

LEAVE

SOLDIERS: A TALE OF XX CHROMO WARFARE

NEON

Towers of chrome and night rose from the cityscape.

If one looked up, one could imagine those towers were leaning inward, about to close off the sky to the denizens of the ground—those who were foolish enough to allow themselves to be subjugated by walking beneath these irreverent monuments to man's defiance of their Creator.

Goddess, Exxy, and Zilch were three such fools. They walked on the side

of the street to avoid the hovercabs and other vehicles traveling at high speed in the middle of the road. On the sidewalk, it seemed little different. The press of people—some of them moving on personal transports no more than two feet wide—was a sea of bare flesh and exposed metal. Interspersed within the crowds were androids, modies, robots, and mutated humans. No pure sample of humanity could be found—everybody had been modified. Somehow enhanced. The Creator’s original design was obviously flawed. Man had improved on what the Deity had accomplished. It was an evolution, but one of man’s own doing.

The handiwork of man’s arrogance lay displayed to Goddess. She knew all these things existed, but had never seen them all together, pressed up against each other so the differences were apparent. Growing up outside of major cities, and then in government sponsored housing, she had never spent any time in the metropolises. This—all of it—was new to her. It was thrilling and scary all at the same time. She wanted to cry for joy and for fear simultaneously.

A group of five figures brushed by her. They wore brown mesh cloaks, their bodies covered completely. As the last one passed her, the person inside looked up. Goddess caught the briefest flash of blue skin, and eyes without retinas—it seemed that fluid churned within them. Goddess couldn’t help but turn her head as they passed. The back of their cloaks fluttered, as if something wriggled underneath, along their backs. Goddess imagined thick serpents under those cloaks.

“Don’t stare,” Exxy said. “You look like a youngling when you do that. You look like prey.”

Zilch grunted. “Yeah, prey with a pulse dagger on her belt and a DL2 on her shoulder. We’re prey that %@!#ing bites back.”

The three of them were fully armed. They took emergency leave seriously.

Goddess had ordered leave for the Talon. It had become apparent that they needed it after the Oni*asha debacle. Even though the Species considered the mission a success, the members of Talon-5 had been affected by the severing of their command structure and the injuries that Death-nuke and Helix had sustained. Goddess was depressed, and the others were just stressed. A couple days before, a routine training exercise had turned violent, with every trooping going at each other. Goddess had put a stop to it, but

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only barely. She had called for emergency leave. The Commander-9 had granted it because of Goddess's performance on the Oni*asha mission. That, and the fact that she had just about broken down in his office—something he had not been prepared for.

"I thought we were going to get drunk," Exxy said.

"We are?" Zilch asked. She was peering through the crowd as if searching for somebody.

"Goddess and I have a date with just about anything that can inebriate us. It was a promise made in the heat of battle, but we're not backing out, are we? Glitch, didn't think so, and glitch if I don't need it. I haven't had a drink since I joined up with this %@!#ing Talon, and my body's wondering why I'm torturing it like this. I need some fire in my throat, and I could stand a few less synapses firing for awhile if you scan me. I need to forget the j'aa we just went through, even if it's just for a little while. Goddess is gonna get cosmically glitched with me, but—Zilch, what the %@!# are you doing? You looking for someone? If so, where is he? I'm assuming it's a *him*, but correct me if I'm wrong. Going under the assumption that it's a *he*—is he cosmic? Answer the last question first."

Goddess laughed.

Zilch blushed. "I'll let you know when I find him. It's not a specific person, but I'll know him when I see him."

Exxy put her arm around Zilch's shoulders. "I like you just a little bit more now—and I thought you were decently cosmic before."

Goddess was again distracted by the teeming chaos around her. The advertisements that ran the length of the buildings. The neon lights, each competing for the attention of her eyes. *Look here! Look here now!! We have what you want! We have the latest fashion! Show off that skin! Put your body on display for the world to ogle! Wear our transparent skinsuits! We have the latest implants! Get adrenaline injectors! We install artificial pores with poison sacs! We can hardwire your brain to cyberspace! There's no danger of memory loss! We have the latest in AI companions! Have sex with a robot every day of your life! You can program your fetish right in! Even a child can do it!*

Goddess was dizzy with the onslaught. She even stumbled, banging into Exxy. "Sorry," Goddess said, grabbing Exxy's shoulder.

"You're not tipsy already are you?" Exxy asked. "You been sneaking some liquid lava ahead of schedule? I want you to know that I'm not going to

put up with this type of betrayal.”

“No,” Goddess said. “I’m not drunk.” In truth, she had *never* been drunk. The government didn’t allow their wards access to much alcohol. It had been several years since she had tasted any of it—even then, it hadn’t been enough to do anything for her. Goddess was a little nervous about the whole trip, but she wanted Exxy to feel comfortable. If Exxy and Zilch were going to get drunk, then...well, she’d be right there with them.

“We need to remedy that—for all of us,” Exxy said.

“Pick a place,” Goddess said. “Any place. Just get me off this street. It’s a little bit much for me. I’m not use to...*all this*. I feel a little nauseous—not like I’m about to vomit, but...just get me off this street and into someplace dark. I need to close my eyes and let these afterimages fade. Feels like my retinas are burning.”

“I scan that,” Exxy said.

It only took less than five minutes for Exxy to find a place that would suit their needs. It was set between a street doctor on one side and a gathering of androids on the other. The androids were praying, their heads bowed. Some of them had their skeletal arms raised to the heavens. Some were crying lubricant tears. Their stiff mouths moved in quiet liturgies. One of them stood, leading the others in some sort of chant.

Goddess wondered who they were praying to. Who was the God of androids? And was their God listening?

Tapping on Goddess shoulder. *This. One.*

Goddess stopped, looked up. The sign was dark for several seconds. Then, it flared briefly before going dark. A pink afterimage glowed in Goddess’s vision. The afterimage spelled out a welcome and the name of the bar:

**YOU ARE
INVITED INTO
KEETCHAS AND
VIRGINS**

“I think it’s a chain,” Zilch said. “They had one in my hometown. I don’t really like it.”

“It’ll do,” Goddess said, pushing past Exxy and walking inside. The darkness inside swallowed her.

Ah, heaven!

LIQUID

Keetchas and Virgins was larger than Goddess had expected, but then again, what *had* she expected? The lights in here were much dimmer. Oh, that was much better! She felt like she could breathe again. Felt like she could open her eyes again.

The sentry on the inside of the door gave her DL2 a quick glance and waved her through. In cyberspace, Goddess responded to an entity which

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had just popped up. It was requesting a credit transfer approval for her entrance fee into the bar. Goddess made a small gesture with her finger and the entity disappeared, deducting credits from her account as it went.

There were people dancing—if that’s what all that gyrating and cavorting could be called—in the center of the large room Goddess found herself in. Around the flat, open area were rows of counters and stools. Beyond the counters, on all sides, there were small tables and chairs. Along the walls were plush booths.

Exxy steered Goddess and Zilch toward one of the booths. “Sit your rear down. I’ll get what we’re drinking.”

“Remember, charge it all to me,” Goddess said. “Tonight is on me.”

“In that case, I’ll get the expensive stuff,” Exxy said as she left.

Goddess sat down, put her hand on her forehead. She wondered why she had agreed to do this. She didn’t want to be drinking now. Not really. She didn’t want to get drunk. Of course, she didn’t know what she *did* want. The confusion she felt was debilitating.

“Mother Sentinel, you shouldn’t let their deaths bother you, you know,” Zilch said, slipping and using the reverent way to address Goddess. “None of us were responsible for what happened.”

Goddess didn’t know if that was the problem right then, but Zilch’s tone had betrayed that coldness Goddess had detected before. Was it some barrier that Zilch had erected to save herself from...what exactly? Zilch’s voice—that coldness, that musical quality which made Goddess want to hear her voice again, but yet, the harshness which lurked beneath cast a shadow over everything she said. Goddess was disturbed.

“Just because I wasn’t responsible, doesn’t mean I can’t get upset,” Goddess said. “I think it’s a normal reaction—especially considering the circumstances.”

Zilch scratched just above her perfect ear. How did she look so neat and clean all the time? “I guess that’s just a difference between me and the rest of the Talon. I can accept these things easier than you and the others. I accept what life gives me. I move on. Sometimes, it’s that simple.”

“Don’t you feel sad about what happened?”

“Sad? I’m not sure. I think it was more shock than anything else. It was so %@!#ing sudden, and I didn’t expect something like that to happen our first time out. No, I don’t think I was sad. I didn’t know them that well, and

after the way we were treated in Basic...I guess that affected my feelings toward them.”

“What about me, now that I’m Talon leader? How do you feel about me?”

“About the same I guess. I know you better than I knew Glix Kill Thrill, Pulse and Quaze, but I don’t know you *that* well yet.”

“I hope you change your mind about me someday.”

“We’ll see how it goes.” Zilch attempted a smile, but it was forced and rang false. She shifted in her seat, absently scanning the dancers in the middle of the room. The conversation was making her uncomfortable.

Goddess was uncomfortable too. She wasn’t tired, but she wished she was. Sleeping was a good way of not thinking about anything. A good way to shut out her problems. At that thought, she sensed that Ky Lin was going to appear to her. She waited, but he didn’t come.

This was something that was occurring more frequently now. Over the past week, whenever she had negative thoughts, Ky Lin would appear in her mind, angry. He was chastising her! He let her know when she was being selfish, thinking only of herself and her needs. He was there when she began to give up. He was there when she thought about reaching for her pulse dagger and inflicting a fatal wound on herself. He was there, every time.

The memory of him; it was protecting her. Even dead, Ky Lin was doing what he’d always done. Goddess had cried when she realized what was happening. In some small way, he hadn’t completely left her. That made the reality of his death sting just a little bit more.

Exxy came back, sliding in next to Zilch. She had three thin containers which she placed in front of each of them. Steam wafted from inside, but when Goddess wrapped her hand around hers, the metal surface felt cool to the touch.

“Is it safe?” Goddess asked, and immediately wished she hadn’t. What kind of a question was that? It made her seem like a child—she felt like one. Maybe she could hide under the table...

Ky Lin would have frowned at that. She didn’t need to picture his face to know that.

Was her really going to be with her like this? Her guardian? Her conscience?

Exxy laughed. “Hah! Glitch no, it’s not safe! If it was, it wouldn’t be any

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fun.”

Goddess smelled the liquid, which had the color and consistency of molten silver. She smelled it—a horrendous mixture of chemicals and nature: cleaning agents and fruit. “Do they have a name for this stuff?”

“It was just numbered on the screen, but the ‘tender called it *Sex With a Ninja*. I have no idea what that means—I can only hope that it burns all the way down and can do its job without coming back up before I can send a few more its way. Why, are you scared? You are, aren’t you?”

Goddess was, but wasn’t about to back out now. She didn’t even think; she just brought the container to her mouth and tilted her head back. The liquid was cold and hot all at the same time, filling her mouth with the most putrid taste and an indescribable sweetness. It seared down her throat, feeling like it was eating away at her esophagus, but somehow tickling her nose hairs, making her eyes water, and raising the hair at the back of her neck. With a shaky hand, she drained the container and set it back down. She realized her toes were curled in her boots.

She put her palms flat on the table and pushed her torso back, trying to breathe, but she’d just swallowed a singularity. The wave, when it came a second later was a raw bolt of ecstasy, shuddering through her muscles. She grabbed for the edge of the table, but her whole body convulsed anyway. It was coupled with the feel of lava-injected arteries, but it was so entangled in the heat, that she couldn’t tell which was which. Her vision dimmed, eyes crossing, rolling upward.

When it was over—mostly—her neck went weak, and she sat there, head bowed, breathing hard. There was something wet on her chin, but she didn’t know if it was the drink or some of her own saliva.

Oh! My! The intensity!

In that moment, Goddess believed in spontaneous combustion; a molecular discorporation was a cosmic possibility.

Exxy and Zilch gaped at her.

“I’ll have what she’s having,” Exxy said, drawing the words out. “So that’s what sex with a ninja is like. Oh my Goddess! I’m a little flushed myself, and I was sitting over here the whole time.”

“Oh %@!# that; it couldn’t have been that good,” Zilch said. “She’d just not used to that level of drink.”

“What have you done to me?” Goddess whispered, her voice hoarse and

low. “I’m going to kill you, Exxy. Just give me an hour or two to recover.”

“Just let me try mine first. I don’t want to die without having experienced what you just did.”

“God, that was either the best experience of my life, or...I never want to do that again as long as I live. I’m not sure which right now. I can’t focus. Is it possible to go blind from this?”

“Not a chance,” Exxy said, raising her glass.

“I’ll try anything once,” Zilch said. She put her drink to her lips.

Their reactions were nowhere near as strong as Goddess’s had been, but they both agreed it was one of the better drinks they’d had.

“Hey soldier cutie, you wanna get on the floor with me?”

Goddess, still having trouble focusing, realized that the voice came from a figure standing by their table. It looked like two people, but that was just her double-vision. She concentrated, blinked, and the figure came into focus.

It was a him.

He was about six feet tall, with close-cropped, black hair. His face was beautiful and his muscular body was covered in some black synthetic that sparkled gently in the dim bar lights. He didn’t have any obvious implants.

Oh, and he’d been directing his question at Goddess.

“What?” she said. You know, in this light, he looked a little like—

“I’m Ky Lin. Do you want to marry me?”

Goddess sat up straight, pushing herself deeper in the booth. What had he said? *What the %@!# had he just said?* No. No. No! This couldn’t be!

“What did you just say?” Goddess asked.

The guy looked confused now. He spoke louder. “I’m Sev. Do you want to dance with me? I-I want to dance with you.”

So, it had just been her mind. Or the liquid inebriant coursing through her bloodstream. She had just misheard, that’s all.

“Sorry, buckaroo,” Exxy said. “You’re not her type, or mine. Zilch?”

Zilch looked him up and down. Her smile, when it eventually surfaced, was predatory. “Yeah, I’ll let him dance with me.”

Exxy let Zilch out, then sat back down. Zilch grabbed Sev before he knew what was happening and whisked him away.

“I almost feel sorry for him,” Exxy said.

Goddess, who was existing in a mild state of drunkenness—bewildered by her mind and ears playing games with her—could only nod.

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BLIP

Goddess had, within an hour, only managed to down one more drink—a much tamer one this time. She sipped at it, preferring to let the alcohol take her slowly down the cliff of insobriety, instead of throwing her off of it as her first drink had attempted to do.

She talked with Exxy, enjoying her company. The tension between them had eased, and their conversation was another step only that road.

But Zilch was back now. She had left Sev out in the middle of the floor. He was still standing there as if he expected her to return.

“You guys scanning that?” Zilch asked.

Goddess looked at Exxy, who shook her head. “No, what do you have?”

“A blip. It’s that %@!#ing signal again! Somebody is %@!#ing broadcasting, and they’re doing from inside this place. The signal is strong this time. Stronger than what Fluffy recorded for us.”

“Okay, we can’t let this continue,” Goddess said. “Let’s find out what’s going on here. Spread out through the room. Track the signal. With the three of us, we should be able to triangulate the signal’s origin.”

Goddess stood, but the room seemed to stand with her and she found herself still sitting.

“Oh my Goddess, you’re glitched,” Exxy said, placing a hand on Goddess’s forehead. “No walking for you. Why don’t you just scan from right here?”

“You know...I think I’ll scan from right here.”

Zilch and Exxy moved through the bar.

“Zilch to Goddess. I’m over by the far booths now. It looks like the signal originates from somewhere on the other side.”

Goddess, in cyberspace, listened to the signal, but it seemed different than before. It was wavering, fading in and out. Has it changed, or was she just drunk and hearing-impaired? The signal didn’t *seem* to be coming from over there though. It seemed to be more—

“Exxy to Goddess. I have a lock! I did a narrow-band scan and zeroed in on the precise frequency. Bounced it back off the local cyberspace node transmitter. Blam! I %@!#ing got it!”

“Who is it?” Goddess asked.

Exxy and Zilch moved towards the center of the bar. Exxy’s voice seemed far away—maybe Goddess’s hearing was going. “Glitch, it’s that Sev guy.”

Goddess heard Zilch sigh before saying, “No big loss. He wasn’t a good dancer anyway. Kept pressing his body up against mine. He wouldn’t let me lead. Let me do the takedown.”

“Too late,” Exxy said. “This keetchin is mine.” Exxy swung her DL2 off her back and stepped into the dance area. The people parted around as if she were splitting an ocean. She walked up behind Sev—who was trying to press

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his body up against some implant-infested girl—and pressed the nozzle to the back of his head. At the same time, her foot reached out, and her hand jerked his arm behind his back. He was on the ground in an instant, face against the neoplastic surface, grunting and protesting. Exxy was saying something to him.

Goddess was too far away to hear what was being said, but Zilch approached. Exxy said something to her. Zilch unslung her own DL2 and pointed it at Sev. Exxy release her grip on him, put her DL2 over her shoulder and proceeded to give him a full body search. A check of the collar of his shirt had Exxy removing a small, black device, which was about two centimeters in diameter. Exxy said something to Sev, louder than before, then she motioned to Zilch. Zilch yanked Sev to his feet and pushed him towards the door. Sev protested the entire way, but the DL2 in his back was motivation enough to not put up a fight. When he was out, Zilch and Exxy returned to the table.

“The bar security will hold him till we’re ready to leave,” Zilch said. “We can interrogate the %@!#ing keetchin at our leisure. Preferably when I’m a little drunker and I’ve had a night’s worth of rest to sleep it off—maybe a clean companion to spend it with. You know, they have private rooms here. Sonic showers. Everything.”

Exxy ignored her. “That %@!#ing glitch bucket was using one of these to get audio and video of us.” Exxy held the tiny circular transmitter in the palm of her hand.

Goddess took it from her. “But why would he be doing this? That doesn’t really explain how we picked up the signal in Oni*asha, or in Basic for that matter.”

Exxy picked up her drink container and signaled for another. “My guess is that he’s not the only one with one of these. Maybe he’s working for the Onis.”

“What about the signal in Basic though?” Zilch asked.

“Yeah, I’m not sure about that. I guess we’ll have to beat it out of him later.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” Zilch said, “but for now, I’m going prowling. I want a man.”

“Just make sure he’s clean,” Exxy said as Zilch walked off.

Goddess looked at the device, then pushed a small button. The signal

disappeared.

“What did you just do?” Exxy said. “The signal’s gone.”

“I turned it off,” Goddess said. “Either that, or I broke it. Here, since you discovered it, you take care of it.”

Exxy grabbed the device and slid toward the edge of the booth. “Cosmic. I have to pee. I’ll be back. We’ll talk more.” She left.

Goddess watched her go. Exxy image wavered, just a mirage in the desert of Goddess’s alcohol-tempered dreams.

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REVEAL

They were creative. Goddess had to give them that. And what they lacked in creativity, they made up for in persistence.

The first had come up to the booth and had sat down directly across from her. He had made some semi-smooth statement about how cosmic she looked in her 'flage—he had known the Species term for her uniform—and how he supported everything that the Species did, including all-female

Talons. He had rambled Exxy-like for a minute or two, and then he'd made some suggestion about just how naked he could get her if she would just come back to the private room he'd rented already—just for her. He'd gone on to describe what they would do back there in explicit detail. To Goddess, most of what he'd described didn't seem to be all that appealing, although some part of her wondered if she wouldn't have liked to try a few of those things with Ky Lin...eventually, if whatever was between them had worked out, and he hadn't got himself dead.

She'd never know now, would she?

She'd asked the guy to leave, and unexpectedly, he did so without protest. Goddess scanned cyberspace, but Exxy had disappeared. Zilch had herself shielded, so her exact location was hidden. Goddess didn't feel like executing a priority coordinate scan to locate either of them.

Exxy must have jacked out. Well, she'd better of had a good reason. Goddess sat through several more propositions. Half an hour later, she realized that a single sixteen-year-old girl, sitting along in a bar was an open invitation for the rest of the bar's citizens to test whether she really wanted to be alone. For the last one—a woman—she'd simply pulled her DL2 and set it down on the table. The woman—her straight black hair was interwoven with thin, robotic spiders which crawled up and down her strands, trailing glistening webs as they went—smiled a smile plagued with silver teeth, then stalked out of the bar.

Ky Lin, Goddess observed, was laughing. That was just like him. The jerk.

Where was Exxy? She'd been gone a long time. How long could it take one girl to relieve herself?

Still no sign of Exxy in cyberspace.

A thought occurred to Goddess. What if? What if Exxy was in trouble? What if she needed help? What if—?

Goddess forced all that down. Forced a calmness to rise up within her. Exxy was fine. She wasn't hurt. She wasn't lying bleeding on the floor beside where she'd just urinated. She was a Species soldier—a lethal one. Predators were going to think at least twice before choosing to tangle with her.

Goddess would just go look for her. She needed to pee too anyway. She stood up, taking a second to let the wave of dizziness pass, noticing with some internal amusement that there were two more propositions headed her

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way. They saw she was leaving and altered their course to intercept her. Goddess hoisted her DL2. The two altered course again, failing to make it look like they had done so of their own volition.

Inside, Goddess imagined that Ky Lin was laughing again.

Jerk.

If he was alive, she would've strangled him. Then she would've kissed the living glitch out of him and squeezed him so tight their molecules would've been forced to bond. Then she would've—

No. That was a useless line of thought. It made her ache from deep down. Made her hurt and want to cry. She shook the thoughts away, slinging the DL2 back over her shoulder. She moved with a purpose, not looking at the bar's inhabitants, but *through* them. At the far end of the bar was a sign that led to the washrooms. The light back there, in the hallway, was a little brighter. A sentry stood back there, guarding an offshoot passage that led to the private rooms and sonic showers. There were additional sentries scattered down the passage. Whatever went on back there...*stayed* back there.

Goddess found two doors. They were marked *keetcha* and *keetchin* in wide, precise lettering. She put her hand on the *keetcha* door—

BLIP.

Goddess stopped at the alert which had popped up in cyberspace.

The signal. It was back on, pulsing its own unique pulse at some predetermined interval. It was strong this time, and it was clear. That meant whoever was doing it was close. The signal was clear enough for Goddess to get a direction and range. The signal was coming from behind the *keetcha* door.

Goddess pulled the pulse dagger, deciding against the DL2 for the moment. It could be unwieldy in the cramped space behind the *keetcha* door. She gripped the pulse dagger handle tight, keeping the now-glowing blade down, half-hidden next to her thigh.

She pushed the door, stepped through, let the door close behind her.

BLIP.

The smell of humanity met her, but the room was empty of people. There were small dividers separating the individual units, but they were all vacant. The cleansing area was abandoned. A small android attendant stood in one corner.

“Is assistance required?” the android assistant asked.

“Was there another soldier just in here?”

“Another Species soldier left twenty-three minutes and sixteen seconds ago.”

“Do you know where she went?”

“No, but the soldier did wash afterward. I did not have to remind the soldier to do this. Is there anything else I can answer for you?”

“No,” Goddess said, noting in cyberspace that credits had just been deducted from her account. Info from the android attendant had a price attached to it.

Goddess stepped between two dividers. As she sat, letting her body relieve herself, she realized that Exxy must’ve activated the transmitter again. That made the most sense; it was the easiest explanation. Goddess wished Exxy would jack back in so they could meet back up. Goddess wanted to talk to her, wanted to drink some more with her. She’d been having a good time before, feeling a great amount of comfort and kinship with Exxy, and to a much lesser extent—Zilch. They were her officers after all. It was only right that she have some stronger bonds with them, right? Their time together earlier—it had felt so good.

The effects of the alcohol in her system was fading. These places designed the effects to be quick and shot-lived. The faster the customers sobered up, the more alcohol they would buy.

Looking out across the room, Goddess could see into the mirror above the cleansing area. It reflect the opposite wall. There was something written back there—in reverse, so it was readable only by looking in the mirror. The wording was big enough that Goddess could read it from where she was. It read:

Hark!

A blue angel has breached this world.

*When $[5 \times 4 - 1]$ unfolds,
I will unleash a virtual apocalypse.*

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When [4 x 5 + 1] arrives,
This world will die.

by a brush of the blue angel's wing.

Amen.

[dg] [2176]

Great, another prediction of doom for the planet. Goddess had heard enough of those.

A few minutes later, Goddess was back in the hallway. A quick check of cyberspace confirmed that the signal was still there. She was about to turn, go back into the keetcha room, when she changed her mind, stepped toward the private room/sonic shower passage.

The direction on the signal changed. Oh, now it was down there, back among the private rooms.

Was Exxy back there? What was going on? Why would she have—?

Oh.

Goddess moved toward the closest sentry. Ky Lin didn't like that, not at all. He was frowning. If he'd been audible, Goddess thought that she would be able to *hear* that frown. Goddess pushed him back, ignored him. Shut him up.

"One of my trooplings is back there," Goddess said to the sentry, who was a foot taller than her and about twice as wide. He was wearing body armor and carried some sort of baton, which he held casually in one hand. "I need to know which room she's in."

"I can't tell you that," the sentry said.

"I'm Sentinel-8 of Talon-5 of Hive-4 of Colony-3. You're interfering with Species business. That's just stupid, pure and simple."

The sentry didn't even move. Didn't respond.

"I guess I'll call in the rest of my Talon. We'll declare this a Species Quarantine Zone, and then I'll do whatever the %@!# I want at that point—including shoving my pulse dagger in the closest uncomfortable orifice I can find. Why don't you tell me where my solider is and let me go back there. I will bring her out, and we can avoid a lot of Death Laser 2 damage to this high-class establishment. Contact your superior—whatever you have to do to get me cleared, but do it right now. I'm going back there in ten seconds, whether I'm approved or not." To drive home her point, Goddess unslung the DL2 and flipped it over to automatic. The DL2 began to emit a high-pitched whine. It only did this for a couple of seconds, but it had the desired effect. The sentry's eyes went vacant as he jacked into cyberspace.

"You're a fireball, aren't you?" the sentry said a moment later, his focus returning as he jacked back out. "Okay, I have clearance to let you through. She's in Private-Hollow-Epsilon. Since it'll be the two of you, you'll pay double the by-minute rate."

"Fine," Goddess said. "I won't be long."

"Maybe, after you're done with her, you and I could—"

"No," Goddess said, pushing past.

The further down the passage Goddess went, the stronger the signal got. This was it—the true signal. She must have been getting a reflection before. What was Exxy doing back here?

Some doors led to private rooms. Others led to sonic showers. A few of the showers had actual water in them. Oh, how Goddess would've loved to get into one of those, feel those soft drops against her face, against her body. But there wasn't time or money for that.

She stopped in front of it. It said:

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EXPERIENCE
PRIVATE
HOLLOW
EPSILON
PLEASUREPASSIONHEAT
INSIDE

An inscription underneath read:

WHAT
HAPPENS HERE
WILL BE OUR
LITTLE SECRET
OKAY
?

This time there was no mistaking it. The signal was coming from this

room. It was like a beacon, pulsing at Goddess in cyberspace. Goddess was a little irritated. If Exxy had wanted to examine the device, she should've just told Goddess what she wanted to do. She didn't have to sneak around like this. Goddess hoped that Exxy hadn't damaged the transmitter.

Goddess put her DL2 on her shoulder and made sure the pulse dagger on her belt was secure.

Ky Lin was there again, making a face that she could tell was meant to warn her of something. He was more than irritated now—he was mad, furious. About something. What was it? Goddess wished she could sigh internally, let him hear how frustrated she was with him. With his death. With the memory of him becoming more than just a memory.

The door to Private-Hollow-Epsilon slid open for her. Goddess stepped through, into a short entryway which led out into a larger room. The edge of a bed was visible from where she stood. Two bare feet and two bare ankles were sticking off that bed. Exxy's.

"Who's that?" came a concerned voice. It was low, throaty. It was definitely Exxy. "I'm notifying the sentries! Don't come—"

"Exxy, what are you doing back here?" Goddess began, moving toward the bed. "And can you tell me why you activated that device—"

As the bed came into full view, Goddess's voice caught in her throat as if it was a physical object that had just stuck itself there. Cold. Frozen. Paralyzed. No real word could best describe her state of non-movement. Nothing could describe her state of shock.

Well, this was unexpected—this revelation. This...*reveal*.

For her part, Exxy, lying there, was frozen too.

That is, if Exxy was even who she said she was.

If Exxy was even Exxy.

If Exxy was even a *she*.

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HUSK

It was all Goddess could do to stay conscious. Her mind, whether from the aftereffects of the alcohol or from the stress of the moment, tried to save itself and attempted to switch off. Goddess slumped, her back against the wall, her DL2 falling from her shoulder as she slid to the floor.

Exxy looked as if she were shedding her skin. She was naked on the bed. Her face and neck looked normal and smooth, but the wrongness manifested

itself just underneath her shoulders. Down the center of her chest, the skin was split, pulled back like the two sides of an unzipped skinsuit. What had been a female chest was now divided, pulled wide now, one breast hanging lifeless and loose on either side. The split in the skin continued downward, past Exxy's navel, and even further, fully exposing her. Beneath it all—the thin pseudo-skin that Exxy held with shaky fingers—another layer of skin. The skin underneath was different somehow, more alive, stronger. No, it was real, that's what it was. That's what the difference was.

Whether Exxy was caught in the act of *dressing* or *undressing* , Goddess couldn't tell. What she could tell was that the real Exxy was beneath it all. The pseudo-skin quivered in Exxy's fingers.

Exxy was male.

Oh, God, Exxy was male!

Exxy was frozen, completely open and exposed. Goddess realized she was staring and averted her eyes. Ky Lin was laughing. Yeah, everything was funny. Hilarious.

"I can explain," Exxy said, still not moving.

It took a couple of jaw ups and downs before Goddess found her voice. "I-I don't know if that's possible, but I...I guess I found out what your other secret was." Was she going to cry? She sure felt like it, but something had dammed up the liquid. The pressure was there, but the flood wasn't coming.

"I know this must be—"

"No!" Goddess yelled. "No! No you %@!#ing don't!" There, she had cursed. Let it loose. Even in her rage, her confusion, she felt a prick of regret. "Don't patronize me! Not like this! Not when you've done what you've done."

"I-I'm sorry," Exxy said.

"Oh, put some %@!#ing clothes on! Put that thing back on, take it off—I don't give a glitch which. Just cover yourself so I don't have to see you naked like that! I...I can't handle it."

Exxy sat up. "Do you want to see me as I really am, or as the Exxy you know?"

"I don't know right now. Do what you want. I'm not even sure why you're asking me." Goddess closed her eyes, trying to cry, trying to fill her eyes with tears so that she could at least blur the image of Exxy's naked fe/male body in front of her.

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Goddess could hear Exxy shifting on the bed. There were squishy sounds then—flesh moving against flesh, molded and stretched. Goddess tried not to listen, but her ears picked up the noises, and her mind imagined what the noises meant. After that, the sound of Exxy’s feet on the floor. Soft, padded footsteps on the carpet—synthetic, but yes, carpet!—back and forth. Then, ‘flage against skin.

Goddess noted that the signal had stopped. When she opened her eyes, Exxy was sitting on the edge of the bed, looking like the Exxy who Goddess had known all along.

“I wanted to tell you before, but I couldn’t,” Exxy said. “God, I wanted to tell you so bad. It ate me up inside to become friends with you, yet having to hold this back.”

“What are you?” Goddess asked. “Are you male or female? Just what the %@!# are you? Tell me that first.”

Exxy sighed, holding out a hand, pinching the flesh there “*This...this is just a husk. It’s not the real me. I’m just a boy. That’s all.*”

So. There it was. The Statement. It was rhetorical to vocalize what Goddess already knew—had seen with her own eyes. Now that it had been said though, there was a sense of finality to it. At long last, the truth had been spoken.

What was one to do with the truth then?

Goddess couldn’t stop herself. “No glitch. I guess I don’t know how I wanted you to answer that. I probably just wanted to hear *you* say it. *I wanted to hear the %@!#ing truth from your %@!#ing lips for once!* God, I guess you are into women after all! I was so naïve. So stupid. I can’t believe I let you carry me along like that. I can’t believe you did this to me.”

“No, it isn’t your fault. None of this is. I’m responsible.” There were tears in Exxy’s eyes. “I deceived you. I deceived everybody. I can only apologize for it—I can’t take it back like I wish I could. I-I...want to go back and change—”

“Stop. No amount of regret is going to undo it. The past is over and passed. “Tell me *why*. Tell me why you did it. I have to know.”

Exxy brushed tears from his—could she really think of Exxy as a *he*, especially when he looked like *that?*—eyes, wiping the liquid on the bed cover. Her—no, *his!*—makeup was streaking, running down his cheek. He looked pathetic there, back hunched, the caricature of a person on the verge

of being broken. Maybe he already was. “If they find out that I’ve told you, I-I don’t know what they’ll do. I’m not supposed to let anybody find out; obviously, nobody was ever supposed to find out. The only reason you found me like this is because I was trying to fix a problem with this %@!#ing fleshsuit. It’s been giving me problems ever since the Oni*asha mission.

“Anyway, you want to know why I’ve done this. Uh, the answer’s simple. I’m a data gatherer for God’s Retina.”

God’s Retina was one of the more popular news conglomerates. It claimed to operate in every single country, even Yoshirolan. It maintained an enormous cyberspace presence, and was known for its tendency to make news rather than report it. It was also famous for its persistence in acquiring news from difficult sources.

Exxy continued. “The Species are one of the most difficult entities to get accurate data on. The EUL keeps things extremely quiet. God’s Retina doesn’t like that. We have other sources inside the Species of course, but I’m the first to be inserted into an all-female Talon.”

“Why didn’t they send a female?”

“I had already volunteered for the next Species insertion assignment. This one came up. We decided that a male perspective would be the better story. If it was successful, they’d probably follow it up with a female insertion. I don’t know for sure, but I suspect there’s a female already in one of the all-male Talons. The signal—I was broadcasting data. It was me every time. Even in Basic. I had no idea it would cause us that much pain.” Exxy exhaled. “I know things are far from better now that you know what I am, and what I’ve done, but it felt...good to tell you that.”

Goddess flinched. Exxy’s voice—the same as it always had been—was having a disarming effect. Goddess was having a hard time holding onto her anger. She pulled it back in, not liking the feeling of that particular fire dying on her just yet. She *wanted* to be mad. Exxy had hurt her with his deception. She had every right to be angry. She had every right to want to hurt him back.

Ky Lin was lurking at the edge of her mind. He had his arms crossed. He wasn’t happy.

“You don’t have to forgive me,” Exxy said. “I can’t—I don’t have the right to ask for that right now. I *won’t* ask.”

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Goddess wasn't going to be able to hold out much longer if Exxy kept talking like that, no matter what he had done. It wasn't in Goddess's nature to be mad at someone for long. She felt guilty about losing control. She felt guilty about swearing at Exxy. She felt guilty for her anger. She felt lonely. And here, her only friend—if that's what Exxy was, at least in some distant sense—had just revealed his most intimate secret. It was hard to stay angry at someone who had just done that. Could she? Did she even *want* to?

"I don't know where we go from here," Exxy said.

"Neither do I," Goddess said.

"Do you hate me?" Exxy asked.

Goddess found that she didn't. "I'm just hurt. I don't hate you—I don't think I hate anybody." Ky Lin shook his head. Well, maybe she hated Ky Lin a little for dying on her. For not giving the two of them a chance.

Exxy sighed, looking relieved, his hands clasped on his lap. "I would understand it if you did. I did what I did because it was my job. It wasn't anything personal, and nobody was supposed to find out—glitch, if anybody else discovers this, I'm cosmically glitched. You're not going to tell anybody, are you? Even with how much you found out, I shouldn't have told you any more, but I wanted to. From the first time I saw you in Processing, I was attracted to you—"

"Exxy! I don't want to—"

"I need you to you to understand, 'cause I don't think you do yet. I saw you in Processing, and it was as if my heart stopped—not just because you were naked either. I'm as susceptible to that as the next guy, but it was more about how you carried yourself. I mean, you are very beautiful. Beyond beautiful in fact. To me. I couldn't keep my eyes off of you."

Goddess was struggling to contain tears. She had better not be blushing! She was supposed to be mad, not accepting compliments from the focus of her anger! The effect his words were having on her was feeding a different type of anger—directed at herself.

Ky Lin thought it was hilarious. Goddess tried to distract herself from his image, but the only thing left to focus on was Exxy. Ah, glitch!

"I panicked," Exxy continued. "I went up and told you that I wasn't interested in you. Now, I can see that was a mistake. I should've %@!#ing kept my distance. Telling you that first lie was a misstep of cosmic proportions. I really couldn't have glitched things up more if I'd been trying

to do it on purpose. What a stupid vootch I've been. It's just...you made me crazy. I wasn't thinking straight. Glitch, I *still* don't think straight when I'm around you. You don't realize how intoxicating you are to me. The best way I can sum it up is this: You affect me."

Goddess felt the last remnants of her righteous anger fading away. The hurt still burned in her chest, but how was she supposed to stay mad at a boy who was enmeshed in a deep infatuation? Goddess let out a breath, feeling a graceful calm settle into her. Ky Lin was nodding his head. Could it be? Did he approve? He did have that one particular smile right now—the one that said, *Goddess, you're making me smile, and I like it. Keep it up, buckaroo.*

"I forgive you," Goddess said. The words were out before she had fully weighed the consequences of saying them. Did she really mean them? It was too late to take them back. Letting Exxy believe them was just another lie to add to the pile between them. Goddess didn't want that. She wanted...

She didn't know what she wanted.

"I want to believe you," Exxy said. "I want it more than anything else. Do you really want to say those words this soon? I don't want to hear them unless they're true. Don't forgive me too early."

"I meant what I said," Goddess replied, finding that she truly did. It was a bit of shock. She hadn't realized she was capable of that feeling. Had she really matured to that level? Had she matured that fast?

Exxy lowered his head, wiping his eyes, a smile breaking across his face like the rising sun. "Thank you."

"No more secrets, right?" Goddess asked. "I really can't trust you at this point, but please tell me that you're out of revelations. There isn't much forgiveness left in me right now."

"That's it. You know everything now."

"I don't know everything about you, but as long as you're not hiding something that directly affects me or the Talon, I'll be able to move past this. You'll have to give me some time though. You're my Guardian-5, but don't press me for awhile. I need some space."

Exxy looked up, eyes wet. "This is the completely wrong time to say this, but...I want to hug you. Does that make you mad at me again?"

There was such a pain in Exxy's eyes, that Goddess found herself wanting to comfort him. What the?!? Did that make any sense? *She* was the one needing the comfort! *She* was the one who had been wronged. And yet,

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the feeling, there it was. It wasn't explaining itself; it was just present, causing her to stand up, walk over to the bed, and lean down in front of Exxy.

Exxy looked up, looking too much like a scared little girl for Goddess's comfort. Exxy was male! Exxy wasn't this pathetic female that sat with her hands gnarled in her lap and tears seeping from her eyes. This projected frailty unsettled Goddess. She wanted to banish it. She reached down, her hands coming down on Exxy's shoulders, then sliding around to his back. Exxy kept his hands in his lap. Goddess knew he was scared of what her reaction might be. She leaned further, pulling him closer. He went stiff as she leaned her body against his.

"You can hug me back," Goddess said in his ear.

Exxy shivered, but brought his hands around to her back, turning the one-sided outreach into a mutual embrace. They were like that for some time, clinging to each other. It was sensual, but not sexual. It was two humans sharing a small amount of comfort between them. Besides, it felt too good. Goddess found that she didn't want to let go—she'd had too few hugs in her life.

"My Goddess," Exxy whispered. "I need to tell you something."

"What?" Goddess asked. A spark of fear flared.

"I want to kiss you."

In Goddess's head, Ky Lin threw back his head and laughed. Oh, he was having such a cosmic time at her expense!

Exxy held tight, but Goddess let her grip loosen. "I don't think that's a good idea. I need some time. Besides, I can't trust you any more."

When Exxy talked, Goddess could feel his breath at her ear, tickling the hairs there, and on her neck. "I can't think straight when I'm around you."

"Just one of the reasons we shouldn't complicate things between us."

Exxy began to relax his hold on her, hands moving to her waist. "I think I'm in love with you." Then, he drew away from her, sliding his cheek against hers.

As he drew away, soft as feathers, his lips touched hers.

FLED

Even as the bolts of pain?/pleasure?/confusion? shot through her body, Goddess was yanking herself up and out of Exxy's reach.

“You shouldn't have done that,” Goddess said, her hand going to her mouth where her lips were all tingly.

Exxy stood, reaching for Goddess. “I can't help myself. Don't you see that?”

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“I can %@!#ing see that,” Goddess yelled, immediately feeling bad about the swear word. “You’ve made that obvious time after time! After all you’ve done, you’re still acting like a child!”

Exxy shook his head, dropping his hands to his sides. “We don’t know how much time we have. In the Species, life is short. I don’t want to waste the time we have between us.”

“Well, you’re doing a cosmic job of it! You can’t make me like you! You can’t make me love you back! Kissing me isn’t going to speed things up! You lied to me and I forgave you, but you know things aren’t better in an instant. You said that yourself? Was all that just a bunch of words to get into my arms? Were you thinking I could just let all that go so we could fool around? Maybe we could put this room to the use for which it was intended? We could both get naked! Now you, you’d have to decide which level of nakedness you’d want to take it to! What in Eiech were you thinking?!”

“No! I mean...” Exxy dropped back onto the bed.

“I’m not in love with you, and I never will be,” Goddess said, then, ignoring whatever expression Ky Lin was currently beaming at her, turned and ran from the room. She could hear Exxy make some sort of protest, but she ignored it.

At the end of the passage, she paused at the sentry, looking him dead in the eyes, daring him to comment on her tears. Her speech was tempered with sobs. “Make sure my soldier in Private-Hollow-Epsilon stays there all night. Don’t let her out till morning. Use my credit to pay for any charges she incurs.”

Goddess didn’t see any sign of Zilch in the bar. As she exited the bar, the outside noise assaulted her.

Exxy’s matrix-husk materialized in cyberspace. “Go—” was all Goddess heard before she jacked out, cyberspace winking black

Goddess picked a direction—left or right, it didn’t matter—and tried to run. There were too many people packed onto the sidewalk for her to manage more than a walk. She pushed her way to the edge of the street. There, where the danger of getting clipped by a hovercab was always present, fewer people were in her way. She began to run. As always, the DL2 over her shoulder hit her in the butt with every other step.

Behind her, she heard a commotion, then Exxy’s voice, actually audible over the chaos of the city. It couldn’t be! How had he made it past the sentry

that fast?

Goddess picked up her pace. Vehicles passed her at high speed on the one side. She was going against the flow. At least she'd know a millisecond before if she was going to get hit.

It wasn't long before she found an overpass which allowed her to cross to the other side of the street. She continued on, intent on losing herself in the crowd. She moved through the city, not caring where she was, what direction she was going. She was aimless, content to let herself be carried, let herself drift with the currents of the city's population. The waves of humanity swept her along till she was entirely lost amidst the tumult.

She fled.

Exxy didn't find her.

Eventually, Goddess located a Haven. It was crowded, but the Guardian-8 of the Haven led her to a small room with a solitary cot. It was his room, but he gave it to her for the night. Lying on her back, staring at the cryptic patterns and words on the ceiling, she didn't find sleep right away. Instead, she let her feelings shoot through her, wondering what any of them meant, if anything. Ky Lin expressed his usual array of facial movements. She let him, even cry-laughing at one point. Yeah, that's about how she felt.

Thinking of Exxy was a troublesome chore. His lies. That kiss. She was ashamed of that kiss. It had embarrassed her.

But why?

Goddess was still pondering that question when sleep finally wrested consciousness away from her.

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LIGHT

“I don’t know if I made the right choice.”

Goddess made the statement to an empty room. She was on the cot, which was bathed in a wide, yellow beam of sunlight from a small, circular window at the top of the room. The room was cool, and the beam—grayed with pollutants as it was—warmed her skin. The temperature difference caused a wave of goose flesh to ripple down her exposed arms.

She scratched at the brand on the back of her right hand.

If she hadn't made the right choice with Exxy, then what *should* she have done?

For the remainder of two years, Goddess's and Exxy's lives were intertwined. A professional relationship couldn't survive the personal complications between them. She'd have to handle the situation. She'd have to fix it.

The sooner the better.

But...that kiss. That had complicated things significantly. Goddess wondered at her own reaction. A mess of emotions were caught up in Exxy's lips brushing up against hers the way they had. So briefly.

So pleasantly.

No, glitch it, it hadn't felt good at all!

Ky Lin scowled. He didn't like it when she lied.

Just below the surface, she had sensed the mystery behind what Exxy had done, the gentle thrill that had both excited her and upset her. These conflicting sensations warred within her.

Goddess had wanted Exxy as a friend, when Exxy had been just another girl to her. Physical attraction—physical love—hadn't been part of the equation. Now that the truth of Exxy's gender had been revealed, the equation had been changed. There were too many variables now. It was too complicated, beyond Goddess's ability to solve.

Whatever would she do?

Leaning her head back, she squinted into the beam. Shutting her eyes against it, the light filtered through her skin, painting the inside of her eyelids red.

Somewhere, perhaps even in that beam of light, encoded on the very particles which reflected white off her face, the answer lay waiting.

Ky Lin whispered to her, his words tinted with a wise, all-knowing confidence. But they were the soft words of a true friend; they weren't of the I-told-you-so variety. His words spoke of the truth within her—the part that she was denying, suppressing.

Bathed in the beam, Goddess smiled. She knew what to do. Perhaps she had known all along, had been resisting it all this time. Well, no more. Ky Lin had seen it from the beginning—he'd always been able to see her inner being—and she saw now that she had tricked herself. Tricked herself into

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believing that she felt more betrayed than she actually did. Tricked herself into being angry at Exxy when, in her core, she wasn't angry.

And tricked herself into believing that Exxy didn't mean something to her, despite everything he had done. Despite the fact that *he* wasn't a *she*.

Or, maybe because of it.

Could that one fact have changed everything so drastically? Was she really that malleable? How could she suddenly be attracted to somebody who had only recently revealed himself to be of a gender she could *actually be attracted to*?

Whatever the answer might be—deep down, she knew what it was—Goddess had decided on her course of action. She almost laughed into the beam.

Exxy, ready or not, Mother Sentinel was inbound.