

PLANETARY UNION



**THE TANGO
ALPHA
PROTOCOL**

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Planetary Union: The Tango Alpha Protocol

By Maxwell Avoi

Smashwords Edition

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When he opened his eyes after the quantum hop to the UNS Philotes, his first thoughts were unprofessional ones. They involved the transportation officer who was manning...womaning the console, especially her magnificent ass, her pouty lips, and a total lack of clothing on either party's part. His mind registered her dusky black skin, her blue hair, and her wide golden eyes as secondary points of interest after his cock finished taking stock. The nearly skin-tight uniform that marked her as a Planetary Union officer did wondrous things to her.

She saluted him and he forced his eyes back to a professional position. He saluted back and said, "Commander Jesse Highground, reporting for reassignment. Permission to come aboard."

Her salute ended crisply. Her face gave no indication as to whether she had noticed his interest. "Transporter Chief Derisa V'Sal, sir. It's a pleasure to meet you. Permission granted. Welcome aboard."

"You're a Callypian, aren't you, Chief?"

"I am, sir." Her tone gave no indication as to whether she was worried, proud, or otherwise concerned.

"Ah, forgive me, that was rude. I haven't seen many of you in the Union. I think it's my first time serving with a Callypian. I welcome the opportunity," he said, trying to remember his xenobiological studies. There was something he needed to remember about the race, something beyond just the fact of this one's attractiveness. Unfortunately, his mind was stuck on her face and form, unwilling to function as it should.

"I'm glad that you'll have the chance, sir. I look forward to interaction." Did she drop him a wink as she turned to lead him out? He wasn't sure; it had been so fast and just as she'd moved her head that he might have imagined it. "This way, sir. Captain Zerkoth sends her regrets that she couldn't meet you in person. Something's come up that requires her personal supervision. I've been told to take you to your new quarters."

"If you don't mind, Chief, I'd like to see the bridge. My things are already on board, if I'm not mistaken."

“Of course, sir. Right this way.”

She led him down a hallway. Her round hips swayed before that magnificent behind, irresistible. It could have been a hologram, sculpted personally by a team of the most dedicated architects available. Highground imagined them weeping and moving off to live in monasteries after finishing their work, knowing that they could never equal it.

What was more spectacular was the fact that several of the women that they passed managed to take his mind off of Chief V'Sal's behind. They were a cross-section of the Union, a dizzying display of species ranging from the near-Human to the almost painfully exotic. The males were the same, though they didn't hold his attention as strongly as the females. He made a mental note of a dozen species in the short walk to the lift, including four he hadn't met before.

Once they were inside and heading for the bridge he said, “I've never seen quite so many species working together on one ship before.”

“Well, sir, we are a Recreation class ship. That tends to lead to a bit more diversity among the crew.” The Chief stood at attention, her hands clasped above her most magnificent feature, staring forward into the middle distance.

“That's something else I didn't really understand, Chief. What exactly is a Recreation class ship?”

“The Philotes is among the first two or three in existence, so we're still semi-experimental. It's not surprising that you haven't run across the designation before. Oh, we're here.” She nodded to the door as it opened and then swept out of the lift before he could protest that she hadn't answered his question.

The bridge was as beautiful as the rest of the ship, all sleek lines and curved consoles. Everything was padded or smooth, giving the impression of a plush luxury liner rather than an official Union starship. The diversity of crew continued here; Highground looked around to see another Callypian (sitting, so he couldn't see if her ass was as perfect as V'Sal's), two Humans, a catlike Nellick, and what appeared to be a female Orgalian. The Nellick glanced at him and said, “Officer on the bridge!”

“As you were,” said Hightower as the officers stood to salute. “I'm Commander Hightower. Just got assigned here, so I thought I'd look over my new command

a bit. Carry on.”

The officers were junior ones, reflecting the fact that the ship was docked at a major port. It was a good opportunity for the senior officers to enjoy a bit of shore leave. The duty officers resumed their stations, sitting a little straighter thanks to their new First Officer’s presence. Highground took pity on them, leading V’Sal back on to the lift.

“I suppose that’ll do. Will I get the official tour later on?” he said.

“Yes, sir,” said V’Sal. “I’m sure the Captain will be glad to show you around your new command.”

“I’m sure you have duties elsewhere, Chief. I’ll find my own way to my new quarters. Thank you for the help.”

“Any time, sir. Looking forward to further interaction.” She definitely winked that time, though her face didn’t change and the motion was so subtle that he would have missed it if he hadn’t been watching for it. He watched her walk away back to her jump station, mesmerized by the way she looked from behind. This was going to be an interesting command.

Highground took the lift to the residence level, wandering through the halls until he got a feel for the layout and was able to find his new quarters. The door opened after reading his palm. He looked around inside, impressed. The new room was perhaps twice as spacious as his previous quarters on the UNS Marez. His bags, sparsely packed, were sitting on his new bed. He sat down next to them, marveling at the depth and softness of the mattress. If this was what the First Officer’s quarters were like he couldn’t imagine how the Captain’s must be.

Captain Zerkoth of the UNS Philotes lay sprawled across her bed, breathing hard as her body cooled in her bedroom’s recirculating atmosphere. A hulking form lay atop her, his rough blue skin a sharp contrast to her reddish hues and fine fur. He breathed hard as well, his cock still partially hard and lodged inside of her. Zerkoth stroked his back and said, “Are you feeling better, Nalk?”

The blue being, an Ogroth easily three times her weight and half again her height, nodded and snuggled against her with a deep rumble of contentment. He

stroked her side, his giant hand gentle on the fur over her ribs, and she gave voice to a quiet purr of contentment. “I’ve been wanting to do that since the first time I met you, Captain.”

“Please, Nalk. When we are together like this, there is no rank. That is one of the regulations. Call me Prreth when you are with me like this.”

“Yes, Ca...uh, Prreth.” His heavy jaw mangled the pronunciation of the name but it was close enough. She felt him twitch inside of her and shifted her hips to a more comfortable and conducive position.

“I wish that I had known of your desire earlier. We might have been able to take care of it without you risking your own health.”

Nalk had grown increasingly aggressive in the weeks since his promotion to bridge security on the Philotes. It was only after he’d nearly killed himself in an incredibly risky assault on a Vertiash outpost that Doctor Vrelin had recognized the Ogroth reaction to sexual frustration; some work with the doctor had led to the revelation of his desire for the Captain and this subsequent interlude. They had set up a session together so that she could help him with the problem before the frustration-born aggression had caused serious concerns.

His eyes widened as he became hard inside of her. Captain Zerkoth welcomed the opportunity to assist one of her officers in slating his frustration and she enjoyed the chance to try the sexual prowess of one of the Ogroths. The enormous race was well-known for its physical power and the way that it had translated into prowess in bed had delighted her several times now. The fact that he barely fit inside her due to sheer size was simply a bonus.

She wound her long legs around him as he hardened further, purring deep in the back of her throat as he stretched her. “Oh, I had no idea,” she said.

He chuckled, starting to work in and out of her. His weight was supported by arms bigger around than her legs, keeping him from crushing her even though his weight pinned her to the bed. Captain Zerkoth was transported; he stretched her until she was packed almost too full, hitting all the most sensitive spots inside of her. She growled out encouragement as she clung to him and he picked up speed. Her claws, usually well-concealed, extended far enough to scratch at his back while she hung on.

His power matched his size, his natural aggression taking over until she bounced off the mattress with each thrust. She was merely hanging on by that point, her body filled with pleasure as she tried to take a more active role. His strength shut her down, pinning her and making her his plaything as he continued to hammer into her. Finally she gave over to a helpless torrent of yowls and muffled roars as her body wrapped around his and her hips bucked hard against him. He erupted, filling her so full that she was worried that he might drown her. He slumped to the side, both of them winded. This time he pulled out of her, totally spent.

She patted his back and said, "Please take the time you need to recover. I have to meet with the new First Officer."

"Wait...Cap...Prreth," he said, reaching out to wrap one enormous hand around her forearm. "Will there be another...can we..."

She blinked in surprise and looked at him without expression. "Nalk, you are an officer onboard the UNS Philotes, and I am your captain. Of course there will be another time, whenever you need it."

He relaxed back onto the bed, starting to snore as she headed for her shower. She wanted to be clean and well-put-together for her first meeting with her new officer. She smiled and stretched, the afterglow of several climaxes smoldering within her. At least she wouldn't have to worry about being relaxed.

Highground was trying to figure out what the Recreation designation on the Philotes meant when the door buzzed. He recognized the sound of someone requesting entry, and he got up to open the door for them. His things were already either put away or on display though they hardly made the room look lived-in.

He opened the door and found a tall female Nellick standing there, her slitted eyes staring at him with an expression that made him think that she was sizing him up for dinner. She wore an officer's uniform and the medal pinned to her collar said that she was the elusive Captain of the ship. He had time to take in her form, tall and sleek and sexy in a stretched sort of way. Nellicks weren't known for their curves; she was beautiful in a way that a hunting cat was beautiful, and sensual in the same way. He came to attention and saluted. "Captain. First Officer Jesse Highground."

She nodded to him. “Commander Highground. I’m Captain Prreth Zerkoth. May I come in?”

“Please do, sir.”

The Captain followed him inside. Zerkoth admired the way that he filled his uniform; Humans were stockier than Nellicks but they certainly made up for it in some ways. She seated herself at the front of his desk and motioned for him to resume his seat.

He did so and said, “Glad to be on board, sir.”

“Glad to have you. Congratulations on your promotion. I suspect that it is not going to be exactly what you had in mind.”

Highground smiled a bit. “It’s...not quite what I expected, I admit. I have some questions about the Philotes, Captain.” Her voice was overly formal, almost robotic in its precision; according to the rumors, this was common with Nellicks.

“Of course.”

“To begin with, I’m not familiar with the Recreation designation. I gather that it’s a new one?”

She nodded. “The Philotes is one of three Class-R ships in the Planetary Union fleet, Commander, and the second to be so commissioned. They are not generally well known, which is fine with Union command. Some races have problems with the concept of the Recreation class.”

“Why is that? What does Recreation mean?”

She tilted her head. “You noticed the diversity of races represented here.”

It wasn’t a question. “I did.”

“The Philotes, along with the other Recreation class ships, is responsible for providing much-needed release of various kinds of frustration among the Union’s outposts and crews. Mostly we deal with the release of sexual frustration, though we do provide other services.”

“I...wait, what?”

“Surely this is not a surprise, Commander. Your own record implies that you would welcome a berth on a Recreation class ship.”

“My record?”

Captain Zerkoth nodded and pulled down her left sleeve, revealing a computer screen wrapped around her left forearm. She tapped at it and read from it. “Six citations for inappropriate sexual liaisons, including one demotion.” She looked back up at him. “This is not your grandfather’s Union, Commander. There was a time when no one would have taken official notice of your actions but the High Command frowns on that sort of thing these days.”

“I...those charges are...”

She clicked the computer off and slid her sleeve back down. “Highground, I understand. I myself have some of those same citations, for the same reasons. If you had been prone to violence or attempting to force others into sex through coercion, then you and I would not be having this conversation. However, I understand. Most of the officers on this ship would understand, and the others will at least tolerate it. Some people simply enjoy and desire sexual congress more often than others.”

He opened and closed his mouth, unable to think of a single thing to say.

“That attitude is welcome here. You will find that most of the crew is very accommodating, providing that you stay within the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Those boundaries boil down to a very simple rule: Force nothing. If you do not have consent, then do not proceed. Violation of that rule will carry the harshest penalties of which I am capable of imagining, and I can be very creative. Are we clear on that, Commander?”

Highground’s voice was weak when he said, “Perfectly.”

“Excellent. I do not want you to think that I am being harsh. I simply want this Recreation experiment to succeed, and I need everyone’s cooperation to make that happen. Adhere to the rules and we will have no problems.”

“Actually, about that...I couldn’t find very much about the Recreation class or

regulations in the computer.”

She nodded. “Again, it might be taken amiss by some of the more conservative members of the Union, so it is not widely circulated. A copy of the pertinent regulations is now waiting in your message archives.”

“Ah. Thank you. Is there anything else?”

“We are being called away on a Tango-Alpha assignment. I would like you to accompany me to the bridge as we set out, and then I can show you around the rest of the ship.”

“A Tango-Alpha?”

“It is in your new regulations manual, but in short it is a Recreation assignment to a particular ship or location within Union space.”

“Oh.” Highground had no idea how to respond to the information he’d just acquired; his head spun with a combination of confusion, shock, and wonder.

“Are you ready to join me?” Captain Zerkoth stood and looked at him expectantly.

“Oh, yes, of course.” He stood and followed her to the lift.

The Captain spoke as the lift took them to the bridge. “UNS 362436-R, designation Philotes, is a modified Union deep-space exploration vessel. Much of the storage space was turned into various recreation rooms, including full holographic and force-field capabilities for the recreation of multiple scenarios. It has a crew compliment of five hundred and seventy, and is capable of operating without resupply for up to six months at full capacity.”

“Six months seems like an awfully long time for a non-exploration ship.”

“Sometimes we are called to perform multiple Tango-Alpha operations in a short period of time, making it difficult to resupply. You will find that our services are popular and highly in demand.”

“I can imagine.”

“Mm. Also, we are often called away to some of the far edges of Union space.”

On the bridge they settled into their respective chairs. Highground was impressed with his; it was not only one of the most comfortable chairs that he'd ever had the pleasure to occupy, it had a lot of built-in options like vibration and heating and cooling. It could apparently recline all the way to a horizontal position if required. Given his new knowledge of the Philotes and her mission he wondered if that feature was ever put to use for anything other than comfort.

“Please take us out,” said the Captain. The Human at the navigation console tapped on the screen in front of him and Highground felt a slight surge as the Philotes left port. He felt a similar surge inside at the knowledge that he was launching the next stage of his career. It was an exciting thing to consider no matter what the particulars might be.

Soon they were beyond Earth's gravity and had settled into a comfortable cruising speed of several thousand times the speed of light. The ship barely registered any movement at all and Highground approved of its incredible technology; it was much more advanced than the Marez.

Once they were underway, the Captain stood and said, “Aid, you have the bridge.”

A tall, shockingly good-looking man came forward from one of the side stations and sat in the command chair. He nodded to Highground and said, “Lieutenant Commander A27-4a, sir. You can call me Aid. Welcome to the Philotes.” He gave Highground a smile that threatened to blind him; Aid's teeth were a glittering white against the coffee-and-cream of his skin.

“Ah, thank you, glad to be here,” said Highground. Captain Zerkoth cleared her throat, and Highground followed her onto the lift.

Once the door was closed he said, “That's an odd name.”

She nodded. “Lieutenant Commander A27-4a is an Adonic, Commander. They all have names of similar formulation.”

“An Adonic? I've heard of them but I thought there weren't any left.”

“There are not very many, thanks to a lack of understanding about their

background. Aid is an invaluable part of the crew.”

“What about their background?”

“They were originally an experimental race, created by Doctor Isaac Travis nearly a hundred years ago in an effort to homogenize and perfect the Human genome. Since then they have faced persecution and misunderstanding but they are a viable race and one that is gradually coming to be accepted.”

“Oh, right. I heard about Travis, but I hadn’t realized that any of his creation had survived.”

“I am glad that they have.” The lift stopped and she strode out, her natural sinuous movements drawing attention to the way that her slim curves stretched her uniform. Highground appreciated it until he found that she was looking at him. He looked away with a sudden blush. “Sorry,” he said.

She tilted her head and then said, “Ah. Not to worry, Commander. It is quite natural, and on a Recreation ship it can even be welcomed when it does not interfere with our missions. Please follow me.”

She turned and led him down the corridor, apparently unconcerned with the way that he had embarrassed himself. Highground followed, wondering if he really had embarrassed himself. Could this entire ship really be devoted to...that sort of activity? He’d always enjoyed sex but part of it had been an appreciation of its semi-taboo nature. Would it be the same in an environment that encouraged it?

Zerkoth led him to the sickbay, which surprised him. It was an interesting place to start a tour. She walked in and spoke to a harried-looking ensign. “We need to see Doctor Vrelin please.”

“Y...yes sir,” said the ensign. He moved into the sickbay, which was surprisingly crowded.

“Was there a recent problem of some kind?” said Highground, looking around at all the different species waiting to see someone. Nurses and doctors bustled among them and a steady stream of people moved in and out of the doors.

“No, nothing like that. The start of a Tango-Alpha mission means that the crew

needs to update their immunization and prophylactic implants. You will be going through the same procedure when I am done with the tour, but I wanted you to meet Doctor Vrelin before we went much further.”

The ensign returned and said, “She’s waiting for you in her office, Captain.”

Zerkoth nodded her acknowledgement and headed into the sickbay, Highground trailing behind. The women on the tables were a cross-section of some of the loveliest in the galaxy, and the ones he could appreciate were certainly worth appreciating.

The door to the doctor’s office slid open and the two of them went inside. The doctor sat behind her desk, typing something on her forearm computer. She glanced up at them, her wide dark eyes the first feature that Hightower noticed, and she said, “Captain.” He blinked at the sight of her; her breasts were simply enormous, and there was something else about her that made his mind yammer. He thought for a moment that it was her skin, silvery and smooth, but that wasn’t it.

Then the door slid shut behind them and the doctor’s manner transformed. A bright smile broke across her face and she stood. She hurried around the desk and wrapped Zerkoth in a tight hug before planting a shameless kiss on the Captain’s cheek. Then she looked at Highground, her arm still around Zerkoth’s waist, and said, “Who did you bring me?”

Highground blinked twice before he understood what he was seeing. The Doctor was about a foot shorter than the Captain, which made her around nine inches shorter than him. Despite his initial impression, it wasn’t her wide eyes that drew his attention or even the size of her huge breasts that strained at the front of her uniform. She had not two breasts, but four, each one nearly the size of her head. He fought not to stare, fought to keep his eyes on her face, and said, “Commander Highground, Doctor.”

“The new first officer! Welcome to the Philotes,” she said, giving him a lazy salute. All of her breasts bounced with the motion, rebounding off of each other.

Highground was starting to come out of his haze and he noticed that she was older than she first appeared, with fine lines around her eyes and tiny streaks of gray in her hair. The age made her look elegant instead of old. The silvery sheen to her skin and the size of her eyes told him that she wasn’t just a Human who’d

had strange cosmetic surgery. “Uh, pleasure to meet you, Doctor.”

“Forgive him if he stares,” said Captain Zerkoth, her face still impassive. “It is his first time on a Recreation ship and he is still learning the mores.”

“Well, that’s all right,” said the Doctor. “I’m a Spathian, Commander. You probably didn’t meet too many of us before. We like to stay planetside but when I heard about this assignment I couldn’t help myself.” She tightened her grip on Zerkoth’s waist and then let her go. “Are you a hugger? Spathians are known for it.”

“For more than that, I’m guessing,” he said before he could stop himself.

Vrelin gave a bright, joyful laugh before engulfing him in an embrace that was equal parts soft, warm, and soft. “Oh, I’m sure you’ll have fun here, Commander.” She let him go and said, “So are you two taking the grand tour?”

“Yes,” said the Captain. “Yours was the first stop, so that the Commander would know where to come to get his implants later.”

“Some of us don’t need implants,” said the Doctor, giving Highground a wink that would have gotten her arrested in some places. Captain Zerkoth rolled her eyes slightly, the first smile that Highground had seen from her tugging at the corners of her mouth.

“Well, ah, something to look forward to, then,” he said.

“I do like it when they blush,” said the Doctor. “You two kids have fun, now.” She bustled back to her seat, her enormous bosom bouncing off of itself as she went.

Back in the corridor, Highground said, “She seems nice.”

“Doctor Vrelin is an expert in her field, but like you she has notations in her file that might cause her to have problems with her career anywhere but a Recreation vessel,” said Captain Zerkoth.

“Oh. So she, ah...”

“She has been known to comfort her patients in ways that the rest of the Union

finds inappropriate.”

“Oh. Lucky patients.”

“Indeed. It is common with Spathians.” Zerkoth led him to the lift again. “You understand, Commander...on this ship you are welcome to propose whatever liaisons you like with the crew, provided that you remain within the guidelines I gave you at the start.”

“Well, I mean, I heard that, it’s just that when you talk about it so casually, I’m not used to...”

“I suggest that you become so. And to that end, if you would not mind a piece of advice, Doctor Vrelin is a good place to start. She is remarkably skilled and quite open to interaction of all kinds.”

Highground felt himself blushing again and the Captain rolled her eyes slightly once more. He said, “You’re all so casual about...well, about sex, here.”

She nodded. “It is part of the job. Not only that, but we try to foster an atmosphere of acceptance here. Judgment is kept to one’s self. Name-calling and force are kept confined to mutually agreed-upon scenarios, and most everything else is acceptable. Within those guidelines we try to keep from alienating others.”

“Are marriages not allowed onboard?”

“Of course they are, provided that all parties can accept our mandate and act accordingly. My own husband serves on the Philotes in a diplomatic function.”

“You’re married?” Highground wasn’t sure if he was more shocked, surprised, or disappointed.

“I am. And I am still a fully-capable, functioning member of this crew. I am proud to serve here.”

Highground didn’t have a response to that. The welcoming tour challenged much of what he thought that he’d known about life onboard a Union ship; he had no idea what to expect next.

The lift opened into a long corridor with evenly-spaced doors large enough to admit an elephant. “These are the Recrooms,” said Zerkoth. “They utilize force fields, holographic technology, and artificial intelligence to simulate any of millions of different scenarios, including custom ones.”

She turned to a wall-mounted display and tapped at it. The screen showed a list, mostly empty but with a few entries highlighted in green. “Ah, excellent. I can combine two stops, then. Our head of security is using the Recroom for a workout session.”

She led him down the hall until they stopped at one of the doors. It looked like all the others, save for the designation number and the fact that the light above the door was green instead of simply dark. Zerkoth said, “Lieutenant Tharg Hrrok is one of the best. He was recently caught in a quantum-hop incident with one of my other officers, Kellera D’Kath, and...well, you will see. Please do not be alarmed by his current appearance.”

She opened the door and they stepped inside, the door closing and vanishing behind them. The room was about the size of Highground’s quarters, but the furnishings weren’t anything like as elaborate. There were weights of various sizes and shapes in a rack along one wall, a racked bar with more weights, a bench, and a few odds and ends that he didn’t immediately recognize. The only person that he saw was a Callypian woman doing one-arm pull-ups on a rack at the back of the room.

She wore a white tank-top that showed off her belly, tight white shorts, and nothing else. Highground had been impressed by the Chief, thinking her a marvel of architectural biology, but the behind before him was even more magnificent. The Callypian had smooth, rounded muscle beneath her sleek dark gray skin, still feminine in spite of it, and nowhere did the look do her as much good as in the rear. Highground was fairly sure that she could stop a supernova just by turning and bending over a bit.

The rest of her was incredible too, though overshadowed by a behind that was galaxy-class. She was sheathed in sweat as she counted down her last dozen pull-ups. She dropped to the ground, absorbing the impact with a bend at the waist that caused Highground’s pants to tighten. It was only when she turned to them, an irritated look on her face, that he realized that he hadn’t seen Lieutenant Hrrok anywhere.

“Captain,” said the woman, her voice gravelly and low. She was just as gorgeous from the front, with full round breasts and a face that framed those golden Callypian eyes with very short sky-blue hair. Her lips were almost too full, set in a frown that made Highground want to kiss her happy again. Her belly and legs were muscular with that erotic definition that left no doubt as to either her strength or her femininity. Her hips strained at her shorts.

“Lieutenant Hrrok,” said Zerkoth. “Meet Commander Highground, the new First Officer.”

“Commander,” she said, coming to parade rest.

“Ah, Lieutenant. It’s nice to meet you.” Highground looked around, wondering whether people were going to jump out and laugh at him.

“As I told you, there was a quantum hop incident with Lieutenant Hrrok,” said Zerkoth. “He was temporarily transformed into the duplicate of one of my other officers. As you can see, he is making the best of it that he can.”

“I see,” said Highground. “Lieutenant, if you don’t mind, can I ask what...”

“I’m an Ogroth, sir,” said the beautiful woman in front of him. Highground fought to keep his face neutral. To go from a huge blue-skinned brute (and male, to boot) to this curvy, feminine form must have been a horrible shock. No wonder she...well, he looked irritated.

“I see. That must be difficult, Lieutenant.”

“Permission to carry on,” he said, staring into the middle distance between Zerkoth and Highground.

“Granted, Lieutenant. Thank you for your time,” said Zerkoth. She and Highground left, the door closing on Hrrok as he started counting down another set of pull-ups.

“The Lieutenant has had a hard time adjusting, as you can imagine,” she said.

“That must have been awful. Is there anything that can be done?”

“At the moment, no. Damage to the quantum hopper made it difficult to retrieve

a full sample of undamaged bio pattern, so the engineers are attempting to replace the ruined sections of code. It is a long process.”

“She...uh, he seems to have adjusted.”

She shook her head as the lift started again. “Callyprians have an extremely high sexual drive, one which he inherited. There are drug therapies to help control the urges, but I suspect that he is still at war with himself.”

“If there’s any way that I can help, I’d like to.”

She studied him for a moment and then said, “It is to your credit to make such an offer, Commander. I will pass it along to the interested parties.”

“Um. Thanks.” Highground wasn’t sure whether he’d just made an offer to have sex with the transformed Lieutenant or not but he felt that he should help if he could.

The next part of their tour took them to the Engineering level, where the sensual vibration from the edges was more pronounced than usual. The Captain led Highground to the Chief Engineer’s station, only to find that he was out tending to something else. They finally found him in the bowels of the ship, tinkering on a coupling normally hidden behind the panel that sat on the floor nearby. An array of tools hovered in midair next to him.

Or at least...Highground assumed that the Engineer was male. When the man slid out of the panel and stood, Highground’s eyes were immediately drawn to the four large breasts that adorned the man’s chest. His silvery skin and wide eyes marked him as a Spathian, though his breasts weren’t nearly as large as the Doctor’s.

“Engineering Chief Orolis Nello,” he said, holding his hand out to shake after they traded salutes. There was something odd about his manner, something that set the fine hairs on Highground’s neck to standing even more than the idea of the man having breasts.

They shook and Highground said, “Glad to meet you. I don’t think I’ve met a single Spathian in my entire career before, and here I meet two in one day.”

“Oh, I’m not really a Spathian, though they were the ones to create me,” said the

Engineer. He chuckled a bit and said, "I'm actually an android replica, created by an engineering team on Spathic Four."

"Really, an android? I had no idea, but there was something..."

"Yes, sir, I get that a lot. I am trying to refine my socialization skills, but it seems that I have a long way to go. I enjoy interactions of all kinds."

Highground glanced at the Captain, who remained impassive. "I'm starting to see that there are all kinds of interactions available on this ship."

"Oh, if you mean sexual ones, then yes. I quite enjoy those as well, if you're ever interested." The android's tone was pleasant, as if he was offering to make coffee.

"I...ah..."

"I suspect that the Commander is firmly heterosexual along binary lines," said Zerkoth. "He seems interested in females from many species, and not the males."

"Ah, of course," said the android, sounding unconcerned. "Then I wish you many pleasant interactions, Commander, and I hope that you and I have time to talk in the future."

"Of course," said Highground, his voice a bit weak.

"This is nothing like I expected," he admitted as he and the Captain headed back to the lift.

"Compared to other Union ships we are unconventional," she replied. "I will understand if you ask for a transfer to another assignment once the tour is over."

Before he could say anything, she said, "Keep in mind, however, that given your record, you might find it difficult to advance any further outside of duty on a Recreation-class vessel."

Highground thought for a moment and then said, "I'm not yet interested in a transfer, Captain. I just need time to adjust to such a new situation."

“Of course. It can be difficult.”

The lift left them at their final stop, in the more civilian-oriented area of the ship. Zerkoth led him to their destination: a door marked “Recreation Administration.” Highground looked at it with apprehension; now that he knew what Recreation stood for he wondered what the designation meant in this case.

The room beyond was a typical administrative space, with scattered offices and a central meeting table. A beautiful young Callypian woman stood waiting by the door, and as soon as they came in she approached with her hand out and a brilliant smile in place. Highground thought that she seemed familiar but he was too overwhelmed by her astonishing good looks to concentrate on the errant thought.

“Kellera D’Kath,” she said. “I’m the civilian Recreation Administrator on the Philotes. I heard that you and the Captain were coming here next! Welcome to the ship.”

Her voice was chipper and high-pitched, nothing like anything he had heard that day. The sense of *déjà vu* remained.

“Commander Jesse Highground...have we met before?”

She tilted her head and said, “I don’t think we have.”

Her frown made the connection for him. “Ah. I met Lieutenant Hrrok earlier, and...”

“Oh, how is Rocky?”

“She...he seemed out of sorts.” Highground fought to be diplomatic; if he had turned into a duplicate of this woman he would have had a hard time adjusting too. It must have been much worse for the Ogroth. Kellera didn’t have nearly the same musculature that Hrrok displayed; he must have worked hard ever since his change. Though Highground knew that they were genetic duplicates, Hrrok and Kellera were very different otherwise.

Kellera turned and led them back to her office. Highground noted that she wasn’t that different from Hrrok; Kellera’s behind was just as magnificent, though less toned. “Here at Recreation Administration, we’re in charge of making sure that

every one of our missions are appropriately handled. Sometimes a Tango-Alpha call comes through that requires the services of nearly everyone on board, and sometimes it's small enough that we can send an FTL-capable shuttle out to take care of the issue. My staff handles the particulars, interacting with the crew as needed so that the Philotes can offer the best services possible. It's very exciting!" Kellera sounded proud of her staff and her position.

"I'm starting to see that this is a little more involved than it sounds at first," said Highground.

She nodded enthusiastically. "You never know what is going to be needed, and we're here to take care of all the details."

"Control. Privacy lock," Lieutenant Hrrok growled. His voice sounded ridiculous no matter how hard he tried, but it was only one of a galaxy of embarrassments he was forced to endure thanks to the quantum hopper accident. He couldn't fight his new height, so small compared to his previous stature. He could offset his lack of strength with strenuous exercise but there was only so far that his new body could go before results started to become damage instead. He worried that he was reaching that point already, nearly a year after the accident. He hated how people stared at him, whether they knew his history or not, whether they were staring at him out of pity or embarrassment or simple lust.

The worst thing, though, the heaviest blow to his pride, was one that he hadn't even realized was an issue until nearly a week after the accident. By then he'd adjusted enough that he'd been allowed to leave sick bay but not enough to resume his duties.

A strange restlessness had filled him during those days, driving him to walk the corridors at all hours as it had grown. In the midst of a Tango-Alpha assignment that had involved heavy civilian traffic through the ship he had walked by a half-open Recroom that had contained a writhing, moaning group of four in the midst of a small orgy.

The shock had been incredible, driving upward to his head and down to his feet, but it had originated in his groin. He'd found himself gasping, his nerves on fire and his uniform's groin suddenly soaked. Frightened and angered, he'd made his way to sickbay where he'd told Doctor Vrelin about the situation. She'd taken

his hand and led him to the chair next to her desk, sitting in the other one so that she could keep his hand in hers. Then she had explained to him some of the finer points of Callypian physiology.

If anyone else had told him that he was experiencing a woman's sexual urges he would have lost control. Vrelin had broken the news gently, with much touching and holding, and soon the two of them had been locked in an ecstatic embrace in her office. She had led him to climax after climax until both of them had been wrung out. For the first time since the accident he had felt at peace.

Then she had told him the bad news. It was a facet of Callypian physiology. The desire to mate, to couple with another, would come back, and soon. There were medications to help delay the onset and other techniques to slow the arousal's swelling, but Callypians simply had to have sex, and often.

The worst part was that while what they had done would stave off the cravings for a time, it would take a male to truly satisfy Hrrrok's new body. Callypians had evolved a group social dynamic that meant that no one was sure which children belonged to which male; it was simply how they were set up, and the Doctor was no more able to change it than she could eradicate his fear response or need for food. The medications that could ease the urges would eventually cause physical damage.

Hrrrok had lived in denial for as long as he could, avoiding the rest of the crew during Tango-Alpha assignments and spending most of his free time in the kind of strenuous exercise that had given him back a measure of his strength. After some hesitation he had learned self-pleasuring techniques from Vrelin, allowing him to stave off the hunger with nightly bouts of self-pleasuring that had left him tired enough to sleep through the growing dreams of penetration. He'd walked around in a haze of desire, the lust looming higher every day in spite of everything he tried.

Eventually he had arrived at the Doctor's door again. By that time he'd been shaking with pure need, his groin a lake and his body so hot that he'd been scared of the fever. He had fingered himself into climax after climax, the desire crashing back down even faster and harder each time until he'd been on the edge of screaming with need. "I need help," he'd said, hating to admit it but hating the unquenchable lust even more.

The Doctor had led him to the Recrooms, making sure that no one saw. Once there she had activated the program that Hrrok now activated again.

The workout bench morphed into a low, wide couch. Now, as then, a large, naked Callypian male appeared in the corner. Hrrok stared at him, his face set in an expression that would have been dangerous in his old form but now came across as merely hungry. The lust wasn't nearly as strong as it had been that first time; he didn't allow it to get to that level any more for fear of losing control. The workouts helped but he was still forced into this same situation perhaps once a week in spite of all his willpower; he simply couldn't overcome physiology.

The first time his new body had taken over without his conscious command. Now he was in control, still compelled into doing these hateful actions but no longer utterly helpless against his body's need. The first time he had fairly torn himself out of his clothes; now he knew enough to wear small amounts of clothing during the days that he worked out in case the effort of the exercises led to a spike in his arousal levels. Now he was able to calmly remove his outer garments, the only problem being that he hated the sight of his body. Then, as now, his body had naturally gravitated toward a position that put him on all fours and presented his utterly spectacular ass to his partner. He was told that it was the traditional Callypian position and he saw no need to change it; he was there to complete some necessary business, not revel in it.

"Begin," he growled, still trying to keep his voice low in spite of the damage that he had done to his vocal cords. The first time he had simply hung onto the edge of the couch, panting and whimpering with need until Doctor Vrelin had signaled the computer to start the simulation. Now he knelt and presented himself proudly, a warrior forced to do another's bidding but still proud. Then, the Doctor had held his shoulders and stroked his head as the terrible penetration had worked its way into his new body.

Now, he tilted his pelvis and accepted the simulation's attentions without effort or whimpering. The pleasure was immediate and deep, penetrating a part of him that mere fingers could not. Then he had climaxed at once, screaming with ecstasy as the doctor had held him. Now he allowed the simulation to do as it wished to him, working him into a state of need that allowed his ego to acquiesce to the desires of his body. Since it was a Recreation ship, the

simulation was fully programmed in various techniques that worked very well on Hrrrok. Finally he rocked with the simulation, the pleasure building until he had to take iron hold of his own reactions to keep from screaming or clawing at the padded floor. Even then, when the supernova pleasure burst through him, tiny moans escaped his hatefully plump lips.

The first time he had begged the simulation to go harder and then even harder, the Doctor's soothing embrace enough to keep his ego at bay. Now he allowed the simulation to do as it would, working through his orgasm together and then building toward another. Shortly after his second, not quite as intense as the first but longer, the simulation started to hitch in breath and then pulled tight against Hrrrok's glorious ass as it deposited a load of genuine synthesized seed inside of him. It would do everything but get him pregnant, including soothe his needs for the next week or so.

Back then he had collapsed into a weeping puddle after countless climaxes, able to relax for the first time in days. He had slept, then, the Doctor still stroking his head and cradling him against her enormous breasts.

Now he simply dismissed the simulation, allowing his body to relax into the couch for a time before getting up to have the Recroom simulate a shower. He had to be on top of his game during a Tango-Alpha mission, and if it took the simulation to do it then he was prepared to make that sacrifice for the ship's safety. He showed no reaction to the situation in spite of the afterglow; as far as Hrrrok was concerned, it was simply another piece of necessary business.

Highground read through the report about their current Tango-Alpha assignment that Kellera's office had sent him. It was a small mining colony, one currently without a functioning Recroom of its own, and the miners had appealed to Union headquarters for relief. The Philotes was supposed to go to the colony and entertain the miners while a new Recroom was installed or the old one was fixed. The mission was estimated to take three days, not including travel time.

His door buzzed, and he said, "Come in."

It slid open, revealing the doctor standing there holding a small plastic box in one hand. She smiled at him. "Hello Commander. I noticed that you hadn't come back to sickbay for your immunization and prophylactic implants, so I thought

that I'd bring the mountain to you." She entered and headed to his desk, sitting down opposite him. He still had a hard time keeping his eyes off of her chest and the way that the mountains of flesh bounced and jiggled with each step.

"Oh, ah, yes. Sorry about that, just had a lot on my mind."

She chuckled and dismissed it with a wave. "No problem. I suppose that it's all fairly overwhelming if you're new to all this. I don't mind you looking, by the way."

"I...what? I didn't."

She gave him a knowing smirk. "Spathians are telepathic, Commander. Not all the time, just when we try, and generally only within tactile range. I didn't have to try with you, though; it was pretty obvious. I just wanted to let you know that I didn't mind. Hand."

She reached out and he put his right hand in hers. Her skin was smooth and soft but her grip was strong. She rolled the sleeve back; underneath the computer on his forearm a small mark indicated the location of his immunization and communication implant. While she swabbed it with a piece of cotton that left it numb, he said, "It's just a lot to take in."

"You don't have to apologize to me. I was overjoyed to find out about this assignment, but I know that some people don't react quite as well. Cultural differences, I suppose."

"I suppose?"

She chuckled as she opened a small hole. She inserted a device into the space that reminded him of his initial immunization implant, and it met the previous device with a small click that he could feel in the bones of his forearm. "There. Let's give it a few minutes to make sure that it's in good working order. Hate for your prophylactics to fail."

"That's all reversible, right?"

"Oh, sure. Just let me know if you want it removed and it'll come right now. We'll have to update it every six months or so." She stood and folded the plastic box into what he recognized as a small medical scanner. "Now, stand up and

strip.”

He blinked. “Say what?”

“Come on. Standard procedure for new officers, you know that.”

He stood slowly. “I had my physical before I left the Marez.”

She nodded, her motherly attitude all business now. “And now I want to do one to make sure that everything is up to the standards required on a Recreation ship. No offense to your doctor, but I’m sure that he didn’t know where you’d be stationed and what our protocols are here.”

He hesitated, saw her foot start to tap, and then unbuttoned the top of his uniform. It wasn’t long before he stood there in just his skivvies. She looked him up and down and ran the scanner over him, nodding in approval. “Final piece of prep work for a new officer, sir. Drop your drawers.”

He did so, closing his eyes. He hadn’t wanted to drop anything; the sight of her so close to him had triggered a response that his underwear hadn’t hidden well but at least it had provided some concealment. Now he was out and obvious, stiff in spite of the cool air.

“Ah, excellent. You really are a healthy specimen.” He heard her come closer and then he felt her warm, soft fingers wrap around his hardness. His eyes shot open, only to find that she had removed both her uniform top and the doubtlessly-incredible bra that held her gigantic bosoms. Her gigantic breasts jostled each other with every movement, sagging a little but still spectacular. She smiled at him, stroking at him, and he moaned a little. The heat of her hand was wonderful after the shock of the cool air. She leaned closer, her nipples brushing against his belly, and said, “I’ve got a secret. I lied about needing to do a physical.”

He felt his breathing accelerate. “Is...is this...okay?”

She giggled, a girlish sound for someone her age, and said, “You can rest assured that this is mutually agreeable between both parties and therefore falls well within the code of regulations for a Recreation-class vessel.”

Highground gave her a smile back and they leaned in for a kiss that was one of

the most incredible experiences of his life. She was soft, but she offered enough resistance to let him know that he was being tenderly, thoroughly kissed by a master of the craft. Her enormous breasts were electrifying, the feel of all of them flattened against his chest making him even harder. He got lost in the kiss, the two of them tasting each other as if savoring some piece of exotic fruit, learning each other's taste.

When they finally separated, he was breathless. It had been a long time since a kiss had rendered him breathless, but there it was. She smiled at him and stroked her fingertips up the length of him before saying, "Go sit on the couch, Commander."

He went, half-crouched from the sheer hardness that jutted from his groin, and she followed close behind. When he turned and sat, she knelt before him. Her enormous breasts jiggled and bounced with the motion; she stayed up on her knees instead of crouching, allowing him a full view of her elaborate charms. She gave him a smile that whispered that she knew all about the sexual desires of males of the Human variety, and that she shared them.

She leaned in and kissed the head of his shaft, lapping gently at it before engulfing him with her bottom set of breasts. The top set rested on top, the two sets completely covering even his thick length. With some effort, she leaned her head down and buried her face in her own cleavage until she was able to suck at the tip. Highground threw his head back, his strong fingers digging into the couch cushions as the combination of softness, heat, and wetness was enough to drive him halfway to frenzy after the disconcerting day that he'd had. "I'm going...I'm not able..." he stammered, trying to explain why he was about to do what he was about to do.

She gave him another one of those giggles. This one traveled the hard length of him and echoed back, bringing with it the first of one of the strongest climaxes that he'd ever had in his life. He felt that deep clench centered around his aching groin and then the roar of pleasure as he exploded into her mouth. She slurped eagerly at him, her breasts and mouth merging into one huge, soft encouragement that made it impossible for him to control anything. He came and came, and she swallowed every drop of it

Finally he was drained and gasping. She licked him clean with slow strokes of her tongue that eventually left him half-erect again.

Then she stood and started to roll off her uniform's trousers, her heavy breasts dangling as she leaned down. He caught sight of her beautiful, strong back with the highly developed musculature for the first time, so necessary thanks to her race's multiple heavy breasts. She stood again, gloriously naked, and he gazed at the silvery skin of her legs and the thick thatch of hair between them. His half-erection rose again at the sight of her, and she smiled.

She said, "Did you know that my race is telepathic?"

Highground stirred himself, forcing himself to focus on something besides her body. "I...you mentioned it, but I haven't served with many Spathians, I..."

"It's touch-range in most cases, but it makes for some interesting encounters because of the way that our nerves are set up." She climbed up his legs, settling herself in his lap with her legs splayed out to the side. His shaft was a burning brand stretching up her belly and almost to her lowest set of breasts.

"What...ah, how, is that?" he said, proud of himself for stringing a coherent sentence together. He was usually better at talking during sex, at keeping his focus, but the day and the situation teamed up to push him to his lowest mental ebb.

"Well, we're very sensitive compared to you Humans. And we're used to sharing those sensations with our partners. I hope you don't mind. It's quite automatic, and I'm told that it, ah, enhances the activity to unknown levels."

She leaned forward, putting delicious pressure on him as she hugged him close, and she kissed him just as thoroughly as before. Even the slight tang of his own seed on her lips didn't put him off; rather, it was some exotic spice that added another level to the kiss. He was so hard that he thrummed. He gasped again as she let him go, and he said, "That...that would be fine."

It seemed that a window opened up in his mind, one that showed him what she felt. He was aware of himself pressing against his belly and hot against hers, and when she finally lifted herself up to slide down onto him he groaned. The feel of her wrapping around him as she slid down, inch by inch, was unlike anything that had ever happened to him before. He felt her from the inside and the outside, felt as he entered her and felt what it was to be entered, and felt the hair on his chest rough against her extremely sensitive nipples from both sides.

The sensations were soon overwhelming, well beyond his control. He felt as if he was fourteen again, his body so eager to become a man's that he couldn't stop himself from filling his pants at the touch of a girl's budding breast. He whispered something into her ear as he came, holding her close with her multiple breasts pressed flat between them as he throbbed into her. She whispered back, though he didn't hear her with his ears. She whispered into his mind, reassuring him and sharing in his pleasure even as she rolled her hips against him.

She giggled again as he softened inside of her, but now her own arousal held him captive. He marveled at the feel of it, the way that she held him inside her with expert muscles when he was soft and then only semi-hard, writhing against him. He felt it from her side and his at the same time, her mental powers strong and sure, and he could tell how worked up she was. He started to touch her, exploring her marvelously sensitive body to try and find the best spots. He learned that nearly everywhere did something wonderful, and that the most sensitive areas were beyond anything that a Human woman could feel. Nestled in her mind, he knew precisely what was best and soon they were gasping together with mutual excitement.

He was shocked at how hard he got the third time, the time that she shared with him. He stretched her, stretching himself in her mind, and when they finally came together the mutual orgasm was so powerful that the only thing that kept him from blacking out was the window that allowed her to reach into his mind and keep him safe.

Coming down was like being born again, as she gently withdrew from him. He was alone in his mind again even though she stayed snuggled into his lap. When both of them were able to breathe normally again she said, "Welcome to the Philotes, Commander."

"So glad to be here," he said.

"I could tell." She laughed. "Join me in the shower?"

Impossibly, he felt his cock twitch against her leg. She lifted her head and grinned mischievously. "It's possible, you know, that this implant that I gave you also allows you to go...longer. Harder. More often." With each word, she stroked at his arousal until he was standing hard again.

"You're a wonderful doctor," he said. He stood, then, lifting her into the air. She

gave a delighted squeal and clamped her arms around his neck, opening the mental window again as she melted into his lips.

“Report,” said Captain Nellick. She settled into the command chair, tugging her uniform straight. She had taken a few moments for a wild ten-minute session with her husband in her ready room, and she felt quite relaxed again.

“One hour from orbit around Manderla Seven,” said Lieutenant Hrrok. Hrrok stood at attention behind the Captain, at his post where he oversaw both navigation and tactical operations. His soft lips were pressed together, his sensuous face set in a stern expression that, to the casual observer, had no business being there. His hands were clasped at the small of his back, just above his magnificent ass, forcing his heavy breasts out and up. He showed no signs that he was trying to ignore his body or that he was even aware of the fact that he was anything other than an Ogroth warrior of massive stature. Nellick was willing to allow him the illusion so long as it didn’t affect his performance, and had made it clear to the rest of her command staff that they shared the same opinion. Or else.

“Hail coming in from the mine, sir,” said Petty Officer Cevik N’Nessk. He was the communication officer for this leg of the trip, a Callypian who had a strong talent for both language and diplomacy.

“On the main viewer,” said Nellick. The large screen flickered and then steadied, showing a dirt-streaked male Human. He had a nose that dominated his face in the same way that invading armies dominated helpless villages.

“Captain Nellick of the UNS Philotes,” she said in greeting, retaining her calm and distance.

“Foreman Nelson here. How far out are you people?” He was breathing hard, his eyes darting around. Miners ran back and forth in the background, their motions agitated.

“We are one hour from orbit,” she responded. “Is the situation changed?”

“There’s been a cave-in. We really need help here.”

“We will ready rescue teams. My first officer, Commander Highground, will be in charge. We will be there as quickly as we can.”

“I hope it’s soon enough. Manderla out.” The channel went dark.

“Mister Hrrok, please shave as much time off of that hour as possible. Mister Aid, set up rescue and repair teams. Mister N’Nessk, get as much information as possible about the number of people involved in the accident, and pass it along to Aid and Hrrok when you find out.”

There were acknowledgements, and she stood. “Aid, you have the bridge. I will be in the ready room making my report to Union Central.”

Aid stood to take the command chair, his fingers dancing across the portable tablet. Nellick went to her ready room where she keyed open a channel that would broadcast her voice to the entire ship. “We are still on a Tango-Alpha assignment, but it has also grown to include a rescue mission at our destination. There has been a cave-in at the mine. I expect each of you to perform to your fullest. Commander Highground to my ready room, please.”

Highground and Doctor Vrelin were in the shower when the Captain’s orders came through, locked together in mind and body. They both looked up, and then with a mutually agreed-upon mental conversation decided that they had enough time to finish. He thrust into her, holding her tightly against the shower’s slick walls as she held onto him with her legs wrapped around his waist. Within seconds the shared pleasure drove them over the edge into another mutual climax, and then they spent a few minutes cleaning each other up before getting out to find their uniforms.

Before she left, Doctor Vrelin smiled at him and said, “I had a wonderful time. Thank you so much, and I hope that things turn out well planet-side.”

“Thank you, Doctor. That was the best welcome I’ve ever had to a new ship.”

She laughed and stood up on tiptoes to kiss him again. The kiss was no less enthusiastic, though somewhat different now that they were both clothed. “You’re sweet. Don’t worry,” she said. “It won’t be the last time. We Spathians have a rep, and I’m honor-bound to uphold it.”

They split up and headed for their respective destinations, both of them glowing

with pleasant echoes of shared pleasure. Highground forced himself to focus on what was necessary to help the trapped miners; while he'd had a wonderful time and looked forward to what else this command would eventually offer, the ship and its crew had much greater concerns than his cock at the moment.

He headed for the Captain's ready room, finding her reading a report on the mine when he got there. She nodded and said, "Please sit, Commander."

"Sorry to take so long. I was...indisposed."

"Of course. I am reading about the mine and its stability. This report is disquieting."

"How so, sir?"

"Judging from the scans by Union geologists before the mine started, there should not have been any cave-ins. The scans cannot find anything, but the extent of the damage when compared to the results of the collapse makes me wonder whether there are other factors involved."

Highground nodded. "You're thinking there might be saboteurs."

"It is a possibility. I am sending you in to oversee the rescue efforts. While you are there, you are also to look for evidence of sabotage. You and Lieutenant Hrrok will be in charge of that part of the mission, and I would prefer that you keep it to yourselves unless absolutely necessary. If there is a saboteur, we need to be careful in how we handle the situation." Her emotionless voice easily transmitted the gravity of his assignment.

"Fair enough. How long until we get to the planet?"

"We accelerated our approach, and should be there in under ten minutes. Best of luck, Commander."

"Thank you." He nodded and stood, heading for the armory. While he strode through the bridge he said, "Mister Hrrok, with me, please."

He and Hrrok got into the lift, and Highground had a sudden flash of gratitude toward Doctor Vrelin; ordinarily, a woman like Hrrok would have given Highground a raging hard-on but thanks to the enthusiastic sex that he'd shared

with Vrelin he was able to stay focused. Given how the former man would have probably reacted to any sort of sexual interest from him, Highground was doubly glad that he didn't have to worry about the issue for the time being. He explained the possible sabotage to Hrrok, only to find that the feminize man had guessed most of what was going on.

“My analysis of the situation was similar, Commander,” he said, his naturally high voice kept as low as possible. “I had planned to keep my eye out for those kinds of problems.”

“Excellent. Glad that I can count on you, Lieutenant.”

Hrrok gave him a look that could have welded steel. “Of course, Commander. My current state has not compromised my abilities.”

“I never thought that it had. It must be difficult, but I've heard nothing but outstanding things about your skills.”

“Good.” Hrrok seemed content to leave it at that, standing at attention while the lift carried them to the armory. They headed down the hallway, Highground's eyes drawn to the way that Hrrok moved in spite of everything. The smooth flex of Hrrok's muscle under his soft skin was actually reassuring; knowing that the lieutenant was strong enough to take care of himself meant that he was also tough enough to count on for backup if something should happen.

Hrrok knew all the procedures for checking out the combination of tactical computers, equipment, and small arms that they would require for the mission. The way that the armory officer treated Hrrok reinforced Highground's impression: the man gave Hrrok zero attitude, treating him as if he was the Ogroth warrior he remembered being.

They also met the members of the other teams there, Hrrok and Highground making sure that everyone was properly supplied before they headed for the shuttle deck. Highground rode the lift with Doctor Vrelin.

As soon as the door closed she relaxed from her on-duty persona into the more playful air that she assumed when not in the spotlight. “I'm so glad that we're going by shuttle for this mission. I hate to have Tharg go by quantum hop if he doesn't have to.”

“Tharg? Oh, Lieutenant Hrrrok?”

She nodded. “Naturally he won’t admit it, poor thing, but the hoppers scare him to death these days. He’s always afraid that something’s going to happen to him.”

“Something worse, I guess?”

She gave him a strange look. “There’s nothing wrong with being a woman, or a Callypian. I can see why it upsets him, but I’m surprised at your attitude.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to imply that there’s something bad about being a female. I just mean that from his viewpoint it must have been unpleasant.”

Vrelin relaxed and sighed impressively; she was capable of a lot of sighing when she wanted to. “Yes, it’s been hard for him. Still, I think that he’s adjusting in his own way.”

“My biggest issue is that it’s hard to look at Hrrrok and refer to him as a male.”

“Well, you’ll find that attraction and gender are not the black and white that Humans seem to think that they are so often. Remind me to introduce you to some of our Orgalian crew members one of these days. They have three genders and are very enthusiastic about it.”

He grinned a little, making her shiver slightly when she remembered the fun that they’d already had. “I’m getting to the point where nothing about this ship surprises me anymore.”

“Well that was quick. Glad I could help.” She laughed again, sobering when the lift doors opened.

Hrrrok oversaw the division of teams with quick, efficient orders. Highground was starting to see why the Captain trusted the altered man so much; Hrrrok was blessed with a keen mind for tactics that informed every action. They divided into three shuttles and were on the way to the planet’s surface as soon as the Philotes entered a stable orbit.

The skies around Maderla Seven were inhospitable, with near-constant storms battering the shuttles as they headed for the reinforced landing pads encased in a

mountain. Giant doors opened in a cliff, allowing the shuttles to enter a sort of an airlock where they hovered while the outer doors closed and the inner ones opened. In the much calmer air inside the mountain, the shuttles made their way to the landing area.

It was obvious even from the air that the landing area was much smaller than it had been until recently; at least half of it was taken up with a makeshift hospital. The shuttles landed as far away as possible from the beds, making sure that none of the wounded were caught in the backdraft from their engines.

As soon as the engines were powered down Highground led the first team onto the pavement. The other teams were right behind him, the medical personnel spreading out to assist where they could. While Doctor Vrelin started barking orders, Highground went to find the Foreman.

Nelson was easy enough to find; he was the man in front of a large display that showed the mine in profile, the tunnels cutting through the air as if holographic worms had made their homes there. Portions of the mines were outlined in red, showing where parts of it had collapsed. Most of the collapses were in the middle of the tunnels, though some minor cave-ins had happened further out.

Highground held out his hand. “Commander Highground of the UNS Philotes.”

Nelson shook. “Glad to have you here, Commander.” He glanced at the team with Highground, his eye lingering on Hrrok. Hrrok appeared not to notice, absorbed in the display instead. His hand moved an inch closer to his holstered blaster.

Highground spoke quickly, hoping to head off any potential violence. “What’s the situation, Foreman? How can our people help?”

Nelson nodded at the display and said, “That’s pretty much it. We have around forty miners stranded behind the collapsed areas, and you saw the injured ones.”

“Our medical team is already helping out there. How can we assist with the collapse? We brought a variety of equipment, and more’s available on the Philotes.”

“Actually, I was hoping that you had some ideas on that front, Commander. I thought maybe your quantum hoppers might be able to do something. Ours were

damaged in the collapse.”

Highground nodded and activated his communicator. “Highground to Philotes.”

Captain Zerkoth’s calm voice answered. “Philotes here. What’s the situation, Commander?”

Highground sketched out the problem. “Can the quantum hoppers lock onto the miners and get them out of there?”

“Patching Chief V’sal into the channel now,” said Zerkoth.

Once the Chief was fully updated, she said, “I’m afraid that our hoppers can’t lock onto the miners. The mines are lined with velnite, which refract the signals and lead to dangerous hopper misalignment. It would be too much for any organic material.”

“Is there some way that we can amplify the signals?” said Highground.

“It is possible that we could use a signal anchor to allow us to lock onto individuals. We would have to find a way to get the anchors to the miners.”

“That’s where we come in. Chief, get us a crate of fifty of those anchors as soon as you can. We’ll work on a way to get them to the miners.”

After signing off Highground nodded to Nelson. “You heard the Chief. How can we get to the miners in the collapsed areas?”

Nelson rubbed his face. “The problem is that they’re still in an unstable area... how big are these anchors?”

“About the size of a Human fist,” said Hrrok.

“We might be able to do that. We use robotic probes to explore before we cut. Maybe they can be rigged to carry those anchors into the collapsed areas.”

“Sounds like a plan to me. Let’s get going, huh?”

A half-dozen engineers quantum-hopped down with a small crate of the signal anchors, and they set to work while Highground went to see how the wounded

were doing.

“Mostly it’s bumps and bruises, though there were a few broken bones. I had to send six of them up to the Philotes for treatment for inhaling velnite dust,” Doctor Vrelin reported. She was utterly businesslike in the midst of the crisis, handling both her team and the civilians who’d volunteered to help with total efficiency. There was no indication in her manner that the woman who’d made such enthusiastic love with him not an hour before even existed. Highground found himself appreciating that; it was a good sign that they would be able to have an appropriate working relationship. With any luck, the rest of the crew would be just as businesslike and mature about his new command.

“Excellent, Doctor. Hrrok and I are going to oversee the delivery of the anchors, so we should have some more business for you soon.”

“We’ve got enough to keep us busy, but do what you can. Good luck.”

Highground found himself in a whirl of activity. Foreman Nelson had the information and wanted to take charge but Highground soon saw that Nelson was too concerned about his own people to make clear decisions. Highground carefully inserted himself into the process, gradually smoothing out operations and leaving Nelson feeling that he had made the tough calls himself. It was an art, one that Highground slightly resented having to use while people were trapped, but it was necessary.

Within half an hour the first dozen of the small mining robots were ready to go. When Hrrok brought that report to Highground he took the Commander aside and said, “Also, sir, I’ve had one of the robots modified to carry as many sensor arrays as the engineers could fit onto it. If the tunnel was collapsed on purpose, it should be able to find traces of any explosives.”

“Good job, Lieutenant. Keep an eye on it for me.”

“Yes, sir.”

An hour later the robots finally broke through to the miners. While Highground’s rescue teams explained to the miners what was going to happen, he took Hrrok aside. “Any information about possible sabotage, Lieutenant?”

“I’m afraid so, Commander. The sensors detected several instances of trace

amounts of a common mining explosive, nesslerite-6, along the way. There were older signatures but some of the chemicals break down quickly. That means that the explosives were used within the last day, which fits into the window.”

“Talk to Nelson and get the records that relate to that explosive, Hrrok. Find out if anyone checked out enough nesslerite-6 to cause this collapse.”

“Yes sir.” Highground shook his head, forcing himself not to stare as Hrrok walked away. Thinking of Hrrok as a man got harder and harder every time that he saw the Lieutenant’s breathtaking hindquarters but he would have to do so if he wanted to work with Hrrok. It was easier thanks to the tense situation they found themselves a part of.

By the time the first miners were being hopped out of the collapsed sections and into sickbay, Hrrok had finished the newest portion of the investigation. Vrelin returned to the ship with another half-dozen wounded via shuttle to oversee the medical operations while the rescue effort went on.

Hrrok’s report landed in Highground’s wrist computer, and Highground took a moment to read through it. According to the records and his own estimates, Hrrok had found five different miners who had checked out enough of the explosive to have caused the cave-in during the last three days. Since the explosive was unstable and degraded quickly outside of cold storage, he felt that those five fit the criteria unless there was an unknown storage unit elsewhere in the mine.

Highground took Hrrok aside again. “How can we figure out which one is the saboteur?” he said.

Hrrok shook his head. “I’ve been trying to figure that out myself, sir, but nothing’s come to mind.”

Highground nodded and looked over the list again. Something occurred to him. “How many of these five were injured in the collapse?”

“None, sir, or only the most minor of injuries.”

“How many Spathians do we have aboard who can take part in, ah, recreational activity at the moment?”

Hrrok's expression didn't change as he did a quick mental calculation. "Probably eleven, sir, but it would slow down the recovery efforts if we--"

"Spathians are tactile telepaths, correct?"

Hrrok's eyes narrowed slightly and then widened as he broke into a grin that looked like an open invitation to outrageous sex. "They are, sir."

"I think I'll let Foreman Nelson know that we can start the recreation activities, on a limited basis. Good thing I have a list of recommended miners who can avail themselves. Perhaps a half-dozen at a time, don't you think, given that the Philotes is stretched a bit thin with rescue operations?"

Hrrok's grin faded as he resumed his usual stern demeanor, but Highground was sure that he caught some merriment in the Lieutenant's eyes. "I think that would be permissible, given the situation."

"Glad to have you on board. I'll get things set up with Captain Zerkoth and then go talk to Foreman Nelson. Good work, Lieutenant."

Hrrok tilted his chin. "Thank you sir. I'll go back to assisting with the rescue efforts."

The operation was set up within the next fifteen minutes, and a handful of miners were sent on their way to the ship via shuttle. They looked happy to be going. Given Highground's brief encounter with Spathian techniques, he couldn't blame them. Lieutenant Hrrok, needed back at the ship for reasons unnamed to the miners, flew the shuttle personally.

Highground threw himself into the rescue efforts, moving rocks with his own hands as he stood shoulder to shoulder with ensigns and miners. The train of tiny mining robots trundled back and forth, carrying the quantum anchors that allowed the trapped miners to quantum hop out of the cavern that could have been their tomb.

Onboard the Philotes, Lieutenant Hrrok handed the excited miners off to Kellera D'Kath. The similarities between Kellera and Hrrok caused some whispers about identical twins, which both of them ignored. Hrrok went on his way, checking to

make sure that the brig was ready to receive up to five prisoners, and Kellera took the miners to the Recrooms. They followed happily, their eyes locked on her ass.

Five Spathian crew members waited for the miners, each woman wearing comfortable clothing that showed off their most prominent assets. The four-breasted women each took a miner into a different Recroom, already chatting and laughing with them while hands wandered. After a few minutes, one of the women came out and reported to Kellera.

“My miner prefers a more...masculine form of recreation,” she said.

“Do you think he’ll accept a Spathian male?” said Kellera, worried that the entire plan might unravel before it got started.

The woman shrugged. “I suppose he’ll go with whatever he can get. It’s been a long time, according to him.”

A Spathian male was duly recruited and sent into the Recroom, his breasts jiggling as he went. He wasn’t nearly as heavily endowed as the females, but Kellera still noted with dour amusement that his breasts were the same size as hers.

Soon after his recruitment, a small security team arrived with Lieutenant Hrrrok in the lead. They waited patiently for the Spathian crew to finish. No sounds escaped the high-tech Recrooms, of course, for which Hrrrok was grateful; sometimes the pleasure was so great during his own sessions that cries had escaped his lips in spite of all his discipline. It was good to know that such indiscretions had not become the fodder for shipboard gossip. The sounds of passion were also capable of driving his own arousal higher, and he was glad to be spared that in this instance.

He became aware of Kellera standing next to him and he tensed up. Ever since the accident had caused him to become her clone, he had felt uncomfortable around her. Doctor Vrelin, during their counseling sessions, had said that it indicated that he might blame Kellera for the accident on some level. The idea was laughable, of course; Kellera was no more to blame for the accident than anyone. She also said that his resentment at being forced into sexual acts by his new physiology might have colored his thoughts, however, and he had a harder time dismissing that idea.

“How, ah, how are you?” she said.

“Quite well, thank you,” Hrrrok responded, his back as straight as he could make it. He forced himself to relax his grip on the stunner that he carried. The rest of his security team, half Ogroth and half human, carefully kept their eyes trained on the doors of the Recrooms.

“I’ve been meaning to come talk to you, but it’s hard to, ah, adjust, and...”

“It’s quite unnecessary, but thank you for your concern,” he said.

Kellera’s shoulders slumped a little and she sidled away from the security team. “Probably the wrong time to talk, sorry. Ah, sorry.”

Hrrrok was saved from further conversation when the green light above the most distant Recroom blinked three times. It was the prearranged signal indicating that the Spathian had picked up a thought that indicated that the miner inside had been involved with the bombing.

Two of the security team peeled off, one Ogroth and one Human, heading for that door. The rest of them stayed where they were, watching the other lights in case more than one miner was involved. The two men went into the Recroom and soon exited carrying the stunned, naked form of the miner. One opened a line to the quantum hopper, where the Chief hopped the unconscious miner into the brig for later questioning.

Captain Zerkoth nodded to Lieutenant Hrrrok as he entered her ready room. “Report, please, Lieutenant.”

Hrrrok came to attention and said, “The saboteur was discovered, sir. His identity is conformed.”

“Excellent. Feel free to inform Foreman Nelson and request his presence when he has a moment.”

Hrrrok nodded and said, “There’s a potential issue, Captain.”

Warned by her officer’s tone, Zerkoth pushed aside a report and gave him her

entire attention. “Yes, Lieutenant?”

“The problem is the identity of the saboteur.”

“My son?” Foreman Nelson bellowed. Highground forced himself to stay where he was, to not take a step back in the face of the sheer volume of the man’s rage. “That’s impossible!”

“He’s already admitted to it, sir,” said Highground, keeping his voice as steady as his feet. “We would invite you to come up to the Philotes to discuss it with him and act as his advocate if need be.”

Nelson’s fists clenched harder, until his knuckles turned white, but he didn’t make a move to attack Highground. After a long, trembling moment he said, “Let’s go get my boy.”

They found Captain Zerkoth waiting for them when they got to the brig. Doctor Vrelin was there as well, looking irritated. Lieutenant Hrook hovered in the background. Restrained behind a force field, Erik Nelson sat on his bunk with his head down, staring at his hands.

“Why’d you do it, son?” said Nelson, his voice pitched low.

Erik looked up, glaring through the force field. “You know why.”

“Erik, we talked about this. I thought you understood!”

“I’ll never be you, dad. I won’t be one of your miners. There was no other way out for me!”

Nelson turned and walked away from the cell, his hands clenched again. This time he kept walking until he was out the door, leaving the Union officers standing there feeling uncomfortable. Finally Erik said, “I couldn’t get out. He wanted me to live and die on that rock, just like he had. I had to get out, and when I heard that your ship was coming here, I just...I went and got the nesslerite explosives and set them up.”

“You were planning to use us as an escape route,” said Captain Zerkoth, her voice even more expressionless than usual.

“It was my only chance to get out. I wanted to damage the mine enough to suspend operations, that’s all. I set them up to blow when no one was going to be around. I’m...I’m sorry that it turned out like it did.”

“Four people died,” said Doctor Vrelin, her usually chipper voice nearly as icy as the Captain’s.

The prisoner’s head fell again, his shoulders slumping along with it. The officers looked at him without a shred of pity. Captain Zerkoth said, “You will be transported to the nearest Union base for trial. Counsel will be provided for you if you cannot afford it.”

“To the conference room,” she said to the officers as she turned to go.

Outside the brig, Foreman Nelson stood staring out one of the holographic windows at the planet below. Highground looked at him and then nodded to the others. “I’ll meet you there, Captain.”

Zerkoth nodded and led the other officers away. Highground went and stood by Nelson. They were silent for a moment and then the Foreman said, “I thought he’d gotten used to being a miner.”

“He’ll be well-treated.”

Nelson nodded. “I know. I just...wish that I’d listened to him.” He gasped out a painful-sounding laugh. “I guess he got his way after all.”

“I’m sorry. If there’s anything that I can-“

Nelson cut Highground off with a chopping motion. “I have to get back down there, get to making sure that my men are all right.”

Highground nodded. “We’ll do that, then. The Philotes will stay in orbit to help with the rescue efforts. Our engineering team will fix your Recroom as well. I’m not sure about the rest, but I’ll get you the information as soon as I can.”

“You...you should stay. The men who are still in good shape, they’re going to

need...well. Recreation, I guess. They deserve it.”

Highground nodded. “I’ll make the recommendation to the captain, sir.”

Philotes stayed in orbit around Manderla Seven for another week, busy with both medical efforts and its usual Recreational assignments. While sex was a large part of that, parties and other activities were offered as well. By the time that the ship broke orbit on the way to Union Base Blazer, the crew was pleasantly tired and ready for a rest on the way to the next Tango-Alpha assignment. Erik Nelson was to be left at the next Union Base for legal proceedings. He offered no protests, sunk in misery over having caused four deaths during his attempt to escape fate.

Highground rolled over in bed, pressing himself up against Chief V’Sal. She made a contented purring sound and pushed back, pressing her lips to his in a passionate kiss that left him wondering if he would ever breathe again. When she pulled away she gave him a devilish smile. “How did you like your first assignment, Commander?”

“I can see that even a routine Tango-Alpha is going to be something memorable,” he said. They worked their muscles together, unwilling to separate even long enough to join more fully. They gradually worked him into her, their muscles stretching against each other until he was deep inside.

“There’s nothing routine about this, I...I hope,” she said, her breath hitching slightly.

He pressed his hands against her spectacular ass and pulled her as close as he could get before kissing her again. “Nothing routine at all, Chief.”

“Welcome...ah...welcome aboard, sir.”