to keep his mind off of the memories.

Hrrok moved slowly, staying low as he did his best to focus all his senses on potential threats. For the millionth time since the quantum hopper accident had stranded him in this body, he cursed the lack of adequate senses; Callyprians had evolved from a communal mammal that relied on teamwork to fight off predators. Orgroths, like the one that Hrrok had once been, were of predator stock themselves and had much keener sight and hearing. Sometimes he felt that his head was wrapped in cloth.

They had made it nearly to the base of the hill when another Vertiash ship appeared in the sky above them.

“Ohh, shit,” said Highground.

Hrrok was just about to agree when they became aware of a strange buzzing sound that was coming closer. They dodged behind a large tree as it entered the same clearing, revealing itself to be a runabout of the sort that the scientists at Muse 12 used. It was heading straight for the crater and the crashed ship.

Highground stepped out and waved his arms to try to get the driver’s attention, but the runabout was already past him. He and Hrrok ran behind it, waving and shouting, but it disappeared over the rise.

There was a moment of silence and the runabout reappeared, heading back

toward them at a much higher rate of speed. Highground and Hrrrok dove in different directions, the runabout narrowly missing both of them as it skidded to a stop. The door opened and Lieutenant Desirae Richards stuck her head out. "Get in! Quick!"

Hrrrok looked back at the crater, in the direction that Richards was watching, and saw a boiling wave of Vertiasch pouring over the lip of it in their direction. He and Highground ran for the runabout, Hrrrok's hurt ankle ensuring that he got there last. He fired at the swarm a few times with the blaster, using up the last of its reserve power as he waited for Highground to get in.

The blasts hit a pair of the charging Vertiasch, sending them tumbling into the body of the swarm. They vanished immediately, whether killed or simply engulfed by the rest. Finally Highground got into the cramped runabout and Hrrrok jumped for the last seat. As he pulled himself in, suddenly glad of the hours of exercise that he'd put in since changing, the Vertiasch wave reached them. A handful of the insectoids latched onto Hrrrok's legs, their pincers and mandibles clutching at him. Hrrrok cried out, holding on as he tried to kick the monsters off, but more were coming. "Go, go!" he yelled.

Richards took off, pushing the runabout as fast as she could, and they left the Vertiasch behind for the time being. A few of them still clung to the vehicle, and more were still attached to Hrrrok's legs. Hrrrok himself was only holding onto the runabout's interior by a bit of safety webbing, his fingers locked in a tight grip that owed everything to hours of pull-ups.

The Vertiasch kept chewing, each of them pulling at him as they did so, and Hrrrok kicked at them weakly. The runabout stopped, allowing him to let go, and he was vaguely aware of Richards vaulting out of the front seat. Her speed and surety contrasted sharply with the outrageous eroticism of her heavy breasts and wide hips as she calmly drew her blaster and started firing. Soon the Vertiasch were down, twitching. Hrrrok's legs burned with a dozen wounds, his entire body tingling from close exposure to the blaster's stunning beams, and he could only twitch as he fought to pull himself up again.

Highground and Richards pulled Hrrrok to his feet, to his shame, and he did his best to help them get his nearly useless body into the runabout. Some of the Vertiasch were starting to revive by the time Hrrrok was stashed; Richards stunned them again, hardly seeming to aim. They piled into the runabout and Richards

headed out again, aiming for the hill.

Their flight was cut short as the new Vertiash ship descended, coming to rest an inch or two above the jungle floor directly in front of them. A loudspeaker set in the living flesh of the ship crackled and a multitudinous voice said, "Halt, mammals."

Richards stared out the windshield as if trying to decide whether she could get away. She said, "What do we do, sir?"

"There are six blaster ports pointed at us," said Hrrok, trying to keep his voice under control. His true form had been much better at dealing with pain.

"Do what it says, Lieutenant," said Highground. "Keep the windows and doors shut. The Vertiash can't get through them easily in their current state."

"I'm more worried about the tires," said Richards. She followed orders and the runabout stayed where it was as the wave of feral Vertiash swept over them.

The Vertiash ship opened fire from its blaster ports, the beams set to a wide angle that sliced into the Vertiash around the runabout. The feral Vertiash tumbled and lay still, either heavily stunned or dead.

"Captain," said Aid. "The Vertiash are back, and they say that they want to discuss a prisoner transfer."

"In my ready room," said Zerkoth. She tapped her comm. "Grris Hsao, please join me in my ready room."

"-completely unacceptable," said Enlet Leten. He crossed his arms over his chest and glared at the monitor, which displayed Twelve Twelve Two.

"Project Leader, I need to remind you that the Vertiash are holding three of my people prisoner. At least one of them is badly hurt. I need you to not endanger them in any way," said Captain Zerkoth. She lifted her lip just slightly, in a gesture that could easily have been mistaken for a smile but for the sharp teeth

that it displayed.

The Orgalian scientist shrank back from her a step. “There’s just no room for another research team, particularly one composed of Vertiash.”

“You have an entire planet at your disposal,” said Grris Hsao.

“It’s Union territory,” said Leten, keeping his jaw firm and his arms crossed.

“I have the diplomatic authority to allow this peaceful display of goodwill to come to fruition,” said Hsao. “Moreover, I plan to do so. You are more than welcome to register your complaints with Union headquarters, Project Leader.”

While Leten sputtered, Hsao turned to the monitor and said, “Twelve Twelve Two, on behalf of the Planetary Union, I welcome your research team to Jiqu’sa Nine in strictly peaceful anticipation of mutual scientific breakthroughs. May I suggest a landing site for your team?”

The insectoids made a buzzing noise and said, “We will use our damaged ship as the base, once our people are restored to unity. Stand by for transport of your crewmen.”

The channel closed abruptly. Zerkoth tapped her comm and said, “Chief V’Sa, stand by to transport the three members of the away team to sickbay.” She nodded to the others in the room and said, “Project Leader, I hope that you and your team continue to reinforce the olive branch that we have offered today. We do not need to resume old battles with the Vertiash.”

Leten gathered himself up and tilted his chin in an imperious manner. “I simply hope that your actions today haven’t jeopardized the incredible scientific gains we could have made here. The Union will be hearing from me.”

He swept out of the room and Zerkoth heavily. Hsao came to her and put his hand on her shoulder, and she turned her head to rest her cheek against it. He said, “You have done all that you could do.”

“I hope that it is enough.”

“Time will tell.”

She allowed herself a moment longer with her husband before she stood. “Let us go and see how Hrrok and Highground are.”

“And Richards as well.”

The Captain smiled slightly. “I suspect that Richards will be just fine.”

Highground looked up when the buzzer on his door sounded. “Come in.”

The door slid open, revealing Lieutenant Hrrok. He stood there at attention, his hands clasped just above his magnificent behind and his round breasts emphasized by the position of his shoulders. “Permission to enter and speak freely, sir.”

“Granted. Come sit down.”

Hrrok moved slowly, as if much older than he appeared to be. His uniform couldn’t hide the telltale bulges of the nano-active regeneration packs on his legs. He glanced at the offered chair but remained standing. “Sir, I came to apologize for my behavior during the away mission. There’s no excuse for-“

“Stop it, Hrrok.”

Hrrok’s mouth clicked shut, his eyes locked on a spot on the wall behind Highground’s head. Highground said, “It wasn’t your fault. It’s just how things are now. I did some research into Callypian physiology, and I understand a little better than I did. You can’t help your body processes any more than you can breathe underwater.”

Some of the tension went out of Hrrok’s shoulders. “Still, sir, I feel that I should offer some sort of apology for-“

“You’re embarrassed. You shouldn’t be. No one will find out what happened from me. As far as I’m concerned, I simply helped a crewmate with a problem, no more and no less. I hope that’s the end of this apology, Hrrok.”

The shoulders went back to their previous position and Highground regretted his tone for a moment. “It is, sir,” said Hrrok.

“Before you’re dismissed, can I make a suggestion?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Make your peace with the situation, Hrrok. We’re going to do everything we can to get you back to the way that you were, but for right now things are the way that they are. The sooner you accept that, the sooner you’ll stop feeling like you have something more to prove. You’re an excellent officer, and nothing has changed that. Dismissed.”

Hrrok saluted and left. The casual observer would have noticed little, but there was renewed vigor in his stride as he headed for the Recrooms. The exercise program waited for him...and so did the holographic Callypian who could provide him some relief from the ongoing desire for sex. Perhaps, he thought to himself, perhaps this time he could relax a little and maybe even enjoy the sensations instead of hating them. He frowned and revised the thought; perhaps this time he could look in the mirror without the massive flood of anger, shame, and hatred that he usually felt. One step at a time.

She sat back and stretched as the coded message to Planetary Union headquarters went on its way. The situation had been handled admirably by all concerned in her opinion, though she was sure that there were those who would feel otherwise. Still, that wasn’t her concern; as a field agent, she just sent reports and kept an eye on the Philotes. Her messages would be put in the file and eventually used to decide whether or not the Recreation program was worth continuing.

Her door beeped and she stood to open it. Kellera D’Kath stood on the other side. Kellera smiled at her and said, “I never get over how beautiful you are.”

Desirae Richards laughed. “Keep talking like that and we might have to make some time for something besides business.”

Kellera looked back and forth down the corridor and then glanced at the time readout on the computer on her forearm. She shrugged and surged forward, wrapping herself around Desirae and planting a kiss on her lips that would have been illegal in some border settlements. She leaned back, their breasts pressing together as they breathed, and she said, “Promise?”

Desirae smiled and closed the door.