

BASIC

DEITY

“What the %@!# do you think you’re doing?”

The girl didn’t know how to answer that. She had followed the instructions and hadn’t expected the reaction she was getting. Since she didn’t know how to answer, she just stood there, her mouth slightly open, some strangled sound trying to expel itself from the back of her throat. She did manage to swallow despite the dryness of her mouth.

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“Did you hear me?” the speaker mounted in the wall asked.

The girl nodded.

“Then can you tell me what the %@!# you think you’re doing? Were you awake when you filled out your entry datawork?”

Again, the girl nodded.

“Not a talker are you? That’s okay, the Processing will loosen up your tongue soon enough. You’ll be crying for your boyfriend or your mother or your favorite PetBot before the end of the day.”

The girl stood quietly, trying without success to ignore the predictions. Just above the speaker, through the tinted glass, she could see the person behind that voice. A male form, but indistinct. The girl shivered.

“Fine. You don’t have to say much. At least not to me. Now, your Sentinel, that’ll be a different situation. You’ll want to do whatever she says. If you don’t, she’ll make you wish you hadn’t signed up. She can %@!# you over twice and back again if she’s in the mood. She’ll pretty much own your pretty young body after today.”

The girl wanted to tell the man behind the glass that she hadn’t wanted to sign up. She *already* wished she hadn’t. But it hadn’t been her decision, and so, here she was, listening to the static-laced taunts of a wall speaker.

“So,” the speaker said, “here’s the deal. You can’t put your real name down on this form. It’s not allowed.”

“But,” the girl managed, “it said—“

“I know what it says. I’m reading it all off my screen here. And I’m telling you how real-life is, cutie.”

The girl shivered again. No one had ever called her that—at least nobody who wasn’t trying to lure her into an alley for a chance to gnaw on her digits.

“Just think of this as cyberspace. You need a matrix-husk designation.”

The girl replied, turning her head slightly away. In shyness? In shame?

“What did you say? I didn’t catch that. Been having trouble with the external pickups all %@!#ing day. They’re new, and they work about as well as tarokk j’aa would. Repeat what you just said, but audibly this time.”

“I don’t have one. A matrix-husk...that is. Not anymore. Not since—“

“Don’t have a matrix-husk? %@!# that! Where you been living, cutie? The Untamed? You’re leaving me speechless here. Nobody is without a matrix-husk. How do you get—” The speaker went silent. “Okay, never mind that.”

“I’m sorry,” the girl whispered.

“Yeah, I’m sure it’s not your fault. Somehow. Okay, this is a first.”

The girl adjusted the pack on her shoulder. The pack held everything she owned, so she was reluctant to put it on the floor. “What do you want me to do?” she asked.

“For starters, you can come up with a matrix-husk designation. You don’t have to pick the actual husk right now—that’s for later—but I don’t want you meeting the rest of your Talon with your real name on display so somebody can jack your identity. Glitch, somebody has to look out for you newbies.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me, cutie. Just give me a designation. There’s no way in Eiech I’m approving this data with Emily Nokani listed here.”

Emily hesitated at hearing her name spoken so casually. She looked over her shoulder. The three halls were clear. Nobody else had heard.

“Don’t worry,” the speaker said. “I wouldn’t let that kind of data out if anybody else could hear.”

“Thank you.”

“Listen. Don’t thank me again. I mean it. It makes me uncomfortable.”

Emily closed her mouth.

“Just give me a designation. I’ll approve you and send this data on its way—and you down the hall where you can experience the universally cosmic wonder of Processing.”

Hopeless, that’s what the situation was. Emily knew it. It was all too much to deal with. She missed Ky Lin. She was going to cry.

“You don’t have anything, do you?” the speaker asked.

Emily shook her head, thin black hair swaying against her shoulders.

A hissing sound issued from the speaker. A sigh. Then: “Okay, this is a first too, but I’m going to help you out here. I don’t know if it’s because I’m tired of the routine, or if it’s because you’re cuter than glitch and I’m too old to do anything about it. Something like that. Regardless, I’m going to scrounge you up a designation. Shouldn’t be too hard, right. People do it all the time. Not people your age of course, but others.”

Swirling thoughts of Ky Lin rendered Emily silent and on the verge of tears.

The speaker was quiet. Thinking.

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Emily blinked, breathing deep. She was unwilling to cry in front of the wall speaker.

“Got it!” the speaker blasted, voice clipping.

Emily waited.

“That long black hair. Thin body. Those big, brown eyes. You reminded me of a matrix-flik I saw. Had this one character. You remind me of her, now that I think about it. Her name—and now your matrix-husk designation—was Goddess.”

“Goddess.”

“It’s perfect.”

“Goddess,” Emily repeated as if she were trying the word on. It felt strange on her lips. She didn’t know if it fit. She certainly didn’t *feel* like a Goddess.

“Okay, maybe it’s not perfect,” the speaker admitted. “Seriously, it may not fit right now, but you’ll grow into it. Do you like it? Or, more to the point, will it work for you?”

Emily didn’t know if she did or if it would, but she nodded anyway.

“Cosmic. Entered and approved. You’re done here. Follow the flashing lights down the hall to your right. Stop at the door marked Processing. Wait for instructions. Do *not* enter without being prompted. Trust me, you’ll regret it.”

“I know I’m not supposed to say this,” Goddess said, “but...thank you.”

The speaker was silent for a moment. Goddess could make out slight movement behind the glass. Was he coming closer?

When the speaker spoke, she imagined a smile behind the voice.

“No problem, Goddess. Welcome to the Species.”

PROCESSED

“Drop your belongings and step through the door.”

Goddess dropped her pack and stepped forward. The door slid open as she did. The room was lined in white neoplastic—so much of it that the room appeared to be self-lighting. The effect produced a haze around the edges of her vision.

A hiss. The door closed behind her.

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The voice, piped into the room, was generated and calm. “Walk three meters forward, then sit.”

There was a chair there, and a bald, bored-looking woman in white. She glowed like the rest of the room. She held something sharp in her hand.

Goddess sat, her hands clasped in her lap. “What are you going to do?” she asked the woman.

“I’m going to shave your head. Right to the skin.”

Even though she had anticipated this part, she began to cry the moment the blades began to cut.

“Can’t have all this getting in the way,” the woman rasped. “You won’t miss it much. Not in here.”

Amputated stalks of black fell into Goddess’s lap, harsh wisps of contrast against her yellow skirt. Tears fell there too, darkening the material. She didn’t move to wipe them away; she wanted to cry. It felt good. She was the only one who was going to mourn what they were doing to her anyway.

It was over more quickly than she expected. The woman was practiced in her skill. In less than a minute, Goddess’s head was completely shaved. She stood up when the woman double-tapped her on the back of the neck. Her head felt weightless without the weight of her hair. Her hands instinctively went to touch her scalp, fingers searching out stray bristles. There weren’t any. The cut was that close. Through her tears, Goddess saw the woman give her a smug smile.

The room spoke again. “Walk three meters right. Step through the door.”

Goddess wiped her eyes, let the door open for her, and stepped through. It was a hallway. Doorways on the opposite wall stretched out on either side of her.

“Choose an open door,” the ceiling said.

Goddess did. It was a neoplastic cell, only about a meter square. Even through her tears, the walls closed in on her. Once inside, the door slid shut behind her. She spun, disoriented. She put a hand on the wall to steady herself, but the seam in the door was invisible. A sob built in her throat and got stuck. That hurt. More tears came.

“Remove your clothing,” the cell said.

“W-What are you going to do to me?” Goddess asked.

“You will not be harmed. Remove your clothing.”

Goddess fumbled at her clothes. The long-sleeved, black shirt came off

first, followed by her yellow skirt. She hesitated only a moment before sliding the rest of her clothing from her body. She stood there, shivering, shirt and skirt in one hand, undergarments in the other.

“Place your clothing on the floor,” the cell instructed.

Goddess dropped her clothes. “What are you—?”

“Close your eyes during the procedure.”

“What procedure?”

“Do not open your mouth. Do not breathe deeply. Keep your head upright. Keep your hands at your sides. Remain as still as possible. These actions will minimize the risk to you.”

Goddess had barely closed her mouth and her eyes when the liquid rained down on her. She was coated instantly in the cold spray, goose flesh rising like a spreading infection across her body. After half a minute, she realized she was holding her breath. Cautiously she exhaled through her nose, then inhaled. The chemical tang was strong enough that she tasted it on her tongue. She shivered, holding a back a desire to cough. She tried to distract herself by thinking of Ky Lin. He had hugged her tightly the day she had left. He had pressed his lips to her cheek. And then, for the first time, he had slid those same lips over and kissed her on the lips. She had been shocked—that he had done it, and that she had wanted him to. For whatever reason, she hadn’t thought of him that way before. His kiss changed all that, put her heart on a tangent, beating some new, strange beat in her breast.

The spray stopped. She kept her eyes closed, tears still escaping. She dripped and shuddered. She tried to remember what Ky Lin’s lips had felt like on hers. A delicious tingle passed through her body. If she hadn’t been crying, she might even have paid the sensation more attention. The cell whirred, then blasted her body with warm air from all sides. She was dry, tears and all, in less than a minute. She opened her eyes.

Her body hair. The rest of it. Was on the floor at her feet.

What a mess.

She spat, expelling the taste of the chemical from her mouth. She coughed. She sobbed.

“The door will open in thirty seconds,” the cell said. “Step through. Leave your clothing here. Follow all verbal instructions given to you by Species personnel. Your cooperation is mandatory, but appreciated.”

Goddess went down to a crouch, putting her head in her hands. The

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smell of chemical residue on her skin was strong in her nose.

It was all wrong. She hadn't wanted this. Her parent's wouldn't have either. Now, Ky Lin—he was a different story. He believed in what she was doing, or rather, what she was being *forced* to do. He believed in the Species and the obligations she had to them. When she received her entry date, he had accepted it with an immense level of calm. She now knew that she had *wanted* him to object. Had wanted him to act like he cared more. For her. She had wanted him to fight for her.

He hadn't done any of that though. He believed she owed the Species—a minimum of two years of her life to be exact.

Goddess didn't know what exactly, if anything, she believed. She just knew she didn't want to be where she was. She didn't want to be in a cell. She didn't want to be naked. She wanted to go back to Ky Lin, to see if there was anything between them. She wanted her hair back. All of it.

The cell hissed open. It was a different door this time. She looked up. Through wet eyes, she saw the enormity of the adjoining room. Though the walls were white, colored lights cast the room in rainbow hues. Hundreds of young women moved about inside.

Goddess stood, limbs unfolding. She stepped forward. She felt self-conscious of her body, even though all the other women were shaved and naked too.

There was certainly some order to the room, but she couldn't discern it—certainly not through the tears.

There were signs on the walls. One of them proclaimed:

**THE SPECIES IS
MOTHER**

Another said:

**DO NOT
FEAR
THE SENTINELS
WILL PROTECT YOU**

The largest one said:

**OBEDIENCE IS
MANDATORY
AND APPRECIATED**

“Name?” a voice asked.

Goddess turned.

The woman was holding a data sphere, reading from its surface without really looking up until Goddess didn’t answer. The woman didn’t repeat the question though. She just waited.

“Emi...ah—Goddess.”

“Right. Goddess. Yes. Talon-5. Move underneath the green ceiling light. Stand behind the others there. Do not talk to any of them. Move along.”

Beneath each colored light was a line of women, all waiting to be taken behind a partition which ran the length of the room. Various Species personnel appeared and disappeared behind the partition every few seconds,

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delivering data and ushering naked women to whatever waited behind.

There were three girls beneath the green light. Goddess positioned herself behind the last one, a short girl who turned and looked up at Goddess. The girl had red eyes. Goddess looked away, blinking through her tears. She waited and cried, not caring who saw her—she wouldn't have been able to stop herself anyway.

Three more girls showed up. Goddess wiped her eyes enough to see that two of them were twins. They stood close to each other, one with her hand on the other's shoulder. Their skin color was darker than the rest of the girls. Clearly, they weren't natives. Why were they joining the Species?

The line moved forward then, with Goddess and the other six girls led behind the partition by a woman in a tight gray uniform. The sight of the woman's wavy black hair made Goddess ache.

Behind the partition, they followed the woman into a hallway which turned out to be lined with various stations. Each in turn, they were run through each station. It was a gauntlet of medical tests and procedures.

Goddess had her blood sampled at the first one. While it was being analyzed, a woman shined a bright light in her eyes and ears and up her nose. When the woman was done, she handed Goddess a small data sphere.

"Don't lose this. Take this to each station, and make sure you hand it to the Species personnel there."

At the next station, Goddess was handed several small pills. She tasted them, one at a time, and answered questions about them. *How did that taste make you feel? Does that one remind you of your mother? What were you emoting when you tasted the green pill before the yellow pill?*

The olfactory tests were next. They were most unpleasant. The odors they had forced her to sample were overwhelmingly putrid. Except for one smell, which had somehow reminded her of Ky Lin. She didn't know why that smell—some mixture of sweat and synthetic oil—had stirred up memories of Ky Lin, but the tears flowed stronger anyway.

Goddess heard someone up the line screaming. Then the screaming stopped, as if the person in pain had been knocked unconscious.

At the next station, when they hooked up the 'trodes to the back of her hands and turned on the juice, her body vibrated for ten minutes. When it was over, and they were removing the 'trodes, the girl at the previous station took a deep breath of some odor and went limp, dropping to the floor with a

thud. Goddess was buzzing from the charge her body held. She was instructed to touch a small metal rod imbedded in the floor. When she did, a spark jumped the gap, cracking like a sonic boom held within her body.

Next, she took a written test. Every time she got a wrong answer, a woman would prick her shoulder with a small needle. By the time she was done, a small rivulet of blood reached all the way down to her elbow. She tried to wipe it away but only succeeded in leaving a recognizable imprint of her index finger on her arm.

A small cot was set at the next station. She lay down, spreading her legs when ordered to. In the end, no, she wasn't pregnant. Goddess figured they could've just asked—she was still intact after all. She stood, feeling a little violated.

They ran a small wand in front of her body at the next station.

“Any implants?” one of the women asked.

Goddess opened her mouth to respond, but the woman with the wand ignored her, speaking to her assistant. “Ah ha, a class seven MIU. Located at base of skull.”

The matrix interface unit had been upgraded earlier in the year, when she had turned sixteen. Ky Lin had been noticeably jealous.

The woman continued. “Looks like a Takiyoma Digital Demoness 999. This year's model. Must be nice. Glitch, I wish I could afford one of these. Okay, jack her.”

The woman's assistant picked up Goddess's data sphere and grabbed a cord from her belt. She connected one end of the cord to the data sphere and shoved the other end into Goddess's MIU. Goddess wasn't ready, mentally or physically, for that. The shock of being blasted into cyberspace took her from her feet, her eyes rolling back and her vision blanking. To her mind, the local Species cyberscape net appeared a second later. Matrix-husks began to appear. Goddess suspected that they were others who were experiencing the same thing she was; they seemed distracted, wandering without direction. There was a burst of light. A flashing stream of data scrolled up her vision. Then the cyberscape disappeared.

She was on the floor. Her data sphere was in her hand. The woman and her assistant were talking in low tones, their backs to her. Her body ached where she had hit the ground. The skin around her MIU felt raw. She wouldn't have been surprised to find blood leaking from the edges of the

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MIU, but she stopped herself from reaching back and checking.

She moved to the next station, eyes still leaking tears. She didn't want them to stop. They felt too good. Too appropriate.

There, they literally tried to break her bones. Eventually, they succeeded in snapping one of the bones in her little finger. She screamed at that, realizing why she had heard screaming before. After telling her to keep quiet, they clamped a small device on her finger for ten minutes. When they removed it, she had full range of motion with her finger, and it didn't hurt at all.

At the next station, they simply had her hold her breath for as long as she could. She was at one minute twenty seconds when the woman holding her data sphere ran a hand across Goddess's bare scalp. The move was blatantly sensual, causing Goddess to exhale sharply, recoiling back a step. She grabbed her data sphere, trying not to come into contact with the woman's hand as she did.

The next station required her to drink a pink liquid from a vial.

"What is this?" Goddess asked, holding the vial up to the light.

The woman laughed. "Believe it or not, you're the only one who's asked *before* drinking. It's a toxin flush."

"What's that going to do to me?"

"See that container over there?"

Goddess did. It was a pink bin. It was filled with a lumpy substance.

"You're going to empty the contents of your stomach into it as soon as you drink that j'aa. Don't know how it works, but it does. It sucks any drugs and foreign substances from your body. Then you vomit it out. Yeah, it's gonna clean you out real good."

Goddess almost dropped the vial.

"Sorry you asked, huh? I understand. Best to get it over with."

"I'm clean. I don't take any drugs. I'm not even on any medication."

"Sorry, everybody gets the treatment. Just drink it fast. And don't spew anything on the floor. Make sure it all goes into the bin."

Because she had no other choice, Goddess lifted the vial and drank the contents. It tasted sweet and thick, but she was on her knees in seconds, heaving it all back out. Along with her morning meal. It was a disgusting waterfall of partially digested food and stomach acid. Her stomach contracted and her mouth burned. Her fingers clutched the edges of the bin.

Along with her vomit, her tears dripped into the bin. Her nose began to run at the smell of her own stomach juices mixing with those of the women who had already passed this station. A thin line of mucus streamed out, combining with the putrid mixture beneath her. Soon, there was nothing left to bring up, but her stomach was still clenching, as if it were trying to expel the very memory of what had filled it only moments before.

Goddess bowed her head, spitting into the container, her muscles tight as the last few spasms passed through her. Her fingertips hurt from clawing at the edge of the bin. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. It was several minutes before she tried to stand. And when she did, her knees wobbled, threatening to send her back to the floor.

“That’s a good girl,” the woman said, handing Goddess a small, wet towel. “You did fine—went through it like a real soldier. You’ll do fine here.”

Goddess brought the towel to her lips, biting on the material, sucking some of the liquid from it, spitting the taste of bile from her mouth. She wiped splatters of vomit from her neck and cheeks. She dropped the towel, grabbed her data sphere, and left.

It was the final station.

“Stand on the pad,” one of two women said. “Put your feet on the dots. Raise your arms to waist level.”

Behind the pad on the floor was a tall device with multiple arms. At the end of each arm, small lasers were mounted.

“This will hurt, but the pain will be brief,” the woman said, motioning to the other, younger woman. “Scan her.”

The younger woman, looking solemn, moved in front of Goddess. She took hold of Goddess’s chin and turned her head to one side, exposing the right side of her neck and the small mark there.

“She’s an Eastern Unified League native. Branding designates Sashiko region.”

She had received the brand at birth—and every year since. The EUL liked its brandings to be clean and pristine. Fresh and easily recognized. It was all marketing.

“Well, soldier,” the older woman said, “get ready for a few more.”

“What are they for?” Goddess asked through tears. She hadn’t known about this part.

“They’re your Talon designation. You get one on the inside of your left

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thigh. One on your right calf. One on the back of your right hand. One on your left bicep. One between your shoulder blades. Since I'm in such a good mood, you pick where the one on your head goes. It's against the regulations, but I didn't get my scheduled break today so %@!# 'em."

"Left eyelid," Goddess squeaked. At least she wouldn't have to look at the brand in the mirror.

"Unusual choice, but we can do it. You'll want to see if you can stop crying though. It could cause problems when we get to the one on your eyelid. Okay, we're ready. Hold still."

Goddess didn't dare breathe. She sensed the device looming over her, motors whirring. Its metal arms reached around from behind. The small lasers rotated toward her.

"Here it comes," one of the women said.

And it did. The device made a high pitched whine. Blue beams reached out. They were quick blurs of motion. Goddess's skin burned as the lasers branded her skin in five places at once. She gritted her teeth and took it. The pain was nothing compared to what she had just gone through—especially the pain of the broken finger.

The lasers shut off. Goddess thought she could smell her flesh burning, but that might have just been her imagination. One of the arms repositioned itself in front of her left eye. She wiped her eye, then closed her lids. A moment later, the device whined again. Light pierced her eyelid like she was looking directly into the sun. Pain shot through her body as if a spike was being driven into her pupil. Somehow—just barely—she managed not to flinch. Kept her eye shut. Didn't clench her brow. She exhaled through tight teeth, forcing the air out and back in, seething. She felt spittle on her chin.

Underneath the pain, she wondered just how stupid she could be. A branded eyelid! What a glitch of an idea!

Then it was over. She allowed herself a small whimper and a couple quick gulps of air, willing endorphins to flood her body and drown the pain. After a minute, she allowed herself to open her eyes. Her left lid felt stiff and her vision was marred by an enormous afterimage. She held up her right hand. On the back, just behind the knuckles was a bold brand:

TALON-5

“Let me look at you,” the older woman said, taking Goddess by the shoulders.

The younger woman applied a clear liquid on all of Goddess’s brands except the one on her eyelid. It was some sort of numbing agent, and it was glorious. Goddess sighed, let her shoulders slump.

“Haven’t seen anybody get one there before,” the older woman said, leaning her head close. “Can only see it when you blink though. Curious. You knew what you were doing, didn’t you? Well glitch, the quiet ones are always the smart ones.”

“They’re gonna have to watch this one, aren’t they?” the younger woman asked, wiping a tear from Goddess’s cheek. It was such a tender move that it brought new tears.

The older woman winked at Goddess. “They’re glitched if they don’t. Now move along.”

Goddess moved into a new partitioned area. Three naked girls were there already. Goddess could see their brands—Talon-5 each and every one of them. Nobody was making a sound. The black-haired woman in the tight, gray uniform was there also. She was flanked by two other young women now. Their heads were shaved and their expressions were unreadable. Their eyes pierced, scanning the area, watching the Talon members enter. Goddess stood in the corner, waiting for some instruction. She received none, so she sat down on the floor. One hand went to her scalp, wondering at the bare skin there. Her other hand traced the brands on her leg, thigh, and bicep.

Goddess wept softly.

Three more naked girls arrived. Each bore the Talon-5 brands.

The black-haired woman spoke. “Stand on the black line, trooplings.”

Goddess stood, moving to the line painted on the floor, taking her place with the other Talon-5 soldiers.

“Mark time,” the black-haired woman said to the young woman on her left. “It begins here.”

Goddess struggled to contain her tears. This black-haired woman

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frightened her. She was dangerous, and she was in charge.

“Welcome to Talon-5, trooplings,” the black-haired woman said. “I am Glix Kill Thrill, and I am your Sentinel-8. I am your Mother. From this point on, you will address me as Mother Sentinel. If you address me as anything other than Mother Sentinel, you will be punished. On my left is Pulse, your Guardian-5, and on my right is Quaze, your Warrior-3. You will also address them by their titles. If you do not, you will be punished.”

Goddess thought Pulse and Quaze looked like they would enjoy punishing a few trooplings.

“You will now be issued your all-terrain ‘flage. Put it on as soon as you get it. I’m tired of looking at your pale, hairless bodies. You %@!#ing trooplings are not attractive naked. You’re all virgins I bet, and the reason isn’t a mystery to me. Not an ounce of muscle between all of you. Glitch you ugly keetchas, you look pathetic. No flesh-flik stars here. Quaze! Pulse! Get some ‘flage on these keetchas before I lose my temper!”

Quaze and Pulse issued each of the trooplings a folded package.

With shaky digits, Goddess unwrapped hers. There were undergarments in there, along with a black ‘flage. The ‘flage was a two-piece garment made of thin, synthetic fibers. She had stepped one foot into her panties when she noticed that the girl next to her was staring at her, her own package unopened. Goddess watched as the girl’s eyes traversed her body. Foot to waist to head. Scalp to chest to toe. It was a distracted ogling—perhaps she wasn’t even aware that she was doing it. Maybe the girl was still recovering mentally from the gauntlet of abuse they had all just experienced? Maybe she was daydreaming? Maybe she was—

The girl’s eyes were bright blue. So bright. *So blue!* Goddess’s mouth went dry.

The girl’s eyes widened as they caught Goddess’s. Color rose in the girl’s cheeks like licks of flame as she turned away, opening her package and unfolding the garments within.

Goddess didn’t know what to make of that. What did it mean? What *could* it mean? Nothing. Probably. Best to ignore it. Pretend it hadn’t happened. Move on.

It was a pure bolt of heaven to pull on undergarments and then to cover her body with the ‘flage. It flowed like water over her skin, moving with her limbs. Goddess heard a couple of the other girls make quiet sighs. The legs

were cut just above her ankles; the sleeves came to the middles of her forearms. She had briefly wondered about putting the 'flage on with the now-dried blood on her arm, but she had decided she didn't care.

"Excellent," Glix Kill Thrill said when the trooplings were all fully covered. "Now that you worthless little trooplings are no longer flashing your bodies at me, we can make some progress. You don't look like cheap %@!#ing keetchas anymore, but you're not quite up to Species level yet."

Glix Kill Thrill put her hands on her hips.

"Pulse! Quaze! Make them look like %@!#ing soldiers!"

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GEAR

The container in front of Goddess was full of...stuff. It had been placed there by Quaze a minute before. Now, Goddess stared at the container, wondering what she was supposed to do. All but one of the other trooplings looked just as confused. The one who wasn't confused: the shortest troopling, and quite obviously the youngest. She had most of her gear out of her container and was sorting through it all.

“I can see from the %@!#ing looks on your %@!#ing faces,” said Glix Kill Thrill, “that you are an intelligent bunch of keetchas.”

Quaze and Pulse smirked at that.

Glix Kill Thrill turned to Quaze. “Walk them through it. Like they were newborns. We’ll punish these ones later for their lack of initiative, and we’ll punish that one for being such a brain-jack.”

The young girl looked up at that, dropping the device she was strapping to her wrist.

Quaze stepped forward, holding up a chain with two pieces of metal on it. “These are your ID cards. Take them. Put the chain around your neck. You will wear them at all times as long as you are a member of the Species. Unless your two years are up, you will wear them—even if you die! They are a part of you.”

Goddess ducked into the chain. The ID cards felt cold against her breastbone.

Quaze held up the next item. “This is an AquaSucker. It draws moisture right from the air so you can survive in the field without carrying water. You will die without it. Do not abuse it. Do not break it. Do not lose it. It is your lifeline to life.

“This little device goes on your wrist. It is a data unit. It is very expensive. It is worth more than you %@!#ing keetchas are so don’t touch it until we tell you how to use it! I don’t repeat myself, so you’d all better be scanning this.”

“And these are your packs. You will carry them wherever you go. You will live out of your packs. You will put every single little piece of certified Species j’aa we issue you in them. If it doesn’t fit in the pack, you do not take it.”

Quaze paused, eyes panning across the line of trooplings. “%@!# this. The rest of this j’aa you’ll just have to figure out on your own. Pick it all up; put it all on. Incinerator baton, utility belt, assault helmet, and a suicide stick of your very own—just like I know you trooplings always wanted. Shove that in your MIU, and it’s all over as soon as the neural virus hits your stem. Liquefies the brain. *Very* effective. Might want to keep it in a safe place. You’ll *will* use it in lieu of giving up data to hostile parties! You scanning this?! Good. Now for the weapons.”

As Glix Kill Thrill, Quaze, and Pulse began issuing weapons to the

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trooplings, Goddess made sure her gear was in order. The wrist data unit stuck to the back of her left wrist, held there by technology Goddess didn't comprehend. The utility belt hung a little lopsided, but all the other trooplings wore theirs the same way, so Goddess supposed that was the way it was supposed to be. The AquaSucker, incinerator baton, and suicide stick all went in the pack. The assault helmet was a perfect fit for her shaved head. Its surface was matte black, rounded, and smooth. Shaped flaps covered her ears, but she could hear fine. There were small, circular buttons on ridged protrusions just above each ear flap. She was curious, but she thought it was best not to push them.

Even with the pack on her back, everything felt like it moved with her body. The 'flage, the pack, the assault helmet—they all seemed tailored to her person.

Then Pulse was standing in front of her, holding several items out to her. She took them one at a time. Pulse explained each one in turn.

“Pulse dagger, neuro-chill grenades, and a Death Laser 2 self-contained, portable ion accelerator defense weapon. You will call it a DL2 'cause that's what Glix Kill Thrill calls it. Scan that?”

Goddess nodded. Pulse moved to the next troopling.

The pulse dagger and the neuro-chill grenades went on her belt. The DL2 she held awkwardly with both hands, not quite knowing how she should hold it. She certainly didn't know how to operate it! Glitch no! Never even touched a gun before—despite Ky Lin's urgings—and now she was standing there, holding the primary death-dealing weapon of a Species soldier. The DL2 was dark gray and was a mess of flowing curves and sculpted angles. There were no visible seams in its surface. Small control surfaces littered both sides. The grip was padded and firm, customized to her palm. It wasn't heavy, but she almost dropped it twice while examining it. Looking over, she caught the eye of the girl that had ogled her. The girl turned away again. Goddess saw that the girl had her DL2 slung over her shoulder with the strap that attached at the butt of the weapon and just underneath the focusing nozzle. Goddess imitated the girl, the gun a pressing weight over one shoulder now. There, that felt better—correct even.

After the weaponry had been distributed, they were handed tightly bound silver packages. Goddess reached back and slid them into one of the exterior pockets of her pack.

“Congratulations,” Glix Kill Thrill said, an almost-smile dancing at her mouth. “Now that you have your food substitute rations, each of you is carrying everything you will need to survive for the next two weeks.”

Goddess, who had just wiped away a final tear, sniffed her last sniff, found that she wasn’t done crying at all.

In fact, she wasn’t even close.

NOISE

Yellow. That's what colors the walls were in this room. In contrast to the white onslaught of the previous rooms, this room appeared to be sick, maybe dying. It was such a contrast, that the trooplings—who had been led in and left here minutes ago—found themselves staring at the walls, mesmerized.

One hour. That's how much time they had to get acquainted before Glixi

Kill Thrill, Quaze, and Pulse came back and Species training would commence in earnest.

Goddess slumped, sitting in the corner, finally feeling embarrassed that she was crying in front of the other Talon members, but powerless to bring the flow to a halt. Her DL2 lay on the floor beside her, her pack on top of it. She fingered the ridges on the pulse dagger handle. She briefly thought about pulling it out and...and...

And what?

What *would* she do with it?

Her mind balked at that line of thought—incomplete and vague as it was. Best not to pursue it.

Goddess leaned her head back against the wall, wishing she wasn't who she was, that she wasn't a troopling in the Species. Tears ran down the sides of her cheeks. The twin trooplings, who were standing close, talking in low whispers, looked over at the same time. Through the liquid, Goddess couldn't interpret their expressions. Pity from one? Disgust from the other? Empathy from one? Lust? Indifference from both?

What did it matter? They didn't care about her. Didn't know her. Yet. Goddess knew that was about to change. But right now, they were strangers. They, like Goddess and the other trooplings, had EUL brandings on their neck.

And yet, somebody to talk to would be nice. Even for just an hour. Even a stranger would work for the moment.

The youngest, shortest girl was walking around to the trooplings, introducing herself, exchanging names.

Two other girls stood talking. Or was it arguing? Their arms were moving in broad movements. One shook her fist, eyes blazing. Definitely arguing. Their voices grew louder.

It was all just noise. All of it. Goddess filtered it out, tried to ignore it.

Ogle Girl stood in the middle of the room, nervous, casting furtive glances Goddess's way every few seconds. Building up the nerve to come over and talk, exchange smiles. Building up the nerve to come over and proposition her. Yeah, that was it. Had to be it. Why else would Ogle Girl be unable to keep her eyes from wandering Goddess's way?

Goddess didn't want Ogle Girl coming over.

But wanted her to come over just the same.

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Then Ogle Girl was inbound, apparently having overcome the reasons for her hesitation. When she was standing in front of Goddess, she took her assault helmet off, placing it under her arm. Goddess could see that the two of them were about the same height, with Ogle Girl being more filled out, more muscular. One of the Talon-5 brandings was on the right side of her head.

“I’m Exxy,” she said, her voice a complicated blend of huskiness and throatiness which made Goddess’s neck hair stand up. Brilliant teeth beaming there, her eyes alight with something which made Goddess feel immediately disarmed. “Is there something wrong?”

Goddess didn’t answer, even though she wanted to.

“Are you hurt?”

Goddess closed her eyes, shook her head.

“They hurt me too, you know. Broke my forearm, just below the elbow. I didn’t scream though. I could tell that irritated the glitch out of them. It’s the only thing that got me through it. Don’t know how, but they fixed it. They told me there’d be no permanent damage. I’m not sure I believe them. My arm feels a little stiff if you ask me. It’ll probably give out in the middle of training or on some mission. Then I’ll be glitched. Yeah, not sure I believe anything these people tell me. They don’t have to tell us the truth in here, you know. They’ll tell us anything to get us to stay quiet. Tell us anything we want to hear. What a pile of j’aa. Makes me sick.”

Goddess let out a breath that could’ve been a laugh. Exxy had said all of that in one breath, barely pausing between sentences.

“Yeah, um, listen,” Exxy said, “I have this feeling you may have a wrong impression of me. I figure we’ll all get introduced to each other soon enough—especially with that short girl taking the initiative. Glitch, she’s probably gonna be a pain. I suspect she operates on a different brain level than the rest of us trooplings. Probably off the charts in intelligence and all that j’aa. Little glitch know-it-all. If you don’t know how to do something and don’t feel like asking the Mother Sentinel for help—just watch little miss trooping. It’ll definitely be better than getting punished by the Mother Sentinel for asking too many trooping-level questions. Yeah, well, she ain’t cut out for the Species life. She was right behind me as we passed through the stations. Saw her face when they broke two of her toes. She gave a little squeak and went unconscious. They just let her lay there. They didn’t even

bother to fix her until she woke up screaming. We'll just see how long she lasts."

Exxy's monologue had given Goddess time to distract herself and get her tears under control.

"So," Exxy said, "as I was saying, I want to get one thing straight before you make some assumptions about me that are way glitched. I need to be explicitly clear about this: *I'm into men, not women*. So don't worry yourself that I was scanning you and your body for my twisted, in-mind fantasies. I know you saw me, and I know what you thought, but I wasn't. It was all innocent. Ok, you gonna tell me your name now? Or am I gonna ramble on a little longer? I can run my mouth about the other four trooping members, or you can give me your name so we can become friends before Glix Kill Thrill—who I've already begun to think of as GKT because it's shorter—and her sadistic subordinates come back and unleash hell on us for two weeks. You can stop me from talking at any time by just opening those lips and telling me your—"

"It's Goddess."

"Goddess, eh? Okay, I can scan that. See? Friendship is easy! I'm gonna sit down beside you now. I promise not to try anything. I'm thinking it'll be better to rest now. I have my doubts as to how much of sitting-on-our-butts we'll be able to do after this hour's up."

Exxy sat down, putting her assault helmet back on.

Goddess turned to her. "Do you know the names of the others?"

"Not yet. But—oh, look! The short one is on her way over here now. Guess we're gonna find out quick."

"Seriously...you're not into women?"

"Seriously. No. Don't take it personally. I'm mean, you're a cosmic cutie and all, even with your head shaved, but I'm not feeling it here—" Exxy tapped her heart. "—where it counts. Admittedly, you got the butt, the waist, and the chest for a flesh-flik—despite what almighty GKT said. Still you're not really my type, what with you being female—"

"Who was in a flesh-flik?" a voice interrupted. It was the short girl.

Exxy looked up. "Nice eyes. Where'd you get them?"

"My %@!#ing keetcha of a mother," the girl said after a pause. There was a quiet sense of sadness when she continued. "She toxic-dosed on a combination of Pyre, Jack, and Erupt the day I was supposed to be born. It

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had...an effect on me.”

Exxy introduced herself, somehow managing to string together a sentence of what had to be over one hundred words.

“You can call me Fluffy,” the red-eyed girl said.

“That always been your matrix-husk designation?” Exxy asked.

“Yeah. I chose it back when I was three. I spent time in hospitals. There wasn’t much to do except breathing and jacking in. It made the years pass a little faster.”

“How old are you?” Goddess asked. The question came out weaker and more tentative than she had intended. “You look too young to be in the Species.”

Fluffy’s eyes seemed to grow redder—if such a thing was even possible. Was she offended? Had Goddess touched her one sensitive button? What a way to start out! Fantastic! Goddess could almost see Fluffy’s mind coming up with ways to destroy her.

“I—I didn’t mean—“ Goddess began.

“No, I get that all the time. I admit, it’s annoying, but I shouldn’t be so sensitive, especially when your correct. I *am* too young. And yet, here I am.”

Goddess told Fluffy her name.

Fluffy smiled at both of them. “You two need to meet the rest of the trooplings. We’re going to go through Eiech together. Maybe Darr-Eiech too. It’ll be better if everybody knows everybody.”

Goddess and Exxy gathered their gear and stood.

The arguing girls, who were no longer arguing but chatting amicably, were Helix and Zilch.

Zilch was an inch or two taller than Goddess, with small, brown eyes and a thin figure. Everything about her spoke of order and control. Her ‘flage clung to her body without a single wrinkle. The material didn’t even look like it bunched up under her armpits. She had adjusted the strap on her DL2 so it hung at waist level. Only a short movement would be required to bring it into firing position. She stood tall and straight, like a matrix-idol. Goddess couldn’t see any of her brandings—not even her EUL brand. Her skin was flawless. Her nails were manicured. Could a person really be so perfect? So devoid of blemishes? She had to have just stepped off a manufacturing line!

Helix was beautiful. No arguments. Irrefutable. It was fact. A shaved head didn’t even detract from the natural splendor that her body was carved

from. Her toned shape was darker than any of the other trooplings; her skin was...sinful. Her 'flage didn't fit as well as Zilch's, loose in all the wrong places, but it did nothing to detract from her allure. Her eyes were dark blue, possible even black. Around her left eye was a circular tattoo.

Goddess thought that tattoo looked familiar. She couldn't place it. Where had she seen that tattoo before? And where had she seen that face? Where had she seen that perfect brow and those red lips, curvy chin, and cute nose? 'Cause now that she thought about it, Helix's *face* looked familiar. Wait. She almost had it. It was...just out of reach. It was—

“Kill Me If You Can!” Exxy said, loud enough that everybody else stopped talking.

Right! That was it!

Exxy stepped so close to Helix that Helix took a step back out of pure defensive reflex. “You played the whore on Kill Me If You Can! Oh my Goddess, this is unexpected! Cosmic glitch I loved that series! I have every episode imaged back home. And now, here you are. My favorite.”

“What are you doing in the Species?” One of the twins had stepped forward and asked the question. “You can't make any money in here.”

“Wait,” Fluffy said. “Before she answers that, why don't you two tell us your names. Let's get that out of the way. We don't have a lot of time left to talk—just us trooplings.”

The twin, whose yellow eyes seemed to be glowing, perhaps picking up hues from the walls, regarded Fluffy for a moment before answering. “For a young one, I bet you get you're used to getting your way.”

“Scan that. Every single glitched time.”

The yellow-eyed twin laughed. “I'm She7.”

“Who's your twin?” Zilch asked, her voice musical, yet somehow cold and stale.

“I'm Death-nuke.”

“You're the older twin, aren't you?” Fluffy asked.

“I am. By exactly seven minutes. You're off the charts aren't you?”

“Way off,” Fluffy said, nodding. “You don't even realize how much. It was the drugs you see.”

“Figures,” Death-nuke said. “So, what about it Helix? Why are you gracing Talon-5 with your famous face?”

“The reasons I'm here are my own for the moment,” Helix said.

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“Whatever anybody’s heard, it’s not a publicity stunt. That’s just idiotic. I’m not going to stage some big comeback when I get out in two years. And I’m never going back to that show. That was the second biggest mistake I ever made.”

“What was the first?” Exxy asked, looking a little deflated. Was she disappointed that the chances of Kill Me If You Can 2 happening had just plummeted to zero? It seemed that way.

Helix shook her head, eyes taking a downward turn. “Sorry, I don’t know you well enough. I don’t know any of you yet.”

Exxy laughed. “That’s about to change.”

As their allotted hour ticked by, the trooplings talked. They didn’t talk about themselves as much as they talked about each other. Each gave up little personal information, but it was enough. It was a start. Bonds—weak as they were—began to form. Most of them began to feel comfortable around each other.

Then time ran out.

Glix Kill Thrill, Quaze, and Pulse stepped into the room.

“Glad to see you keetchas are getting all keetcha-like with each other,” Glix Kill Thrill said. “Real friendly and all that j’aa. So nice. Well, glitch all that! It’s time to get down to Species business! Time to get down to *my* business! You are my seven keetchas for the next two weeks. I’m looking forward to having my way with each of you over the next fourteen days as I do my best to turn you into instruct you in the proper path. When I’m done with you, you will be a Species solider, or you will be dead by your own hands. And that’s gonna be %@!#ing difficult because there is no way in glitch that I’m going to let any of you die by anybody’s hands other than mine! Are you scanning this, keetchas?!?!”

“Aye, Mother Sentinel!” The response hadn’t been practiced, but the trooplings knew what was required of them. They even managed to all say it at the same time, and loudly enough that Glix Kill Thrill didn’t make them say it again. Instead, she motioned to Quaze. Quaze stepped forward, eyes dancing a dangerous dance. She held a thick-handled device in her hand.

“Welcome to hell, trooplings. Let’s begin.”

EIECH

Pain. It was a dear friend now. Closer than that even. Pain caressed Goddess like a lover, touching her intimately. It asked her where it should touch her, what it could do to please her. Did she like that? What about that? What about there? Yes...oh please! Ah...

Goddess cried out in the night.

Afterward, she lay panting, trying to catch her breath, her back arched,

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her toes curled. She couldn't manage more than a whimper, her throat hoarse from moaning.

Her little finger. It was the same one that they had broke back in Processing. They had weakened it then, and now that weakness had been exploited. The damage was permanent—that much was obvious to her now. It was an *inside* scar; it'd be with her for the rest of her life. Lying there, she wondered how long she had left. At times, the end didn't seem that far off.

She had thought about the pulse dagger more than once over the past two days. At times, she found herself fingering the end of the handle without realizing what she was doing. One time, she had even pulled it from its sheath and had been running her index finger over the edge before she became aware. She counted herself lucky that she hadn't unconsciously flipped the switch and activated the dagger. Her little finger gave her enough trouble; she didn't need to lop off her index finger out of pure carelessness. Besides, Exxy would never let her hear the end of it.

The trooplings had started referring to the two week period as Eiech. In cyberspace, where the legend had begun, Eiech wasn't about pain; it was about the absence of consciousness. Some people called it death. Others called it brainfried. Whatever it was, whatever the reality of Eiech was, it was not a pleasant place. Basic for Talon-5 was Eiech made real.

Goddess ground her teeth. She couldn't move her hand. It was under Glix Kill Thrill's boot. Her little finger was being crushed under there. Goddess had heard it snap as the boot had come down. She had *felt* it snap too, of course. Felt it all the way down to her toes. Sweat broke out all over her body. She felt suddenly cold. White dots appeared in her vision when Glix Kill Thrill shifted her weight.

Goddess bit back curses—she wouldn't swear and give Glix Kill Thrill the pleasure of hearing her break—and writhed quietly, crying.

"I'm terribly sorry, trooping," Glix Kill Thrill said, "that was an incorrect answer. This is the fifth time in the past twelve hours I've had to deal with you. Now, you may think I enjoy inflicting pain on you—I've had to do it so often lately—but I truly don't. It's just that you keep %@!#ing things up. Do something correctly and the pain will stop. I personally guarantee it. But glitch, with your performance these past couple of days, I'm beginning to wonder if you're cut out for Species life. Do you have anything you want to say, trooping? No? Okay, then can any of you other keetchas

tell me, on the miniscule chance you ever meet him, what the proper way to address the Godling-0 is? Somebody other than Fluffy will provide the correct answer within five seconds or I get to break the next finger in line on this keetcha's hand."

And so it went.

Two days ago, immediately after their hour of freedom, they had marched off the Species base and into the wilderness. They had been issued OSOMs, the Official Species Operations Manuals. They were five hundred page books. Actual books! Made from paper! In this form, the trooplings had to memorize its contents instead of uploading it directly into their MIUs. Fluffy had the thing memorized within two hours.

It was going to take Goddess a little longer. Until she had all the procedures memorized, she'd just have to suffer. Unless...well, there was always the pulse dagger. But really, that wasn't a pleasant option either. Sure, she cried a lot—liked it even—but she wasn't a quitter. Ky Lin had believed in her, wanted her to do this. She could do it for him couldn't she? Make him proud of her? She could show him that she could take two years of Species service. Couldn't she? It was something to think about at least. It was a reason. It was a purpose. She needed one of those. To avoid thinking about that dagger.

A six-hour run had started Talon-5 off on the two weeks that Basic consisted of. It wasn't anything the trooplings couldn't handle—they were all young and fit. She7 had lagged a bit near the end, but Death-nuke said something to her—a single word that nobody else heard—and she picked up her pace. After the run, the abuse had begun. Goddess and the other trooplings who hadn't been studying their OSOMs while running did extra physical exercises while Pulse repeatedly touched them with a prod. Each touch numbed the muscle it came into contact with for several seconds. It was a blessing and curse all in one. It dulled their aching muscles, but it rendered the touched limb useless. Pulse tagged Goddess's thigh and she twisted down into the mud. Eyes tearing up, Goddess tried to get up on one leg. She had almost made it when Pulse tagged the other leg. Goddess went down hard, bruising her hip and banging her wrist. Then, Quaze had straddled her and wiggled the little finger Processing had broken. To Goddess, the threat was clear. She had tried not to let her face show the fear she had felt, but she locked up. She felt ashamed at having been so

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immobilized by such a small thing. Wiggle. Wiggle. Little finger. Quaze had let her up when she correctly named the matrix-husk designations and ranks of the Talon-5 members in order. She was thinking fast, but she couldn't talk fast with Quaze on top of her, crushing her lungs. She could only take small breaths. Could only say a few words at a time. She rattled off the list:

“Glix Kill Thrill, Sentinel-8. She is our Mother Sentinel.”

“Pulse, Guardian-5.”

“Quaze, Warrior-3.”

“Goddess, Troopling-6.”

“Fluffy, Troopling-5.”

“Zilch, Troopling-4.”

“Death-nuke, Troopling-3.”

“She7, Troopling-2.”

“Helix, Troopling-1.”

“And Fluffy. She's Troopling-0.”

“What do the ranks mean, troopling?” Quaze had asked then.

“Trooplings are the lowest of low. We're pretty much tarokk dung. Next is the Warrior. Primarily responsible for troopling organization and punishment. The Guardian's primary responsibility is to watch over the Warrior and provide backup for the Sentinel. The Warrior is next in line if the Sentinel gets dead. The Sentinel is responsible for the entire Talon. The Sentinel gives the orders, gets the glory for the Talon's success, gets the whip for the Talon's failures.”

“And the numbers?”

“Within a Talon, the numbers indicate rank. Beyond that, they're just index numbers. Pulse is just the fifth Guardian in our Hive. You're the third Warrior in our Hive. Seven trooplings, three officers make a Talon. Ten Talons make a Hive. A hundred Hives make a Colony. All the Colonies put together make up the Species. Currently there are fifty colonies.”

“How many trooplings is that, troopling?”

Goddess had done the math ahead of time. It was a good thing too. It was hard to think with Quaze's knee in her stomach. Doing math would've been near impossible.

“Five hundred thousand. Approximately.”

“Well done, troopling.” Quaze got up. “This time.”

Goddess took deep breaths, sat up, adjusted her pack, wiped dirt and

mud from her DL2, and got to her feet. She ran to catch up with the others. When she caught up, Pulse was instructing the trooplings in basic survival techniques.

Sincere, serious instruction.

Chilling, brutal punishment.

The past two days had been filled with both.

The Talon was constantly on the move. They did not stop to eat. Glix Kill Thrill instructed the trooplings as they ran, teaching them the basics of their gear, their weapons, and their environment. It was learning on the edge.

Goddess felt constantly in danger. There was danger from the officers. They were as likely to cut her with their pulse daggers as they were to teach her something useful. Even though it had only been two days, she couldn't stop the feeling of dread that rose up in her each and every time Glix Kill Thrill brought the Talon to a halt. These little breaks from running were more often chances for the trooplings to prove how little of the OSOM they knew than they were chances for them to relieve their bladders. When they failed, sometimes they just got pushed around, punched, slapped, or—if the planets were aligned and most everything was right with the universe—simply yelled at. Other times, there was real pain and blood involved.

If Glix Kill Thrill or the other two officers ever drew blood with their punishments, it was perceived as a chance for the trooplings to practice their emergency aid skills. Had it been a coincidence that this was one of the first things they had learned after leaving the Species base? Goddess thought not.

It had been Death-nuke who had finally answered Glix Kill Thrill's question properly, enabling Goddess to retrieve her hand from underneath the boot. Helix bandaged her little finger, setting the bone with a gentle deftness. Goddess thanked Death-nuke through clenched teeth.

Death-nuke nodded. "You can return the favor someday." She said it in a way that alarmed Goddess, making her think that Death-nuke *wanted* Goddess in her debt.

Another day passed.

They still hadn't been allowed to sleep.

Glix Kill Thrill had instructed Quaze to inject the trooplings with a stimulant to keep them awake. It was effective at first, but the drug's length of effect dropped swiftly. By the third day, the trooplings were requiring injections every three hours. Their bodies were shutting down; without the

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stimulant, they would pass out. No amount of will could overcome the weariness in their bodies.

But Glix Kill Thrill wanted them awake, marching, running, jumping, shooting.

Hurting.

At the end of the third day, Fluffy passed out before her injection. She dropped like a corpse, stiff and lifeless. Her face went into the mud, her assault helmet rolling away.

Glix Kill Thrill called a halt to the injections. “Okay, glitch it! We’re stopping here, but the next keetcha who drops gets to spend the night %@!#ing jacked up on the stimulant, walking perimeter. Get your gear on the %@!#ing ground trooplings. We’re resting for six.”

Goddess knew she was close. She’d been next in line for an injection.

“Oh my Goddess, I’m about ready to drop,” Exxy said. Then she giggled. She thought using Goddess’s name in vain was funny. She was using it like that all the time now.

Exxy’s voice seemed distant, yet too loud somehow to Goddess’s ears. Exxy said something else, but Goddess didn’t think it was in a language she understood. But, it was so hard to think, she didn’t really know for sure. She turned slowly toward where Fluffy lay on the ground. Now she...she was the fortunate one here. She passed out and they just let her sleep. Zilch had turned Fluffy over so she could breath and removed her pack, setting it on the ground beside her.

Goddess stumbled. Was there a rock there, or had she just tripped over her own two feet? How clumsy! No wonder the officers didn’t have to look for excuses to punish her; she provided them herself! There was a ringing in her ears now. She was having trouble focusing. She shook her head to clear it, but that just made things worse. She7 was suddenly in front of her. How had she gotten that close so fast? Goddess couldn’t even make out She7’s expression. Her lips were moving, but no sound was coming out, or it wasn’t reaching Goddess’s ears if there was.

Goddess figured she’d better sit down. But what was this? She had attempted to kneel, but the ground just shot up at her. She tried to catch herself with her hands, but her arms gave out like they had no bones in them.

The last thing Goddess saw before she slid unconscious was the very sharp rock her eye was rushing down onto.

SENTRY

It had missed her eye. The rock, that is. But glitch, just barely. In fact, it had missed her head entirely. Somehow. Goddess didn't see how that was possible, but her eye was intact; she wasn't sporting a new puncture wound in her forehead or cheek either.

When she woke up, it was far more sudden than her loss of consciousness. Her face was in the mud. Her body ached. There was a sharp

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pricking pain back around her buttocks. Quaze had injected her back there. The stimulant had Goddess awake and alert within seconds.

Goddess groaned as she stood.

“Trooplings, we have a %@!#ing volunteer!” Glix Kill Thrill said. “Goddess, you’re walking perimeter all night. My officers and I need some sleep if we’re gonna continue to put up with you keetchas, so it’s your responsibility to watch over us through the night. Since we won’t be awake to give you your injections, you’ll have to administer them yourself.”

Goddess nodded. “Aye, Mother Sentinel. I will not fail the Talon.”

“You’re %@!#ing right you won’t. Listen up, keetchas. You succeed as a Talon. You fail as a Talon. As such, you will see to it that *this* particular %@!#ing keetcha doesn’t collapse during her watch. Each of you walks with her for one hour. Lowest rank has first watch. Now, get to it. Move it, keetchas! Aw, glitch! Somebody wake Fluffy up!”

The sun was setting. They had stopped in the middle of a field which consisted of mud and a mutant strain of grass which seemed to sway under its own power, but that could’ve been Goddess’s weariness playing with her mind. The officers found a dry spot and dug in for the night. The trooplings encircled the officers, most of them falling asleep within a few seconds of lying down.

Fluffy walked beside Goddess, their DL2s at the ready.

“Are you okay?” Goddess asked. “You hit pretty hard.”

“I could ask you the same question,” Fluffy said, “but yes, I’ll live.”

“Same here.”

The walked some time. Neither spoke. The mutant grass twisted and writhed around their ankles.

“I want to know about you,” Fluffy said. “How did you get here? Why did you join the Species?”

Goddess paused. “Why do you want to know about that?” She had managed not to dwell on Ky Lin and her life before the Species for a day and a half now—and consequently, she had avoided breaking down in tears for that same amount of time. Well, if you didn’t count certain instances of torture by the officers that is.

Fluffy scanned the area. Her eyes shone in the low light. “I know that’s not something we’re supposed to ask each other, but I can’t help it. I just want to know. It gives me a connection to you and the others that I’m going

to need to get through this. I think I can do it if I know more about you. I suppose that's selfish, but I think it can benefit all of us."

Goddess had to banish thoughts of Ky Lin from her mind to prevent her eyes from leaking. "You'll tell me your story too?"

"Absolutely. This only works if we can understand each other better."

"I scan. Okay, let's do it."

"I'll go first. Glitch, I wish they'd let us jack in. Sorry, forget I said that. It's just—I haven't been off-matrix for this length of time since I was three. I'm going through some deep withdraw. It's mental, mostly, but I'm physically addicted too as it turns out. When I passed out there, I dreamed I was jacked."

"Really?"

"Unfortunately, I dreamed I was watching that piece of j'aa Kill Me If You Can. I can't stand that type of story. No purpose to the story. Plots were written by a computer you know? The storyline was altered real-time to appeal to the audience watching it. They monitored mindwave patterns. That's probably why it was so %@!#ing popular. They *knew* what their audience wanted. Glitch, our friend Helix took off her clothes enough in that show. Didn't need to go through Processing to see her naked—not that I care about that. It makes me sorry for her, that's all."

Goddess let Fluffy's voice carry her.

"My mother died before she gave birth to me. My dad, he...had to—um, cut me out of her stomach. Whisked me, covered in my mother's blood, to the hospital. Some deity was watching over me I suppose. I spent the first two and a half years of my life hooked up to machines that kept me alive. The worst part of it—I was awake for all of it. I don't remember any of it now, but the feelings I had during that time are still with me. You wouldn't think I could have been that bored, being that young, but I was. The toxic-dose my mother ended her life with altered me. Doctors couldn't diagnose it properly, but the proof—well, just look into my eyes."

"What about your father?" Goddess asked.

"He was wealthy. Like my mother, he was a cyberspace engineer. Keeping me alive ate through his money like Gnaw through metal. He saved my life, fighting for me, paying for medical treatments long after most parents would have given up, had my DNA harvested, and been content with a clone. I'm not sure why he did it. He loved me, I guess. I don't really

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understand that. Nobody loves another person that much now do they?”

“I—I don’t know. Ah, how old are you?”

“It’s been eight years since I came home from the hospital. I came home from the hospital when I was five. My dad had run out of money the year before. When I was six, I discovered that he was selling drugs, hardcore j’aa like Flash, Pyre, and Erupt. Ironic, huh? He was selling the same drugs that took his mate from him. With me in the hospital, so young and comatose, it must have been so lonely for him during those days.

“He did it all for me though. For that, I can forgive him of the things he did. I...just can’t forgive him for getting himself killed. I was seven. Even at that age, I knew what he did, and I knew how much danger he was in. I still needed regular medical treatment, but I confronted him one day. I asked him to get out. To give it up. For me. We could find another way to make money. My mind had been modified by the toxic-dose. I thought faster than most people. I was smarter than most people. We could figure it out. Together, we could have a normal life. He could raise me as his daughter. I could have a father who wasn’t always looking over his shoulder.”

Fluffy sighed, her voice cracking.

“What happened?”

“Getting in is easy. Getting out is not. They wouldn’t let him out. He was an excellent distributor. Brought in a lot of money. His attempt to extricate himself from his entanglements met with resistance. He bribed most of them, but one in particular couldn’t be bought. That person had my father killed. They came into our home, held me in one room, took him into another. I didn’t see it happen, but I heard them. They used a...ah—force hammer on him. I could hear it every time they hit him. The walls vibrated with the sounds of his bones breaking and blood splattering. I haven’t forgot what that sounds like. I can’t remember where we lived—I think my mind is blocking that out—but I can remember what it sounded like when they killed him.”

“I’m sorry.”

“So am I. I don’t let myself cry about it. I’ve suppressed those emotions. I don’t hurt as much that way. Anyway, after that, I became a ward of the EUL. They recognize my enhanced intelligence. Put me to work. Data interpretation. I don’t like to talk about what they had me do. I knew that eventually I’d have to serve the Species, so I applied for an early entrance.

They let me in despite my age. That's it. That's my story.”

Goddess was about to reply, but turned at a sound off in the distance. Fluffy brought her DL2 up with one arm, grabbed Goddess's elbow with the other. Her fingers tapped out questions. Goddess moved her hand to Fluffy's shoulder, responding. Goddess hoped she got the codes right. There were so many. She hadn't been entirely successful over the past three days at her touchspeak fluency.

They crouched. Goddess closed her eyes and tried to quiet her heart so she wouldn't be distracted by its insistent pounding in her ears. She listened to the air. She listened to the grass. She listened to nothing.

Animal? Fluffy touchspoke on Goddess's neck.

Maybe, Goddess tapped back. *Imagination. Tired.*

Wait. Glitch. Turned. Mistake. Sleepers.

What was Fluffy saying? It was the rest of the Talon? Oh—

It was. They had circled around. The Talon was over there now, in the direction the sound had come from.

Fluffy tapped. *Keetchas. Us. Glitch. Me. Not. So. Smart. Apparently.*

Goddess smiled in the dark.

Walking, Goddess told her story. Or, as much of it as she was going to.

She grew up in the Sashiko region of the EUL. Her parents were government agents. They had cared for her as best they could, considering what they were and what they did. They had both been victims of a nanotech germ attack on their office. It had been like any other day up till then. When Goddess came home from school, there were government agents waiting at the front door. The image of those two agents greeting her in their black skinsuits and their hip-mounted pulse accelerators was still with her. One of them—a woman—had let Goddess cry on her shoulder for awhile before turning her over to the care of the government. To the EUL, she was just another ward.

She was happy enough there after awhile. She met Ky Lin when she was thirteen. They were the same age. He looked after her, becoming an older brother figure. She looked up to him. He protected her. As the time approached for her to enter the Species, she started to feel differently towards him. But the feelings were indistinct, overshadowed by her feelings of respect and gratitude for the way he treated her. The way he made her feel—as if she was special. As if she were important. Most importantly,

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sometimes, he made her feel like her parents weren't really gone; maybe they were just away on a government assignment.

"Do you love him?" Fluffy asked.

"I-I'm not sure," Goddess said. "I feel something, but I'm confused."

"Did he support your obligations to the Species?"

"Yes."

"Did you want to join? Hold it, ignore that question. I know the answer to that. I saw you in the Processing line. Your face told me everything I needed to know."

Goddess shifted her pack, checked her data unit.

"I suspect," Fluffy said, "you're upset that he let you enter the Species so willingly. You wanted him to fight for you—no matter how useless that would have been, not to mention illegal."

Goddess nodded. "Being sent to Deep Locker Six wasn't something I was going to let happen. I'll do my time in the Species. When I'm done, I'll be free and on my own."

"Are you going to go back to him?"

"To see if he still wants me after two years? To see if he *ever* wanted me?"

"Yes."

Goddess responded, barely audible. "I don't know."

"Well, after Basic, maybe you'll have a chance to talk to him. Scan the truth out of him. If it was meant to be, it will be. Glitch, I'm tired."

"Thanks," Goddess said, only briefly wondering how it came to be that she was taking advice from a thirteen-year-old girl. Simple. That girl's IQ is up in the stratosphere, and she's carrying her DL2 like she designed the thing.

Helix appeared, Fluffy's relief.

"You woke up after only an hour's sleep?" Goddess asked, blinking her eyes. Her eyelid with the branding itched, so she rubbed it.

"I'm not entirely sure how, but yes."

In the dark, the circle around Helix's eye wasn't visible. Goddess told her Fluffy's idea. Goddess shared her story first. Helix was agreeable to sharing hers.

"I trust you for some reason," Helix said. "Maybe I just *want* to trust you, so I'm going to go ahead and do it, regardless of whether I should or shouldn't."

“I feel the same way,” Goddess said.

“We’re in this together. I always wanted to act in the matrix-fliks. I did a few advertising spots when I was younger. I scored *Kill Me If You Can* two years ago. That was my first big role. Really, my first *real* role. Full-time, live scripted acting in its raw form. That role forced me to tap into my acting skills like I never had before. I didn’t know that I could do some of the things I did for that role. It made me a better actress.”

“It made you a famous actress too. What about that?”

“That part is good. And bad. Mostly bad if you’re me.”

“What do you mean? I thought...” Goddess trailed off, not actually knowing what she thought.

Helix stopped walking. “I don’t know how to say this delicately, so I won’t. *I whored myself for that role*. I was going to do whatever it took to get and keep that role. I wanted the money and the fame and the power. I wanted it all. And I got it. I got it all. Glitch me if I didn’t get what was coming to me. Glitch me if I didn’t get what I deserved.

“When it came to the role, I prostituted myself. I let the world see me naked. I let the world see all of me. Even though I was acting, I was letting them see who I really was. It was pathetic that I had them fooled. They thought they were seeing an actress, but they were really seeing the true me laid bare in front of them—not just the physical me, but my whole persona. I was just acting out what was inside me. The world bought the act. The show was popular. It burned all the others in the ratings. I guess I’m partly responsible for that. %@!#ing pathetic.

“A year ago, I got married. I just said that I got what I deserved. Well, I was referring to my marriage. He was an overseer for the show. I was stupid. It’s as simple as that. I don’t know what I was thinking. He was abusive right from the start and I still married him, slept with him, let him use my body, let him do whatever he wanted with it. Have sex with it. Beat it. Pleasure it, pain it—it didn’t matter. The officers call us keetchas? As far as I’m concerned, they’ve scanned me correctly.”

Flickers of anger were welling within Goddess. She realized she had her finger on the trigger of her DL2. She pulled her finger back and relaxed her grip.

Helix continued. “At least I kept my system clean of stimulants. At least there’s that. Anyway, the popularity of *Kill Me If You Can* was rising, but I

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was growing discontent. I wanted off. Off the flik. Off my marriage. My contract was renewed on an annual basis, so they had to let me off the show. My marriage contract was a different story—it didn't have to be renewed, just terminated. My husband didn't like the fact that his personal slave was leaving. He grew...unbalanced. Towards the end, I began to realize that he would kill me if I left. With my fame and power, I could've hired somebody to get rid of him, but I couldn't bring myself to do that. So, I joined the Species. Here, he can't get at me. And when I'm out, I'll be able to defend myself if he tries to come after me. Next to acting, joining the Species was second on my list of careers. They all think this is a two-year publicity stunt. You know—they think I'll be back on the show. Shove the ratings into the stratosphere, or some other j'aa like that. None of that's true. I'm here because I want to be...well, and because of my husband wanting to kill me I suppose, but hey, life isn't ever as simple as I'd like."

Goddess agreed.

Next in line was She7, who rubbed her eyes and slapped her cheeks as she approached. She joined Goddess with a nod. They reversed, patrolling in the opposite direction.

"I can't do it myself," Goddess told her after a few minutes. Her fingers were too shaky. Her eyelids were drooping. The ground felt like a magnet, pulling at her core.

"I'll help you," She7 said, holding the injector.

Goddess tried to hold her arm still, too tired to acknowledge the prick of the injector, waiting for the stimulant to take effect. She needed it every two hours now.

"You going to make it?" She7 asked. "You look like glitch."

Goddess wasn't sure she was going to make it, but the stimulant surged through her system, making her say: "I'm fine."

"Ah, a tough girl. You and my sister have something in common then."

Goddess wanted to tell her that she was anything but a tough girl. A weak, lonely girl—now that was more accurate. And the crying. Let's not forget the crying! "Just talk to me while we walk," Goddess said. "I'll make it through this if you help me."

"Fair enough. My sister and I aren't EUL natives. I'm sure you noticed that already though."

"Yes."

“We’re originally from the Free States. Our father was born into the Black Vale royalty.”

“You’re royalty?” Goddess asked. She’d never met any of those type of people.

“Whatever that means, but yes,” She 7 responded, rolling up the sleeve on her right arm. “See this tattoo?”

The tattoo was a circular insignia with a series of intricate symbols set around its circumference.

“It the mark of Black Vale One. There’s five Black Vales—well, six really, but Black Vale Six was destroyed when the Comet came. Nobody really talks about that one anymore.”

“Does everybody within a Black Vale get a tattoo? Like we do in the EUL?”

“No, just the royalty. This mark means I’m a Black Vale princess.”

Goddess just nodded. She wasn’t sure if she was impressed or not. She was just sure that she was dead tired, and if death was the only way to get some sleep, then it might be worth pulling out her pulse dagger and letting it do its thing.

That line of thinking, for some reason, always brought thoughts of Ky Lin to her mind. This time was no exception. It confused her. She had never thought about ending her life before the Species. How did Ky Lin fit in there? It confused her. She didn’t really want to die. Wouldn’t it be stupid to remove her only chance to be with Ky Lin?

She7 kept talking. “When we were seven-years-old, political maneuverings forced my father out of the Black Vale hierarchy. My father, my sister, and I were forced out of the region. We roamed for awhile, unable to find a new home. Eventually, we came to the EUL. Everybody’s accepted here if they can pay the price. My dad sacrificed his entire fortune to get us here. He became a common data courier; our life was much different than it had been back in Black Vale One.”

She7’s last words carried a undertone of bitterness.

“What about your mother?” Goddess asked, immediately wishing she hadn’t.

She7 kept her gaze forward. “I don’t remember her. I...I never really knew her, I think.”

Goddess snapped her mouth shut, fighting back tears. She was

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embarrassed and sad all at the same time. “Why did you join the Species?” she tried to recover.

“Part of the deal. Buying citizenship in the EUL carries a price. This is part of it.”

Again, the bitterness was there. Could anybody blame her? Goddess couldn’t. She understood. “At least you have your twin with you.”

“Yeah,” She7 said, sniffing, wiping her nose on the back of her hand. “I sure do.”

That time it was bitterness and regret all together and mixed up. At that, Goddess let her end of the conversation drop.

Death-nuke relieved She7. Goddess watched her; she moved like an serpent, her movements smooth, strangely sensuous. Goddess was intimidated and didn’t even broach the subject of her past. Anyway, it was the same as She7’s, wasn’t it? Goddess, for the most part, kept her mouth shut as they patrolled.

“What do you think about me, Goddess?” Death-nuke asked.

“Ah...I don’t...” Goddess tried to say. Her tongue had gone numb. Or perhaps it was her entire mouth.

“ ‘Cause,” Death-nuke stepped in front of Goddess, forcing her to either stop or run into Death-nuke’s lithe form, “no one would know. If we—”

Goddess gaped. She wanted to step back. Couldn’t. Were her legs still attached?

“—expanded our perimeter.”

“L-Listen, Death-nuke,” Goddess squeaked. She wasn’t going to cry was she? Glitch, she just might. “I’m very thankful that you got me out from underneath Glix Kill Thrill’s boot, but I’m not sure what you want—“

Death-nuke leaned closer. Goddess tried to lean back, but couldn’t because her pack would pull her over if she tilted too far. Something within herself stopped her from backing off. It could have been the simple fact that she was carrying a DL2 in one hand. Perhaps that afforded her some small pool of aggressiveness which she had unconsciously tapped into.

Even in the darkness, Death-nuke’s face was a storm of contradictions. Her angular features didn’t send out the rays of beauty that Zilch’s did, but she had a natural beauty. This here, was a *real* girl with a *real*, earthy face. It was about three inches from Goddess’s, unblinking. God, we’re those eyes purple?!? They were two orbs of glistening fire. How could Goddess make

out all that detail in the low light? It wasn't possible!
Death-nuke licked her upper lip.

Goddess felt nothing. Unformed as the passion might be, Ky Lin held her captive in this arena.

Goddess managed to hold Death-nuke's gaze, the purple searching her for some response. Any at all.

"I see it in you," Death-nuke said. "There is another. Already."

"Yes." Goddess held her breath.

Death-nuke grabbed Goddess's hand, turning it palm up. She ran her finger to the center of Goddess's palm. She tapped.

I.

Want.

You.

Anyway.

Before Goddess could react, Death-nuke moved her head close. Goddess turned her head sideways, Death-nuke's lips soft against her cheek instead of her mouth, just for a second. Goddess brought her hand up and pushed Death-nuke's shoulder away, touchspeaking as she did. *Sorry. No. Can't. Please. Understand. Sorry.*

"What did my sister tell you about me?" Death-nuke asked. "Did she warn you? What did she say to you?"

"Nothing," Goddess said, finally taking a step back. She found that she'd pulled the DL2 across her hip so the weapon was between her and Death-nuke.

Death-nuke took note of the movement.

And she smiled.

Goddess shook her head. She hoped it was a warning. The desire to cry was strong in her at that moment. It wouldn't take much more stress and the liquid would flow. In fact, she wondered why it hadn't already. What was holding back the flood?

"It doesn't matter," Death-nuke said, jerking her head—possibly some habit that would have flipped hair out of her face if she had still had any. "You're cute, and I like you. You're just gonna live with that for awhile. Can you scan that?"

"You're not going to do that again, are you?"

Death-nuke bit her lip. "I can't promise anything."

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“Please. Yes you can.”

“You’re not gonna start crying on me are you? Oh, %@!#ing glitch, you just might. Glitch and %@!#, you know that gets my engine going, don’t you? The way your eyes get all puffy and red...ah, glitch it. Let’s say, not unless you ask me to. That’ll have to do. I can’t commit to anything more.”

“That’s fine. Just as long as this is resolved, right now. I like men.”

“Not what I like to hear, Goddess. You know, I’m not used to being rejected. I get what I want.”

“I’m sorry. I wish—”

“Stop,” Death-nuke said. “Don’t say it. Don’t you *dare* say that if you don’t mean it.”

Goddess shifted, brushing a tear from her eye.

When Death-nuke spoke, her voice was almost inaudible. “I know you don’t mean it.”

Goddess didn’t know what else to do or say—this was a new situation for her, and a twist on her expectations of what Species life consisted of—so she just started walking again. Death-nuke walked beside her. The rest of the hour was disquieted by the tension that seemed to string itself between them. Oh, why had Death-nuke done that? What had possessed her? Was a simpler life not possible?

At the end of the hour, Death-nuke tapped a single word into Goddess’s palm.

Scared.

Goddess didn’t know what to make of that.

When Zilch relieved Death-nuke, she launched into her history without any prompting. Goddess was still tangled in a storm of emotions over the encounter with Death-nuke that she missed much of what Zilch said. Zilch came from a wealthy family, growing up in the high echelons of society. Zilch’s voice was still laced with a musical quality, but a cold undertone changed the overall effect of her monologue. Goddess came away with little information other than the fact that Zilch was educated and intelligent. She had joined the Species against her family’s wishes. They had bought her way out of mandatory service in the Species, but she had joined anyway. The only explanation she gave was something about not giving a %@!#ing glitch about the wishes of her parents—it was *her* life.

Goddess managed to distract herself from her thoughts of Death-nuke

by wondering how Zilch managed to keep herself, her uniform, and her gear clean. Goddess knew Zilch had had her face repeatedly shoved in a mud puddle by Pulse earlier in the day. And yet, here she was, no evidence of the ordeal. It was as if the mud hadn't wanted to stick to her.

She was just finishing telling Zilch about Ky Lin when Exxy walked up.

After Zilch left, Goddess realized that the ground was tilting at a dangerous angle. Or was it just her? She was about to crash. Oh no! It had been three hours. She'd forgotten her injection! The Death-nuke propositioning had distracted her.

"Will you help me?" Goddess asked Exxy, pulling her last injection from her pack. "Tell me about yourself. Tell me why you're here."

"Really, it's not that interesting," Exxy said. "It'll put you to sleep, no matter how many stimulants you jack yourself up with. You know, I'm afraid for you." Exxy bared Goddess's arm, pressing the injector there. "You look like glitch. It's not healthy to be taking stimulants this often."

"I know, but what can I do about it?" Goddess threw her head back, staring at the stars, clouded as they were by the haze of pollution. She waited for Exxy to inject her. Waited for the stimulant to pulse into her, fill her bloodstream, touch her muscles, caress her heart.

"Over time, it breaks you down from the inside," Exxy said. "Tears down the muscles in your heart. You won't notice it now, but in ten years, you'll notice how difficult it is to breathe after you do something simple like get up from bed in the morning."

Goddess felt the prick of the injector. She could imagine the stimulant seeping into her insides. She could imagine how warm it was. She lusted after the effects.

"Give it a minute," Exxy said. "You know, I think you wanted this a little too much. You're not addicted are you?"

"Not yet I hope."

They walked the perimeter.

Exxy kept stealing glances at Goddess.

"Stop it," Goddess said. "What's wrong?"

"Sorry, I'm concerned for you. That's all. I mean, you really look bad. Those big, brown eyes are all red and puffy. You're eyelids are drooping so far, I'm not sure how you can see out of them. You're feet are dragging, and no, it's not just this psycho-grass. You're stumbling more than you are

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walking. I'd be laughing at you if your health wasn't at stake here. Maybe you should lay down for a minute or two."

"I'd love to," Goddess said, smiling at the thought. "Just not sure Glix Kill Thrill would appreciate it."

Exxy stopped Goddess with a soft touch. "What Glix Kill Thrill doesn't know, won't hurt her."

Goddess furrowed her brow. What was Exxy suggesting? That she lie down right here on the ground and sleep? Not possible! It was crazy talk!

"I'm not entirely sure the stimulant is working." Exxy said.

The world was fading, Goddess realized. She tried to force her eyes open wider, but they weren't cooperating. The stimulant! What had happened? Could it have been a null batch? Something was definitely wrong here. She grabbed Exxy's shoulder and steadied herself. Wow, the world had blurred and gone wavy there, black dots eating away at her peripheral vision.

Goddess realized that she was on her knees now. When had that happened? "I think you may be right," she said. "The stimulant was bad. Glix Kill Thrill won't be happy..."

Knowing she was about to fade, Goddess made a weak grab for Exxy's hand, but either Exxy pulled it back or Goddess wasn't interpreting events correctly. It didn't matter. The effect was the same: Goddess went limp and slid to the ground. Her consciousness escaped from her in mid-air. She landed sideways, rolling onto her pack and lay there, breathing deeply. Her body formed a bent, misshapen sprawl.

Exxy let Goddess sleep for forty minutes before pressing the injector to her neck, this time with the stimulant capsule inserted.

SUPPRESS

Morning brought the tides of torture along with it. More training. More instruction. More yelling. More abuse. More pain.

“Emotion is weakness,” Glix Kill Thrill said. “Weakness breeds fear. If the enemy doesn’t kill you, fear will. Kill emotion. Weakness and fear will follow. And every last one of your %@!# enemies! Do you scan that, trooplings?”

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“Aye, Mother Sentinel!”

“Excellent. If you cry, you will experience more pain. You *will* suppress you emotion. *You will not show weakness!* Do you scan *that*, trooplings?”

“Aye, Mother Sentinel!”

“Good, trooplings. You are learning fast. Quaze! Pulse!”

Quaze and Pulse stepped forward.

“Get the pulse prods. The trooplings want to learn some new lessons.”

The lessons continued four more days.

JACKED

Ky Lin was in this world too, it seemed. Goddess couldn't escape him. Despite a newfound resolve to put him out of her mind, he remained with her, continuing to manifest in her thoughts on a regular basis. After a full week of Basic, his face popped into her mind even during the worst of her pain. Being beaten by Quaze or Pulse, perhaps the thought of him, and what had been left unfinished between them, was the one thing that

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enabled her to endure the suffering. She still cried, but she used the thought of him as a comfort rather than as a source of new tears.

Cyberspace swirled around Goddess. She tried to banish stray thoughts of Ky Lin from her mind. He had no place here; he was more of a distraction than a comfort.

In the local Species net, her matrix-husk was a replica of her physical body. More correctly, it was a replica of how she saw herself. Consequently, her matrix-husk had taken on the appearance of a scrawny young girl. Goddess tried to change the image, but the net didn't allow modifications to the matrix-husks once they were uploaded into the system.

The rest of the trooplings floated next to her, their matrix-husks shimmering in the light of the primitive net construct.

"To be an effective fighting force," Glix Kill Thrill said, her matrix-husk looking even more menacing than her real self, "you must be able to operate in realspace and cyberspace at the same time. Some of you may think this is impossible. I assure you. It is not. Right now, I am jacked, and yet I can see each of your realspace bodies, laying on the %@!#ing ground. Every one of you has a %@!#ing blank stare on your %@!#ing face. Keetchas, this is pathetic. You are defenseless! If I were an enemy, I could kill you while you were jacked in like this."

"Mother Sentinel?" Fluffy asked. Her matrix-husk had glasses and thick, curly, red hair. Fluffy hadn't yet begun to think of herself as bald. "I have a question. May I ask it?"

"You may."

"What can we do about that? Don't our MIU's interrupt the signals to our optic nerves?"

"Interesting. My littlest keetcha doesn't know something."

"Aye, Mother Sentinel," Fluffy said, her matrix-husk bowing its head. "I'm sorry for my failure. I want to understand. I want to learn. I want to be a soldier."

"I forgive you, Fluffy. Listen. Learn. You *can* divide your mind. Your MIU's do not divert the signals from your optic nerves, they merely overwhelm them, sending the cyberspace data stream to your brains. Since these signals are intentionally more powerful than the ones from your eyes, it is easy for your brain to focus on what your MIU is sending you."

"This does not have to be the case." Glix Kill Thrill floated, pacing back

and forth in front of the trooplings. The feet of her matrix-husk were several feet off the cyberscape's virtual terrain—a nondescript, gray room in this instance. “You can see both realspace and cyberspace if you concentrate on both. No, I swear it; *you will learn to see them both!*”

“Throw away your childish dreams of cyberspace, keetchas. It is not a place of wonder and fantasy! It is *not* a happy place! You will *not* use it as an escape from realspace! It is *not* a way to meet new friends! It is *not* a place to play games! It is *not* a place to watch your favorite flick! It is *not* a place to go shopping! *It is not a place to have sex!!*”

“Cyberspace is a tool. *It is a weapon!* We will use it as such. Scanning this, keetchas?”

“Aye, Mother Sentinel!”

“Glitch you to Eiech if you aren't. Now, just as the mind ignores the images from your eyes while you're jacked, it also ignores the data from your other senses. You must learn to pay attention to *all* signals. Taste, touch, sight, smell, and hearing—to survive, to be an effective soldier, you must use them all, both in realspace and cyberspace.”

“I've told you all you need to know. I cannot tell you how to do this, only that it can be done. Do it now, trooplings! Currently, you are conscious in cyberspace. Sleep in realspace no more! Wake up these miserable carcasses I see in front of me! Now, trooplings!”

She7 groaned in cyberspace, her matrix-husk vibrating. The other trooplings went stiff as they tried to refocus their consciousness away from their cyberspace manifestations. Goddess tore her thoughts from Ky Lin.

“You have two minutes, trooplings,” Glix Kill Thrill said. “After that, I'm gonna walk about in realspace, punishing every weak glitchling who isn't awake enough to move out of the way of the pulse prod. It's simple really. Wake up, and you avoid a wound. Remain dead to realspace and receive one. It's your choice.”

Goddess tried to think of her body, but it seemed that her matrix-husk *was* her body. She expanded her thoughts, reaching out, searching for that part of herself that was her physical body. Here, in cyberspace, it seemed only a memory—she couldn't even feel it. But it was there. It had to be, or the pain was going to arrive.

Goddess grunted. As if it had ever left.

She reached out, closing the eyes of her matrix-husk. The black against

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those eyes was darker than the dark behind her real eyelids. It had a focusing effect. She ignored her virtual breathing, concentrating on her virtual heartbeat. A dull thudding in her ears, virtual blood pulsing to a digital beat.

Boom.

Boom.

Boom.

Boom.

BOOM.

There it was.

BOOM.

BOOM.

BOOM.

BOOM.

Oh, yeah, baby.

That was a real heart with a real heartbeat. A thrill shot through her, right down to her toes—virtual *and* real. She came into her real body like a feather to the earth. In both worlds, she opened her eyes. The worlds merged, ghostly images overlaid across each other. In the real world, she sat up, looked around. The rest of the trooplings were on their backs. Pulse and Quaze paced, circling the trooplings.

Glix Kill Thrill stepped in front of Goddess, filled her vision. “Time’s up, trooping.”

The pulse prod came fast. Goddess actually got her arm up in time to deflect most of the force of the blow, but the end of the prod caught her in the stomach. Her breath blew from her in wheezing rush. She doubled over, gasping, her hands reflexively going to her stomach. The end of the prod was still there. Bad move. The energy seared her hands. It was like holding lightning, but she managed to stay on her feet, managed to push the prod away. Managed to bite back a string of obscenities that she knew would only bring the prod back.

She coughed, managing to hold onto her link to cyberspace. She wanted to rip out the cord connecting her MIU to her data sphere. A harsh transition between cyberspace and realspace like that just might knock her unconscious. Then, she could ignore the pain in her stomach and the burns on her hands for awhile.

She knew the second attack was coming and was ready for it.

In cyberspace, Quaze rushed at her from one side, just at the edge of her peripheral vision. Goddess waited till the last possible second, jumping backward. Quaze passed, a look of anger on her matrix-husk face.

Glix Kill Thrill was laughing. “Looks like Goddess gets herself out of the second half of her punishment. Too bad the rest of you %@!#ing keetchas get aroused by the stroke of the pulse prod. And here I thought I was just calling you names when I call you keetchas! Well, now I know the truth.”

For the next hour, the pulse prod danced in realspace.

As it turned out, it could dance in cyberspace too.

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SIGNAL

WEEK two of Basic was worse than the first. The trooplings remained jacked at all times. Their data spheres, which maintained their connections to cyberspace, grew warm on their belts. All of them were growing used to the dual connections, learning to use the two worlds to their advantage. Do data processing in one, stalk an enemy in the other.

The officers were letting them sleep on a regular schedule, but only a

couple hours a night. When they weren't sleeping, they were training. They studied their OSOMs constantly as they trained. Goddess had taken to tearing pages out, folding them up, palming them, attaching them to her DL2, to her pulse dagger—to anything that she was using. When she had those pages memorized, she tore new pages out and started over. She had gone through over four hundred pages. Her brain felt full from all the data that was being shoved into it.

The training continued. The abuse continued. It all went on and on. Could two weeks actually be that long? Surely not! Goddess lost track of time. She stopped checking the clock on her data unit. She could've kept a time entity up, let it hover just to one side of her vision, but she didn't care about that anymore. She wasn't sure what she cared about. Nothing, perhaps.

Okay, she did care about people. Ky Lin, of course, but the other Talon members. Exxy especially. Exxy talked to her constantly when the trooplings were allowed to talk without the threat of punishment. She ran that mouth of hers like a hypercurrent, but it afforded Goddess a point of focus; she could distract herself, lose herself in the constant flow of words that Exxy expelled as fast as she could. Exxy only stopped for breath when she was completely out of her current one. It was amusing. It got on Death-nuke's and Zilch's nerves. They told her to shut her %@!#ing mouth all the time.

Goddess liked her because she talked.

She liked the others, even Death-nuke, for her own reasons—they were all in this together. True, they were suffering, but they were in it together. Maybe together, they could make it through.

The officers, they were a different story. They were unlikable. If that was their duty to the Species, then they knew what they were doing. Goddess couldn't bring herself to like them. They were the source of her pain. Even as listening to Exxy calmed her, thoughts of what the officers were doing to her and the others made her think about her pulse dagger.

Only now, she didn't think about using it on herself. What would it feel like to someday pull that dagger from its sheath, hold it just like Fluffy had showed her, and run it up Quaze's gut, across Pulse's neck, and into Glix Kill Thrill's heart? What *would* that feel like exactly? Would it feel good? Or just messy? Goddess let her thoughts drift that way during the worst moments of pain.

Now, with only a day to go, the end was in sight.

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Helix, who had a natural talent for bandaging and wound care, healed Goddess's burned hands with some medicinal gel because Goddess had been unable to carry her own DL2. The gel had felt like it was mixed from acid. It had hurt worse than the original inflicting of the wounds. Exxy had held her shoulders as Helix had applied the gel, giving her a hug and kissing her bandaged hands afterward.

Goddess looked at Exxy, the unspoken question on the edge of her lips.

"My mother used to do that when I was young," Exxy said, blushing, her eyes lighting up at the memory. "It always made me feel better. Not for any good reason, but...you know, it's one of those gestures that just meant she cared about me. Her kiss didn't mean that she had prevented me from hurting myself, but that she was going to take care of me until I was better. I remembered what she did, and I figured you could benefit from the same thing. I didn't make you uncomfortable, did I? Oh, I did! I can see it in your face! Oh, %@!#ing glitch! You think that I—don't you? Oh my Goddess, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to make you think that I was still—"

"Thank you," Goddess cut Exxy off, putting a finger to her lips. "It was nice and I liked it."

"You sure? Because I was serious about what I said...before."

"I know. I believe you. Really, I appreciate it."

"What the %@!#ing glitch are you two talking about?" Helix asked.

Goddess looked at Exxy. Exxy looked at Goddess.

"Nothing," they both said simultaneously. There was a brief pause before they both burst out in laughter. It hurt—all those muscles contracting—but it felt good too.

Helix shook her head, walked away.

Now, nobody was laughing.

They had just made their way through a deep valley. Goddess was on point. Exxy brought up the rear. The Talon was spread out over two kilometers, practicing maneuvers over a large area.

In cyberspace, they were all much closer though. Glix Kill Thrill led them through a ground assault on a simulated complex housing a terrorist organization.

"Fluffy to Goddess," crackled in Goddess's realspace assault helmet.

"Goddess here."

"You picking that up?"

Goddess checked her data unit, scrolled through her alert entity in cyberspace. “Uh, negative. I’m not seeing anything.”

“Can’t %@!#ing see it ‘cause it’s a blip of some sort. A signal. Somebody’s transmitting. Glitch, it’s faint. My hearing isn’t the best, so I have my levels jacked. I barely noticed it.”

“Location?”

“Can’t pinpoint it. It could be stray data from some tower out here. Maybe a %@!#ing satellite, but I don’t really think so. I have this...feeling. I think it’s close. Think we should report it?”

Goddess sighed. “Better we report it than they pick it up and decide to punish us for not noticing it before them.”

“I %@!#ing scan that.”

“Get a direction for me if you can.”

“Scan that. I’m out.”

Goddess crouched, scanning the area. The sun was beginning to set. The assault helmet visor came down. That helped equalize the high-contrast light beating down on the landscape. She didn’t see anything. She wanted to curse. It would feel so good. She knew it would.

“Goddess to Mother Sentinel.”

“Speak, troopling,” came Glix Kill Thrill’s voice. It boomed in Goddess’s assault helmet.

“Fluffy picked up a signal. Somebody’s talking to somebody else.”

“What’s the location?”

“Too faint a reading to be sure, but she thinks it’s close.”

“All we %@!#ing need, troopling.”

Goddess waited for Glix Kill Thrill to continue, but there was only silence.

“Mother Sentinel?”

“Yes, troopling?”

“I have a question. May I ask it?”

“Speak.”

“Do you think we are in any danger?”

“Not from anybody other than me, troopling.”

“Aye, Mother Sentinel.”

“Rally the trooplings. Gather them together in realspace. Proceed with the cyberspace mission. You will complete it, or you will be sucking on the

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pulse prod. Scan that, troopling?”

“Aye, Mother Sentinel!”

“I’m out.”

In cyberspace, Goddess moved into the complex, her virtual heartbeat racing as she fired her DL2, slicing two opponents into clean halves. In realspace, she was broadcasting. “Goddess to Talon-5. Come Kneel In My Temple And Worship. Execute code is *Burning Wirewitch*.”

Single-word acknowledgements came rapid-fire at her. They were all at full runs now, speeding toward her. Even the farthest trooplings would be there within six minutes.

A throaty voice came into the helmet. “Death-nuke here. I’m inbound. Kneeling in your temple sounds good, but you probably want me to worship from a distance.”

“Scan that.”

“Glitch.”

Goddess smiled. Couldn’t help herself.

In cyberspace, Zilch executed the last surviving terrorist by stabbing him in the back of the head with her pulse dagger. Goddess arrived after the fact and didn’t see the actual killing, but she saw the mess on the floor and the wall and the ceiling.

The trooplings rushed in, all arriving before the officers. They had set up a perimeter, DL2s at the ready, fingers on triggers when Glix Kill Thrill approached. She moved over the terrain with ease, her breathing relaxed.

“Copy me that signal, Fluffy,” Glix Kill Thrill said. “Copy all of us. I want everybody to see it.”

“Aye, Mother Sentinel,” Fluffy said. “You have it.”

The Talon listened to a recording of the signal. It rang in their assault helmets.

Glix Kill Thrill grunted.

“What is it?” Quaze asked, stealing a glance at Pulse before turning back to Glix Kill Thrill. “Do you recognize it?”

Glix Kill Thrill shook her head. She removed her assault helmet. She ran a hand through her hair. “I don’t know what that signal is, but I do know one thing.”

The Talon waited. Goddess found that she wasn’t breathing.

Glix Kill Thrill turned to the trooplings. “The signal is coming from one

of you.”

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BROKE

“*Is it you?*”

Goddess clenched her teeth tight. She felt like maybe she could break her own jaw if she closed her mouth any tighter. The side of her head ached from the blow. She was on her hands and knees, stunned, probably bleeding just above her ear.

“Tell me,” Glix Kill Thrill commanded, placing her pulse dagger on her hip and picking up her pulse prod. “Is it you, keetcha? Are you the one broadcasting to some %@!#ing glitch bucket outside the Species? You have %@!#ing limits you know. Everybody %@!#ing does. Look at the rest of these poor, wasted trooplings. Each of them lies here, on the ground, face in

the dirt, bloody and leaking, most of them with broken bones. One of them, bless her, my littlest keetcha, may be dying. And you know what? Glitch her! Glitch all of them! You know why?”

“Mother Sentinel, why did you hurt them like that?”

“Hurt them?” Glix Kill Thrill asked. She wiped spots of blood from her chin. “Did I do that? I think not, troopling. They did that to themselves. They wouldn’t tell me what I need to know. Therefore, they had to experience a little bit of glitch. Just another lesson to learn. Looks like it’s gonna be one of the last ones too.

“So, here I am, down to you. If you can’t tell me that you’re responsible for that %@!#ing signal, then we get to see how much pain you really can take. Even though you’re crying like a youngling already, I know you have a high tolerance. You may be able to hold out longer than Death-nuke even. Just remember that pain is weakness leaving the body. I’d like to find out just how much weakness you have left in you, keetcha.”

“Please, Mother Sentinel, don’t do this.”

Glix Kill Thrill leaned over Goddess, running her hand along the back of her ‘flage and up to the base of her neck. “I’m not sure, but I think that’s you denying any knowledge of the origin of that %@!#ing signal. Is that true?”

“Mother Sentinel, I reported it to you!” Goddess sobbed. “Why would I have done that if I was the one sending it?”

Glix Kill Thrill’s mouth was at Goddess’s ear. Goddess could feel the Mother Sentinel’s teeth closing over her. When she spoke, her lips and tongue moved around Goddess’s lobe, wet and warm. Goddess shuddered, her body suddenly trembling. She was frantic for a thought to distract her. Ky Lin came into her head. There. That was better. His smile could get her through this.

“Scan this, troopling,” Glix Kill Thrill whispered. “I don’t give a %@!#ing glitch.”

Then she bit down. Goddess felt liquid spurting down her ear cavity. It wasn’t the worst pain she had suffered, but a cry escaped her mouth anyway.

With her other hand, Glix Kill Thrill reached up and yanked Goddess’s MIU cord.

Momentarily, the world went blank.

Wonderfully, during that perfect black time, the pain in her body was

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absent. It had been canceled, just like the rest of her.

It all came back though. With a start, she was awake, her realspace eyes flying open. It was disorienting being disconnected from cyberspace after having been jacked for such a long period. Her eyes hurt from the strain. Her mind searched for the missing data stream.

There was dirt in her mouth and she was lying on her side. She spat filth mixed with blood. There was liquid pooling at the neck of her 'flage, trickling down inside. She felt wetness at the crotch of her 'flage where her body had relieved itself when her MIU cord had been ripped out. The back of her neck ached, the skin burning there, all around the MIU. There was new pain in her foot. Her toe, she thought, finding it hard to pinpoint the source. Looks like Glix Kill Thrill had gone at her while she was out. Just how long had she been unconscious? Hadn't it only been a second or two? Surely not more!

"Wake up, keetcha," came Glix Kill Thrill's voice from above her. "You haven't confessed yet. That means that we're not finished."

When Goddess spoke, it was through the grit in her mouth. She could barely form the words. "I was not transmitting that signal."

"I think you were, troopling. And I want to know why."

"I'm sorry."

The pulse prod slammed into Goddess's back. Her body convulsed, scraping over the ground. She rolled on her side, dizzy with agony, but the pulse prod was over there too, touching her in the same place on her back. She shut her eyes, but Ky Lin's face escaped her, lost in the thick bite of the pulse prod.

"Who are you working for?" Glix Kill Thrill asked. "Takiyoma?"

"No."

The pulse prod caught her knee. The limb twitched as if possessed. Her toes gnarled in her boot, but then everything down there went numb, and if she still had anything below her knee, she couldn't verify it.

"The Yoshirolan? Don't tell me you're working for those savages. No, really, *do* tell me."

"I'm not. Working. For anybody." Goddess felt consciousness slipping from her grasp.

Glix Kill Thrill touched the pulse prod to her hip. A lick of fire seared Goddess's insides. She went fetal. It was too much. Way too much. Her stomach contracted over and over. She lay, curled, concentrating on taking

her next breath. Her lungs felt like they been cut in half—she could only take small, whistling breaths.

“Open your eyes, troopling,” Glix Kill Thrill said. “Look at me while I’m interrogating you.”

Goddess forced her lids open. Behind Glix Kill Thrill’s crouching body, she could see Exxy’s motionless form. Her arm was bent in an unnatural direction, and the top of her flage was split open, laying wide. Pulse had done terrible things to Exxy; blood covering her torso. She was still breathing though, making soft, sorrowful moans every so often. She had tried to stand once, but hadn’t made it.

Glix Kill Thrill looked over her shoulder at Exxy. “You’re closest to her, aren’t you, keetcha? She’s your friend? Your lover?”

“I’m sorry, Mother Sentinel, you’re mistaken.”

“She likes you, you know. More than she’d ever admit. You trooplings are so %@!#ing naïve, it really amazes me. *Glitch*. You think I don’t notice these things? Scan this, troopling: I know everything about you keetchas. I know when you eat. I know when you sleep. I know when you have to urinate. I know when you have to defecate. *I know when you’re bleeding between your %@!#ing legs!* Your designation may be Goddess, but I’m the true deity around here. Somewhere during your training, you all forgot that! Now look what I’ve had to do to correct you, to help you unlearn.”

Goddess tried to relax her body. It wanted to constrict every muscle within it.

“Exxy. Scan my words, troopling; there’s more to her than you know. More than you’ve discovered. More than she’s *let* you find out. She’s got a secret. She’s hid it well so far, but it’s only a matter of time before her guard slips and you stumble onto what she’s been hiding from you. When that happens, I wonder what you’ll do, how you’ll react. I’d like to be there, but I doubt I’ll be that fortunate. I’m not sure your relationship can survive it.”

Goddess wanted to go for her pulse dagger, which the officers hadn’t bothered to take from her. Her hand moved to her belt, but the pulse prod got there first, slamming down against the back of her hand. Goddess couldn’t be sure since her ear was filled with blood, but she thought she heard something break in her wrist. Her arm turned to molten pain and went floppy on her. Beyond her control, it twisted around behind her, fingers coming down hard on a rock back there.

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Glix Kill Thrill looked happy. Her hair seemed alive, blowing in a breeze that Goddess could no longer feel. “Such defiance! And you were supposed to be the weak one. You’re the weeping trooping, yet you still tried to pull a pulse dagger on me. I think I like you a little bit more now, Goddess.”

“Aye, Mother Sentinel.”

Glix Kill Thrill paused, the smile falling from her face. “But I don’t think I liked the way you said that. You said them, but you didn’t mean them. Disrespectful keetcha!”

“Aye, Mother Sentinel.”

“Trooping, you haven’t told me what I want to know yet, but you will.”

“No, Mother Sentinel.”

Glix Kill Thrill rose to her full height. Her knee popped loudly. Her body seemed to be radiating fire against the red sky. Goddess would have recoiled in fear if she thought she could move without injuring herself further.

Glix Kill Thrill turned, looking the area over. Quaze and Pulse sat on a large rock a few meters away, watching. The rest of the Talon were lying in pools of their own sweat and blood, most of them weren’t moving.

“What have I wrought?” Glix Kill Thrill said. “It was all unnecessary, but the stubbornness of one soldier has caused all this suffering.” She turned back to Goddess. “You told me *no*, trooping. That was a fatal mistake.”

“Aye, Mother Sentinel.” The words were Goddess’s last effort of rebellion. She wasn’t sure how she had the courage to say them. Joining the Species must have been having its effect! Amazing!

“Ky Lin,” Glix Kill Thrill said.

Goddess froze.

“Yes, I know about him. Really, does that surprise you? Naivety, trooping. You’re full of that j’aa. You stink of it. You should cleanse yourself.”

“What about him?” Goddess managed, her mind trying to bring an image of him to the front, but the pain was too much. The shock was too much. And the fear.

“We like to keep track of these things for you, in case there’s an emergency. Earlier today I received some bad news about your almost lover, trooping.”

“No, Mother—”

“I’m sorry, trooping, but Ky Lin didn’t make it. He’s dead.”

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FUSE

“LIAR!!!” Goddess screamed, but deep inside she knew it was true. Somehow, it was true and that meant that Glix Kill Thrill had just won; it was over. The tears burst out of her eyes, seeming to spray across her cheeks. How could there be any tears left in her at this point? Somewhere inside her, she had reserves.

“Shhh, troopling,” Glix Kill Thrill whispered, crouching down again,

actually smoothing her hand across Goddess's forehead. The move was comforting and repulsive all at the same time. "Go ahead and cry for him. I know he meant a lot to you. It's right to mourn him, now that he's gone. Before, you were just pining. There was no excuse for that. But now, crying is the right thing to do."

Goddess gave herself over to her grief. She couldn't comprehend that it was true. Couldn't believe that it wasn't. Life without the possibility of seeing him again was...wrong. Before, even though it would have been two years before her time with the Species was finished, she had hoped to contact him through cyberspace at the very least. He could have messaged her. They could have at least talked, seen if there was going to be anything between them. The memory of Ky Lin's kiss—the only kiss of his that she would ever feel—carried an ache that overshadowed the physical pain keeping her immobile on the ground.

Glix Kill Thrill stroked Goddess's head. After two weeks, there were short hairs up there now. Goddess listened to the scratchy sound of those hairs under Glix Kill Thrill's palm. They were like that for several minutes. Every sob that wracked Goddess's body sent waves of pain washing over her.

Eventually, Glix Kill Thrill stopped, stood. "Now, back to the matter at hand."

Something sparked in Goddess. Without warning, her tears were stopping.

"The signal," Glix Kill Thrill said. "Why were you sending it?"

The spark flared, sputtering inside her, threatening to flare. Goddess stared upward.

"I don't think the prod was effective with you, troopling. Let's go back to the dagger." The dagger came off her hip, blade igniting.

With a great amount of effort, Goddess brought her arm back in front of her. Two fingers were broken, and the wrist looked...*torqued*. She put it on the ground, moved her other elbow beneath her, and pushed. Oh God that hurt! Flecks of black appeared in her vision, but she shut it out, drawing on the little bit of anger that had already pooled within. More was flowing into that pool. The stream was widening. Somebody had turned up the juice.

"Keetcha gonna get up?" Pulse asked.

Quaze laughed. "I don't think she can make it. Keetcha's too beat. Too

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%@!#ing glitched in the body.”

Pulse stepped from the rock. “I’ll take care of this.”

Glix Kill Thrill held up her hand. “Stop right there, solider. Let this trooping do what she thinks she has to.”

Goddess had her knee up against her chest now, her foot flat on the ground. Dizziness swept her. She almost vomited. The bile rose, but she swallowed it back down, her tongue tingling, her throat burning.

In one, jerking motion she stood.

She wasn’t straight, but she was up. Blood poured from her ear, onto her shoulder, down the front of her ‘flage, a thin trickle streaming between her breasts, all the way to her navel, the flow hot and slick against her skin. She found that she couldn’t put her weight on that one foot and that one arm was going to be useless—the wrist was definitely broken.

The data sphere at her belt was covered in dirt; the cord plugged into it hung down to her ankle. With her good hand, she took the cord, reached back and jacked herself back in.

Goddess was prepared, having divided her mind to prepare for the dual-world existence. Cyberspace faded in, just a hollow, see-thru world existing parallel to realspace.

“Goddess to Talon-5,” she spoke, her voice wavering and weak, barely a whisper. “Wake up. The Gods Are In A Rage. Execute code is *Fallen Sentinel*.”

“Keetcha?” Glix Kill Thrill asked. “Just what the %@!#ing glitch do you think you’re doing?”

There was a pause. Maybe they weren’t going to respond. Maybe they were too far gone.

“Death-nuke here. I’m %@!#ing in.”

“She7 here. I’m in.”

“Exxy here. I’m in too. Glitch, I’m hurting.”

Helix and Zilch reported in too.

There was an even longer pause before the last acknowledgement came. It was weak but, the voice was clear. “Fluffy here. I’m...in.”

The officers watched as the troplings began to get up. They all moved so slow, they could’ve been zombies rising from their graves. They groaned and grunted, all of them in pain. All of them hurting. All of them broken.

All of them angry.

Goddess found that the tears were back. She didn't even know why she was crying this time. It wasn't the pain, and it wasn't the loss associated with Ky Lin's death. What was it? Didn't matter probably. What mattered was what was going to happen next. Goddess realized that she wasn't sure how this was all going to turn out. Standing up had been an act of sheer will and pure defiance. Now, where would that lead? Could she go through with it all? Could she maintain this façade?

"Mother Sentinel," Goddess said. "You won't hurt us anymore, will you?"

"Listen, keetcha," Glix Kill Thrill said. "I will *do whatever I deem necessary to whoever I deem necessary to do it to.* Scan that, trooping?"

"Aye, Mother Sentinel, but no, *no you will not.*"

"*Doing right,*" Exxy said. Her DL2 was in her hands, the weapon not quite aimed at Pulse and Quaze.

"Mother Sentinel," Death-nuke said, hobbling over to stand beside her sister. "You will never touch me again."

Helix carried Fluffy closer, even though she could barely walk herself.

Fluffy was teetering on the brink of consciousness, her eyes glazing. "Basic...is...over."

"*Doing glitch it is!*" Glix Kill Thrill said, raising her pulse dagger.

"I'm sorry, Mother Sentinel," Goddess said, wanting ever so much to drop to the ground and focus on hurting less, if that was possible. "Fluffy is right. We're all against you. You trained us well over these past two weeks. You taught us to suppress emotion. You taught us to fight as a cohesive unit. Well, we've done it. We've fused. We are united."

"There's no Deep Locker Six for mutiny," Glix Kill Thrill said. "It'll be trooping execution day."

"Drop your weapons," Exxy said.

Pulse and Quaze didn't move. Their weapons weren't drawn; they had been too confident.

Exxy had them in her sights now. Exxy stepped forward. "You *will do* drop your weapons or I will *do* shoot both of you in your *do* stomachs. It'll take you several *do* hours to *do* die, and I'll just stand by, smiling as I dig your insides out with my pulse dagger."

Pulse and Quaze could see that Exxy was caught in the throes of a

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bloodlust they hadn't seen manifested in her before. Were those looks of shock on their faces? That couldn't be fear, could it? Certainly not!

"Zilch, take their weapons," Exxy said when neither of the officers moved. "If either resists, I'm going to shoot them. I'm telling you this in case you're afraid to get their blood on you."

"Some of theirs might balance out my own," Zilch said, moving to take their weapons.

It all happened fast at that point.

Pulse and Quaze went for their weapons. They were smooth and fast, but Exxy had them centered in her sights and she had proved herself deadly accurate over the past two weeks. The green beam from the DL2 double-tapped both of the officers. Each one took a beam to the chest and on to the head. Their faces melted, and the backs of their heads disappeared in twin explosions of brain matter, skull fragments, and mists of atomized blood. They went down, entangled in a perverse embrace, corpse-lovers blasted into the afterlife.

At the same time, Glix Kill Thrill jumped at Goddess, pulse dagger slicing a luminous arc through the air. Goddess couldn't do anything but take the hit and fall to the ground. The pulse dagger sunk into her stomach, a fiery dart that heated her core like a supernova in her gut. Goddess screamed a scream that, to her own ears, made her think that it was someone else—that person was surely dying. That scream said it all. She reached for something. Anything. Her one good hand was free. It went to her belt. What was there? Her pulse dagger? No, it was gone! Where was it? Her fingers were frantic now. Glix was pressing the dagger deeper. Was that even possible? It felt like it was coming out her back already. She fought unconsciousness. Beat it back. No, she was not going to die like this! Maybe later. Maybe by her own hand, but not by the Mother Sentinel's.

Neuro-chill grenade. Her fingers closed around the small, object. She formed her fist around it and brought her fist into the side of Glix Kill Thrill's head. Her head jerked sideways, but she didn't move. Goddess repeated the movement, this time clipping Glix Kill Thrill's eye and nose. That did it. Glix Kill Thrill rolled off of her, moaning, bleeding. The pulse dagger was burning in Goddess's stomach, converting her flesh to a molten pool. Goddess reached up and flicked the dagger off, pulled it out and dropped it beside her. She didn't look at the wound. Couldn't. She knew it

was horrible. More horrible that she could imagine. Things were...loose inside her now, churned up. Melted. She turned on her side, toward Glix Kill Thrill. She felt liquid running from her stomach. She didn't look down. Instead, she reached out, and punched Glix Kill Thrill in the side of the head, sending her onto her back. Goddess went onto her knees, about to pass out. She crawled toward her enemy.

"You don't deserve to live," Goddess said, "keetcha."

Then she armed the neuro-chill grenade and slammed it into Glix Kill Thrill's mouth, relishing the feel of teeth breaking free of gums. She threw herself sideways, watching in morbid fascination as something trailed out of her own stomach. That wasn't part of an intestine, was it? Couldn't have been.

The neuro-chill grenade went off. It took Glix Kill Thrill's head and shoulders apart like an exploding star. A shockwave of blood expanded outward, coating the area.

Goddess was close enough to feel part of the neuro-chill effects, sensed her muscles go limp. She landed on her back and went still. She could still breathe, but just barely. Her brain tried to go offline. She was still jacked into cyberspace, but she couldn't maintain the connection in her mind. Cyberspace faded. Or was it realspace? She couldn't be sure, drowning in the pain.

Exxy came up over her, grasping her good hand. Exxy was crying. Goddess could see her tears falling.

"I'm dying, Exxy," Goddess said.

"I—I know," Exxy said. "There's something I need to tell you then."

Goddess smiled. The pain was fading now. A numbness was spreading over her. Along with it came an overwhelming peace. "I...know. I like you too."

"Oh my Goddess, that's not it," Exxy said. "Well, that's not all of it. I didn't want to tell you like this. I didn't want to tell you at all, but I don't want you to leave me not knowing."

"Is Fluffy going to be okay?" Goddess asked.

Exxy hung her head. "Glitch it, Goddess, Fluffy's dead. Pulse went too deep. Hurt her insides. She bled out."

Fluffy. So young. So dead. Goddess ached for her. "What about the others?" she asked.

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“They will be okay, just like me. But listen,” Exxy said. “I need to tell you this. I *need* you to know, right now.”

“I’m listening...” Goddess’s voice trailed off.

Exxy took a deep breath. “I’m not what...”

Goddess went under. Just before she did, she tried to catch what Exxy was saying. But it wasn’t Exxy’s voice she heard. It was another, louder voice. It seemed to come from everywhere. If she was dead, then maybe it was the voice of a deity.

“COMPLETE,” the voice said calmly.

The universe exploded.

COMPLETE

Goddess was afraid to open her eyes. What was on the other side of her eyelids—she could not begin to guess.

“It’s okay,” a voice said. Exxy. “Weird, but okay. I think we’re all safe. Though somebody has some explaining to do. That’s for %@!#ing sure.”

Goddess heard other voices. The other trooplings. They were talking in

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low tones. She opened her eyes. The ceiling. That's what she was looking at. It was a dull, dark gray. The room was lit with small, wall-mounted fixtures that provided little light.

Goddess sat up. Looked left. Looked right. There were three beds on either side of her. Exxy was sitting up in the bed next to her. The other trooplings were waking. Goddess reached around to her MIU, found a cord inserted in the hole, tracing it to her data sphere, which was hanging on the wall at the head of her bed.

Goddess hands flew to her stomach. She lifted her top—it was 'flage, but not the one she remembered getting after Processing—with one hand, exposing her belly. Her other hand shot to her ear, touching.

She was whole. Unwounded.

“What—?” Goddess began.

“We've been jacked in,” Exxy said. “All this time! %@!#ing Species glitch buckets! %@!#ing Mother %@!#ing Sentinel!!”

“But, it was all...real, wasn't it?”

“It was virtually real,” Fluffy said, walking up to the foot of Goddess's bed. Her eyes were wide, but the red in them was dull in the dim light of the room. “They tricked us. Trained us in cyberspace.”

“It all seemed so real,” Helix said.

“Those glitch %@!#ing keetchas!” Death-nuke spat, ripping the cord from her MIU. “We went through all that? For nothing! %@!#ing vootches! I'm gonna %@!#ing kill somebody!”

“Sis, think about it,” She7 said, putting a hand on her sibling's shoulder. “We may have been jacked, but it was real enough. I remember it all. Every last %@!#ing detail. They *did* train us.”

“Glitch, I don't %@!#ing like this!”

Goddess's emotions swirled. She was alive! Unimaginable relief washed over her. Of course, she felt wetness at her eyes then. Not sadness this time, or embarrassment, or fear, but happiness. Joy! After so much sadness, after so much pain, what was she expected to do? Compared to the virtual hell she had just survived, she felt cosmic. She felt newborn.

Then Ky Lin's image flashed. The elation was flung away, replaced by an empty ache. Was he okay? Was that just part of the training, or was it a convenient way to get at her on a personal level? What was the truth? A sliver of anger poked into her. They didn't have a right to treat her like this,

play with her like she was a child's toy. They had no right to tangle with her emotions like this!

Goddess tried to access cyberspace, but the connection was dead. She removed the cord from her MIU.

"What are we supposed to do now?" Exxy asked. "Wait? More %@!#ing waiting! I'm a little unbalanced here. I don't know when realspace ended and cyberspace began. I'm searching in my memory, but it's just not there. Glitch, this is %@!#ing frustrating. Was *any* of it real?"

Helix shook her head, rubbing her hand across the short hairs up there. "Look at yourself. Do you have any wounds?"

"Nothing except what from what they %@!#ing did to me in Processing. Glitched j'aa eaters! Give me back my pulse dagger and I'll take a short walk through Processing again. Let them know how I feel about the Species right now."

"I think the answer is simple," Fluffy said, giving the rest of the trooplings a good probing stare with her red eyes.

"Scan us, little one," Death-nuke said.

Fluffy fingered her MIU. "In Processing, when they jacked us in—we've been in cyberspace ever since."

"That explains the brandings," Zilch said. "We got those *after* they jacked us in."

"What brandings?" Fluffy asked, her mouth curled, her eyes seeming to glow for a second. She *knew*.

Zilch checked herself and swore.

Goddess looked down at the back of her hand. White, unmarred skin.

The other trooplings checked themselves. The Talon-5 brandings were gone. Never existed.

"Ah, this is cosmically %@!#ing glitched!" Death-nuke said, punching one of the beds. "They glitched with us. Glitched us, and we were %@!#ing ignorant!"

"No," Exxy said. "We're were %@!#ing naïve."

"They're gonna brand us now, aren't they?" Helix asked. "Now that we're done with Basic."

"*Are we?*" Zilch asked. "Are we *really* done?"

"Oh, we are cosmically %@!#ing done with Basic!" Death-nuke said. "We've put in our time. Anybody tries to %@!#ing put us through that j'aa

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again is gonna have a %@!#ing fight on their %@!#ing hands! I know were all scanning that!”

“Glitch yeah,” Exxy said.

“How do we know though?” Goddess asked. “That we’re really out? What if we’re still jacked? What if Basic isn’t really over? I don’t...”

Goddess stopped, choking. The trooplings didn’t say anything.

Goddess swallowed hard, wiping both eyes. “I don’t think I can go through that again. I—”

“You died,” Exxy said, placing her hand on Goddess’s. “I was right there holding you. I could feel it when you passed. It was horrible. You’re right, I can’t go through anything like that again.”

She7 was shaking her head. “It doesn’t make any %@!#ing sense. Cyberspace was never that real before. I could always tell I was jacked. This was different.”

“Upgrades,” Fluffy said. “The Species must have access to an upgraded connection to cyberspace. Maybe it’s just local to their net. Pretty %@!#ing amazing if you ask me.”

“You seem pretty %@!#ing impressed for somebody who got gutted in there,” Death-nuke said.

“Don’t tell me what happened in there!” Fluffy said. “I know. I %@!#ing know what Pulse did. I felt every thrust.”

Death-nuke scowled. “It’s just you don’t see all that angry—“

“Leave her alone, sis,” She7 said. “She—we’ve all been through enough.”

“She7’s right,” Exxy said. “We united in there against them. They hurt us, but we won. We can’t stop acting as a cohesive Talon just because we’re not jacked. *We won in there.* We cant forget that.”

Goddess looked around the room. It was pretty bare. A couple wall-screens were inset opposite the beds. A line of small tables were set in the center of the room. On them lay various instruments.

Fluffy noticed Goddess’s gaze. “Intravenous lines. Catheters. Solid waste extractors. Everything the extending jacking requires. Guess we’ve been here awhile. They’ve been feeding us, bathing us, carting away our fluids. My guess is they waited till the end to clothe us. Maybe less than a hour ago.”

Goddess rubbed the skin at her bicep. The skin there was red and sore—the intravenous line insertion point. “You know,” she said. “I’m angry at the Species, but I want everybody to know that I’m happy that we’re all alive,

breathing, and okay. Mostly anyway. It may not have been realspace in there, but *it was real to us*. That makes it important *to us*. To me. I'm not going to forget what we all did in there."

"Same here," Exxy said.

Death-nuke paced. "So what're we supposed to do here now? I know what we're gonna do—what they're gonna make us do. We're gonna wait until they're—"

A door on the far end of the room slid open.

"Officers detected," the ceiling said.

The tension in the room ramped up as Glix Kill Thrill, Pulse, and Quaze entered. The trooplings were instantly alert. As if the move was an instinct, Death-nuke reached for her belt, grabbing for her dagger. Goddess did the same.

Only, there was no dagger. No belt to attach it to you see. Death-nuke swore. There was a raw fear that seized Goddess upon seeing Glix Kill Thrill. Her killer—this time in the flesh. Live, breathing, and deadly.

"Enough of that, troopling," Glix Kill Thrill said. Her voice was neither threatening or tense. It was simply issuing an order that it expected to be obeyed. "It's not necessary."

"Mother Sentinel, what have you done to us?" Helix asked. "We're all confused."

"How do we know we can trust you after what you did?" Death-nuke asked, then finished by tacking on an angry, "Mother Sentinel."

Glix Kill Thrill held up both hands, palms forward. "Trooplings, you will listen to me now. You will not ask questions. I will explain everything."

The trooplings had subconsciously scattered, putting small distances between themselves. The officers stood less than two meters away. Goddess wondered how long it would take her to cover that distance if she needed to. If things spiraled down into Eiech, her anger wanted her to be able to inflict some damage.

"First," Glix Kill Thrill said, "let me tell you that I understand what you're feeling right now. I've been there, and I know, you want to cut me open a thousand different ways. The bad thing about that is: I trained you well enough to do just that. I know you all want to, but let me warn you. Doing that will have consequences. Despite what you may think, you're not faster or better than me. You couldn't touch me before you'd be dead. Even

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if you did, attacking a superior officer is an execution-level offense. Put simply, you'd be dead before the day ended. I won't apologize for what we put you through. It was necessary. It is the Species way. You are stronger soldiers because of it, and that is a fact.

"Second, I want to congratulate all of you. Basic is over. You passed. All of you. Your initial training is complete. As a Talon, we are now qualified to be sent on operations with a level seven or lower danger assessment. Remember, I am Talon leader; your failure is my failure. In this case, your success is my success.

"Third, you will all be given the rest of the day as discretionary leave. Tomorrow, class begins again. Don't worry. The cyberspace immersion is only used for Basic training. It allows us to accelerate your learning."

Goddess reeled internally. Just how long had they been under? A week? A couple days? Hours?

"And lastly, I have a personal gesture to make," Glix Kill Thrill said. She nodded to Pulse and Quaze, then began to remove her formal 'flage top. It was decorated with rank patches, award pins, and other various insignia. Underneath, she wore a tight skinsuit which exposed her belly. There, the muscles rippled. She put her 'flage on one of the nearby tables. "Because we understand what you have gone through, we want to give you something. I discussed this with Pulse and Quaze, and they agreed."

Goddess was wary. What was going on? What could they be planning. She scanned the room, looking for a weapon. She remember the last gesture Glix Kill Thrill had made to her, and she shivered.

Glix Kill Thrill set her feet. Her fists open and closed, like she was readying herself for combat. "Each of you will approach the officer of your choice. Then, you will then hit that officer as hard as you %@!#ing can. You can hit us anywhere. We will not dodge the blow or fight back."

Goddess's jaw actually dropped. What was this?

"You will *not* hold back, trooplings. You will channel your hatred and rage into your attack. All you get is once chance, so make sure that you release everything at once. If you do not, I can guarantee that it will gnaw at you as long as you are under our leadership, and you won't be able to do a %@!#ing thing about it. So, trooplings, this is your chance. Don't temper your anger. Don't glitch this. Don't make me regret giving you this opportunity. Show me our training. Make me proud."

None of the trooplings moved.

“In case you didn’t scan it, trooplings,” Glix Kill Thrill said, “your Mother Sentinel just gave you a direct order. You will attack us. Goddess, you’re Troopling-6. That means you’re up first. You don’t get a choice who you hit. Now step forward.”

Goddess was shaking, eyes moist, but she moved in front of Glix Kill Thrill.

“Do it.”

“Please, Mother Sentinel, tell me one thing first.”

“Ask.”

“Ky Lin. Is he...” Goddess couldn’t bring herself to finish. Couldn’t bring herself to *actually* ask it.

Glix Kill Thrill sighed, her face going soft momentarily. “There were many things that were untrue while we were jacked. That, unfortunately, was not one of them. There was an accident. I’m sorry.”

“I see.” Then Goddess hit Glix Kill Thrill in the face. Her fist had come up so fast and hard that Goddess had barely known that she was in motion. There was a *crack* as her fist broke Glix Kill Thrill’s nose in a spray of blood, taking her from her feet. Glix Kill Thrill went down on her back, her head hitting the ground with another dull thud. She was completely still, face bloody. Thick drops of crimson ran down her cheeks, into her mouth, into her hair, onto the floor.

Goddess’s wrist hurt, her knuckles spotted with red—her blood was there too. She flexed her fingers, watched blood seep from broken skin. The tears blurred it all into an indistinct mess. She regarded Glix Kill Thrill’s prone body for a moment. She didn’t know if she felt better or not. Ky Lin was dead. That hadn’t been Glix Kill Thrill’s fault. Punching her wouldn’t bring him back. Why then, had she even done it?

Goddess cried, confused.

Pulse remained stoic as Exxy, grinning, eyes blazing, stepped forward.

Each of the trooplings had their turn, but none of the other trooplings touched the Mother Sentinel. Goddess had done that for them in that single punch.

When it was over, and the officers were lying on the floor, Goddess led the trooplings out of the room without looking back.

PROFESSION

“What’s the %@!#ing point of discretionary leave if we can’t leave the base?” Exxy asked no one in particular, even though she was walking beside Goddess. They were moving alongside a low fence. The fence was constructed of neoplastic and gleaming metal. Really, it didn’t look strong enough to hold its own weight, much less keep persons in or out. The thing probably had hidden defenses—transforming gun turrets,

rotating poison nozzles. That sort of thing. With the Species, you never knew where the weapons were. Maybe it was best not to touch anything.

“It doesn’t matter,” Goddess said. “What matters is that we have this time free, to ourselves, away from the officers, away from everything.”

“I’m still mad. Aren’t you?”

“I’m not sure. It isn’t that simple with me. I guess I don’t really know how I feel. I’m not sure I should feel anything. Shouldn’t we be burying all this emotion? Isn’t that why they let us attack them? Wasn’t it supposed to help us get through this? To move past what happened in cyberspace?”

Exxy sniffed. “I’m not sure I can do that. No, glitch it, I’m not sure I *want* to do that. I like my feelings, and I like expressing them. Trying to push them down is, well, painful at times. It’s like a volcano—too much pressure for too much time, and you get an eruption that destroys everything in its path. I’m not afraid of my feelings, and suppressing them is the worst thing I could do. Yet, here the Species is %@!#ing telling me to contain them, swallow them down deep. I scan you right now—I don’t like the taste of it. I’m not sure how I’m going to survive two years of this.”

“You’ll survive. You’re strong.”

“And what about you?” Exxy asked.

“I’m not that strong,” Goddess said. Was she blushing. If so, why?

“That’s a load of j’aa, and you %@!#ing know it. You’re stronger than you admit—stronger than you know.”

“It’s not that. It’s more like, um—I guess I’m stronger than I thought I ever could be.”

“Glitch yeah, you are. When we were jacked, you took the lead.”

“Not by my choice. I’m Troopling-6 only because some computer selected me to be in charge—it wasn’t an informed decision. It was a mistake, that’s all.”

“Glitch that!” Exxy said, pulling up short, forcing Goddess to stop. “It wasn’t a mistake. You may have been forced into the situation—forced into the Species like some of the others—but you made your own decisions when the time came for action. Glitch, you %@!#ing obliterated our blessed Mother Sentinel in cyberspace. I saw you shove that neuro-chill grenade in her mouth. I saw GKT’s teeth go flying. That was *you*. So don’t give me this %@!#ing j’aa about mistakes and your lack of strength. I’m not gonna put up with it. You scan me?”

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Goddess was smiling, but she had tears in her eyes. Such a contradiction! They turned toward a small group of buildings. In the center, a sign proclaimed in a neon blue:

THE GLITCHED SEAL

“Let’s go in,” Exxy said. “I’ll buy you something that’ll take your mind off of all of this j’aa. Glitch if both of us don’t need something like that.”

“What’s a SEAL?” Goddess asked.

“No %@!#ing idea,” Exxy said as the door, which also glowed neon blue, opened for her. “I don’t like the sound of it though. Hopefully this place has what I’m craving.”

Several minutes later, they were back outside, each holding a small, edible container. The sign in The Glitched SEAL had proclaimed the sweet, velvety mush in the container as:

BLACK ICE CREAM FROM THE FUTURE!

Goddess had no clue what that meant. It wasn’t as much black as it was dark gray, and it certainly wasn’t from the future. Who thought up these names? Ridiculous!

“Listen,” Exxy said as they walked. Her voice was soft, throaty, thick with the mush in her throat and in her mouth. As usual, her delivery was fast and furious. “I’m sorry about Ky Lin. I can only imagine how much he must have meant to you. What the officers put us through was bad, but what they

did to you—that was crossing some line. GKT knew it too, but she did it anyway. Glitch, I feel like I need to apologize for her too! I know none of this makes it any better, but I'm here if you need to say anything. I'll listen. I'm better at talking, but I can listen too, if I set my mind to it and remind myself to shut the glitch up every once in awhile."

"Thank you. That means a lot to me. Hey, let's find a place to sit down. My legs don't feel like they're recovered from the jack—however long it was we were in. They're getting shaky."

Exxy spotted a ring of benches surrounding a revolving holographic sculpture. They sat down. Goddess leaned back, letting a glob of the mush slide down her throat. The sweetness was a bit dizzying. It made her fingers and toes tingle. She was smiling like a child. It confused her mind, tumbled her thoughts. The mush, along with Exxy's companionship, drove Ky Lin from her immediacy. In that instant, she thought, maybe she *could* make it through without the promise of Ky Lin waiting for her at the end of her time in the Species.

Goddess looked over at Exxy, who was doing some introspecting of her own, mesmerized by the spinning sculpture, pondering its cycling colors and pulsing miasmas. Her hair was growing in like the rest of the trooplings.

"Your hair is blonde," Goddess remarked.

"Yeah," Exxy said, not looking over, unaware of Goddess's stare. "It's the same color as my mother's was."

Goddess realized that she hadn't heard Exxy's history. Exxy had managed to get out of that somehow. Goddess didn't want to bring that up right then. She also hadn't ever properly *thanked* Exxy for withholding her stimulant that night she'd been walking perimeter. Goddess had stared her down pretty hard at the time, but Glix Kill Thrill had arrived before there could be any discussion of the matter. Then, she'd forgotten about it for awhile. With all the torture of Basic, her mind had been occupied.

Looking closer, Goddess saw that Exxy's features were harder and more angular than she'd noticed before. Even the way Exxy sat, with her shoulders thrown back and her elbows over the edge of the bench, legs bent, was unique among the trooplings. She was completely at ease, willing to let that part of herself relax and be on display. It was enthralling.

Exxy's eyes reflected the holographic statue, the colors flashing in her eyes, drawing out the blue underneath her eyelashes. She seemed so alive in

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that moment, Goddess wanted to grab Exxy's hand and siphon off some of that energy.

"You know," Goddess said, inexplicably nervous, "before, when we were jacked, and I...um, died, you were going to tell me something. It seemed important. I was wondering, ah...if you want—you could tell me now. If you wanted." Goddess cringed internally when she realized she'd repeated herself. Exxy would think...okay, what *would* Exxy think?

Something changed in Exxy's eyes. She hadn't moved, but she was no longer focusing on the hologram, but down at her knees. "Do you really want to know?"

Goddess swallowed. "I do, but only because you were going to tell me."

Exxy looked over. Beneath her lids were seas of blue. "I thought about it. I want to tell you, but I'm afraid to. I'm afraid it will affect what we have between us. I'm afraid you'll hate me."

"No!" Goddess said, reaching out to put her hand on Exxy's arm. "You couldn't make me hate you! What would make you think that?"

"Oh my Goddess, we all have our secrets. I have a big one—I let that slip when I tried to tell you before. Glitch, I wish I could take that back. Then you wouldn't know that I was keeping something from you. Keeping something from *everybody*. Your ignorance would have been preferable."

"It's alright, you don't have to say anything to me."

Exxy shifted on the bench, facing Goddess now, leaning in. "I said I *want* to tell you—I really do. So, I'm going to."

Goddess held her breath. It seemed appropriate.

Exxy took a deep breath, blew it out slowly. Then: "I lied to you before."

That wasn't so bad, was it? It wasn't good, but she had been prepared for worse.. "You did? When? Why would you do that?"

"I was scared. Anyway, that's no %@!#ing excuse.. It was when I first met you. I told you I wasn't into women. That was my lie. The truth is that I'm *only* into women."

Goddess let her hand fall from Exxy's shoulder. She opened her mouth, but nothing was coming. She was vaguely aware that she had spilled some of her cold mush on the knee of her 'flage. But that was far away now, maybe in a completely different universe.

Exxy didn't stop there. "If that wasn't hard enough for me to say—and for you to hear, then how about this: I'm in love with you, Goddess."

RETREAT

“If I wasn't in love with you from that first moment I saw you during Processing, then it happened during Basic. I watched you. I saw you for who you really were.”

Goddess reeled, standing, pushing away, crying. “You're right, you shouldn't have told me! Oh, God, I can't believe this!” How many times could she be propositioned by members of her own Talon? What were the

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odds?

“I’m sorry, I didn’t want it to be like this between us. But I—”

“You couldn’t what?!?” Goddess said. Actually, it had more of the elements of a scream. “You couldn’t control your tongue? You couldn’t prevent yourself from lying! You’re worse than Death-nuke! At least she was up front about her lust for me! I could’ve dealt with that from you at least!”

“I’m sorry. I glitched this up.”

“Friends don’t do this to each other!”

“I know. *I know!* I have no excuse.”

“How long have you—”

“Forever,” Exxy sobbed. She wiped her nose. She looked like she wanted to stand and join Goddess, but knew that act wouldn’t be accepted, just misinterpreted.

“And you have to hide it? Why?!?”

“I don’t hide it, normally. But, with you...I don’t know. I panicked. I did things wrong. You were so pretty. So unattainable. Then, when I saw you dying, it all came unraveled. I didn’t want you to go, without you knowing the truth. But not just that truth—the whole truth about me.”

“You’re not making any sense,” Goddess said, dabbing at her knee—anything to distract her. “I like you, Exxy, but...you’re hurting me here. Deceiving me like this. How can I trust any of your truth?”

Exxy put her head in her hands. “You’re right. You can’t. I don’t blame you, and I don’t begrudge you your anger. Glitch me, but I deserve whatever it is you feel toward me. You can’t trust me anymore. And you can’t ever fully understand why I did what I did—why I acted like that—unless I tell you one more thing.”

Goddess turned on Exxy, furious. “You mean you have some other %@!#ing secret!” Goddess didn’t swear normally, but that one slipped out. Despite her fury, she felt bad about using it in anger. And for using it against Exxy. Her eyes filled with tears.

“Yes.” Exxy hid her head in her arms.

“I can’t be around you right now,” Goddess said. “Don’t get close to me for awhile. If I want to talk to you, you’ll know it. Otherwise, stay away from me.”

“I can’t tell you my other secret,” Exxy said, her voice muffled behind her arms. “I want to, because it could fix all of this. We would at least be able

to sort this all out. You might even be able to forgive me at that point.”

“Tell me right now, then. I’ll listen.”

“Oh my Goddess, I love you, but...I can’t.”

Goddess turned and left without saying another word. Behind her, as she left, she could hear Exxy’s gentle weeping.

In the end, it was that sound that hurt most of all.