



Subchief Flander (Modern Majuri Warriors #2)

Author: *Crystal Dawn*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Two years of waiting had almost driven him crazy. Now his wait was up, and his mate acted more interested in everything and everyone than him. He'd not been with a female since the day he'd seen her, but did she care? No, she was making this claiming the hardest thing possible.

He'd made her wait two years, now he could wait a little bit longer. Since they'd saved her mother from the Grabbers and been unable to find her father, they'd been searching. Now with a clue that could lead them to her dad, Flander wanted to ground her. So not happening.

Two people madly in love but both have a stubborn streak. Will it cost them their love, or will they learn to compromise?

Total Pages (Source): 12

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:19 am

Flander was being considered for subchief, and his boss, Ranni, was on the short list for the Chief's position. They would pass or fail together in the worst area of space. Majuri Warriors considered it the most likely place to die. Most would reject the option because they didn't want to take the risk. He was sure that Ranni's father, the Emperor, wanted him dead. There was no better place to put him if that was the case. As Ranni's closest friend, he didn't intend to let that happen.

He would keep his friend alive as he worked to claim his mate. It was a tall order, but he knew he could do it. His mate was called Hel, short for Heloise. An apt name since she was putting him through hell. She flirted with other males, but as far as he knew, she hadn't gone out with any of them. If he found out, she did. He would kill the male. It was a known fact.

She was on his team, and they were back in the area she had come from because this had turned into one of the most dangerous areas at the edge of the Empire. This was where Ranni might soon be chief. If he were, he would be responsible for enforcing the law in this area and the other section claimed by the Empire.

They were about to go on a patrol, and he worried about her. Hel was a distraction. He should have kicked her off his team, but he didn't want her around all those males without him to protect her.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:19 am

Back Home

Hel watched out the window as the surface of her old home grew closer. The landing was easy since only the best was allowed to fly the latest military shuttle. She flew sometimes, but Jaird was flying today. Flander sat next to her, keeping a close eye on her. He'd been like that since her training had been completed, and she was now an LT on his team. Being on his team wasn't a big deal because she'd been on his team as a trainee. Trainees were protected. They were only used in low-risk places. Now, she was an officer. One of low rank, working just like the others on the team. For team members, the risk was high.

Apparently, Flander didn't like that. He wanted her locked away somewhere safe where there was no risk. She turned eighteen, and everything had changed. When she was sixteen, she would have done anything for his attention. He treated her like a sister. Now, he wanted things to change. Unfortunately, it wouldn't be that easy. She wasn't sure that things would change at all. Hel would admit that he had been an excellent teacher and adviser as far as the military went, but he had left much to be desired as a friend.

She put her mind back on what they were doing. The planet had never properly recovered. Everywhere she looked, there was chaos. Most of the decent, hardworking people had resettled elsewhere. There were too many criminals, many of whom had come from elsewhere. It was not the world of her childhood. It was not even the world that she had left. Nothing was the way she remembered it. She felt like she was in another world altogether.

As they exited the shuttle, everyone was on high alert. There was no doubt that if a

person couldn't fight and protect themselves, they would die or be taken, and that might be worse. They hadn't been told precisely what they would do here. Only Flander knew. Her best guess was they would recover something. There were still places locked down by primitive means and would not allow entrance. Some places would be research centers like the one her sister had run.

The Majuri were big on technology. Some of the things her sister had created were probably still cutting-edge technology. They were headed in the direction of that research facility. Flander began moving faster just as she saw a group of males. It was a gang of some kind. Those were the most dangerous of the groups that had moved there. Many were backed by off-world interest groups looking for things like technology or other valuables left behind.

The Majuri knew about these groups and the various supporters who had brought them there. Hel had studied them and learned how to recognize several. Those who headed their way were not one of the groups she was familiar with. They were a rough bunch. That was probably why Flander was trying to get them to cover before the group got to them. It wasn't that they couldn't handle them. He simply wasn't willing to take the chance since she was with them. He would have to get over that, or she would have to move to another squad.

If Ranni knew, he would not allow them to continue working together. When they returned to the ship, she would have to decide if she wanted to snitch on him. He'd caused her a lot of grief when she'd been sixteen, and he showed no interest in her, but she still cared about Flander, and she knew this would upset him. For some reason, even though they had no real relationship, they cared about each other.

The problem was that she didn't want to be his sister, and he didn't want to be her lover. When she turned eighteen, and he still hadn't shown the interest that she wanted, Hel had decided that she needed to move on, and she knew for some reason that he wouldn't like it. Maybe some guys wanted their sister to stay virginal forever.

She'd never had a big brother before and didn't want one. So, she didn't know his problem. The place before them was familiar, but it had taken some hits. It was amazing the place was still standing.

This was one of the places where her dad and her sister Kasey had worked on some of the technology they had come up with. Her dad had been a structural engineer there. He had worked on the practical aspects while Kasey devised the theories and plans for the things he built. She moved ahead of Flander, put in the code, and opened the door. They all hurried in, closing the door behind them, leaving the gang in the cold.

"I thought you would know how to get in here," Flander observed.

"Lane and I spent time here while my dad and Kasey worked. What are we looking for?" Hel asked.

"Those things that they were working on right before the attack."

"I'm not sure exactly what that was, but I know where it might be. They tended to either hide downstairs or on the roof. My bet is downstairs in the basement."

"Lead the way," Flander suggested.

There had been a cool elevator, but that no longer worked, so they had to take the stairs. The basement was six levels down, and that was a lot of stairs. Hel and Lane used to slide down the stair rails, and she remembered it had been a lot of fun. She suspected her dad and Kasey had made them that way so they could. It used up a lot of their excess energy and made it easier to be around them after they had gone down six floors. Now that she was older, it was just tiring and not so fun, even though she slid down a few levels.

“This is interesting. Did they build the rails for exercise?”

"No, just for Lane and me so we could have some fun," Hel admitted.

“You were spoiled, weren’t you?”

Hel shot him an irritated look and continued until they hit the basement. It looked just like it had before. The door had sealed off that section, not even letting in air. When it opened, the air rushed in. Where was the safe that had held all those plans Kasey had made? There it was, and she hurried to it. In a way, it was odd that Kasey had made her, and Lane remembered how to access the safe. When she did, the large round door rolled to the side, and it was a huge room full of all kinds of things. There were plans, a robot, weapons, and many other things, all of which were useful.

She didn't understand why her sister hadn't come with them. This place had been her baby. It was where she achieved the most, and her best ideas came to fruition. Neither she nor Ranni had come along, and she found that odd. She may have to get used to being a follower because no one told her anything anymore. At least she got to go out into the field. She was the only female on any of these kinds of squads, and at least that was something.

“You remember all that?” Flander looked surprised.

“Kasey made it like a game. She wrote a little song for each code needed in this facility. We were just playing around and didn't realize we were memorizing what was needed to enter in case something happened to her dad. Crazy, isn't it?”

“Brilliant. You didn't even realize what you were doing, and yet you got all the important information memorized.”

“I was old enough that it wasn't difficult, but our brother learned it all too.”

“Let me poke around in there and see if I can find what we are supposed to bring back. Is that a working robot?”

“It's a security robot. It can work automatically or be remote-controlled. It shoots lasers, among other things. We were never allowed to play with it because Dad said it kills," Hel admitted.

“Would you let your children play with something like that?”

“Probably not, but we didn't see things that way. Kasey messed with things like that all the time. She wasn't that much older.”

“She was the age you are now. You're about to get the chance to put this robot to use.” Flander observed.

Hel couldn't deny that she was thrilled. It was funny that she remembered everything her sister had told her about turning on this robot. She immediately began to set it up and flipped the switch.

“I am B3PO. Who is in charge?”

"I'm Hel, and I am in charge. Take a good look around at my squad and cause them no harm. Anyone who attacks us needs to be neutralized."

“Will he be able to make it up the steps?” Flander asked.

“Yes. B3PO is an adaptable and adjustable robot.”

“Does his name mean anything?”

"Of the bots Kasey made, he is the third in the PO line. It stands for Power Operator.

I had no part in naming him," Hel explained.

"I've got what was needed. We must lock everything up as we leave to keep it safe."

"No problem." Hel shut the first door, locking it as the guys and B3PO exited before her, and they hit the stairs.

The robot hit them hard, and he was loud, but he was also quick. They all followed, moving up the stairs to the top floor, where she locked another door. The outer door would be the last one. They were all waiting for her. The robot went first. The shooting began immediately. B3PO took out many of the gang. The others scurried to find cover as lasers continued to fire. It was odd that the gang seemed to have old-fashioned bullets. They weren't nearly as good as the lasers that her squad fired.

Where do those bullets even come from? Those were some things that old Earth and other planets no longer needed to live. It was true that there was a market for antique guns and the bullets they shot, but those were generally made in small amounts just to suit a specific buyer. Those buyers were usually wealthy people who liked playing around with those items. Hel was all for lasers. Although she had been taught to shoot the antique guns and rifles. The gang didn't seem to have been trained to shoot them because their aim was terrible.

Occasionally, a gun with jam, and it was clear that their lasers were much more reliable than the old guns the gang was shooting. She wondered if that gang was there to try to get into some of her sister's workplaces. Any of the research that Kasey had done would be invaluable to any group. Her squad was dressed in heavy bulletproof uniforms, and they even had face shields that they had all pulled down that would protect them from most weapons, but there were no guarantees. The incoming bullets were not as heavy because about half the gang had been taken out, and the other half was trying to fire from behind a wall.

A bullet hit near her. A piece of stone broke off, flew up under her face shield, and hit her cheek. It stung like the devil, and she was sure it would probably leave a scar. Flander cursed a blue streak and pulled her closer to him, and they began to move quickly. The robot took a position in the rear and continued to fire at the gang. Hel admired the robot's behavior and efficiency in taking out the enemy. What bothered her was how young most of the gang members looked.

They were almost to the ship, and the robot was keeping up well even though it was backing up instead of moving forward as it protected their rear. It seemed her sister had left everything of value behind because she feared it would be destroyed if she took it. Hel would have taken it with her, and it would have been destroyed. Kasey was a lot smarter than she was, even in practical matters. Her mother told her not to compare herself to her sister because their strengths were in different areas, and they were both brilliant. Isn't that what a mother is supposed to say? Her mother always knew the right things to say or do. Thank goodness her mom had returned to them.

She still needed to find her dad. Even if he was gone, she and her family needed closure. Hopefully, some of the toys that Kasey designed would help the search. Hel suspected that he was still alive and being held somewhere. A structural engineer as good as he was could always be of use. He did better when he worked with his oldest daughter because they were the perfect team. Hel had always hoped that when she got older, she would have a skill she could share with her mother, and there was still hope that that was true.

She was an intern working toward becoming a full-fledged doctor like her mother. It was unlikely that she would ever develop the interest in being the research biologist her mother had been, but she had learned that you couldn't have it all. You were lucky if you managed to get anything at all. Right now, she would give it all up just to find her father and get him back safely. They had made it into the ship and were flying with the robot. The robot appeared to be causing problems because it was much heavier than it looked, and it was an adjustment that the pilot had to make.

“Move that damn thing into the center so that we don't lean one way or the other,”
Jaird yelled irritably.

She used the remote to resettlement B3PO. It seemed to calm Jaird, but it did not matter much since they were almost on the main ship. When they were docked, and the door opened, she saw that Kasey and Ranni were waiting for them. They all disembarked and stood there waiting as the robot came out and stood in front of the ship, looking around.

“A very interesting robot,” Ranni observed.

“He's probably the reason we made it back alive,” Hel commented.

“She's been injured and needs medical treatment,” Flander admitted.

“It's nothing life-threatening, but I may end up with a scar,” Hel explained.

“Go to medical and get that treated,” Ranni directed.

He was the boss, so she left and headed to medical. No one came with her, not that she expected anyone to since she was an adult. She wondered what was happening and what they would do with the returned information. It wasn't hard to figure out what they would do with B3PO. They would make one hundred of them and use them in areas like the planet below, where they could not gain control. When they first left, it looked like the planet would be rebuilt, but it wasn't long before it was flooded with gangs and other criminals.

The Emperor had immediately pulled out their troops because he wasn't willing to risk anyone without a good reason. It had taken two years for him to find a good enough reason. B3PO should have been a good enough reason, but the research center was a treasure trove.

“Do we have a hurt?” Jacks asked.

He was a medic and could be irritating. It probably bothered him that she was training to be a doctor while he was a medic. She didn't know why he wasn't training to be a doctor, but it wasn't her business. Just like what she was doing wasn't any of his business. Her training had already been half over when she had come onboard, which had been given to her by her mother and the local college on her planet.

“Looks like we'll be able to fix this right up, and you shouldn't even have a scar. Why do they have you going out with that rough squad? You're just a girl, for goodness' sake,” Jacks observed.

That was how all those warriors looked at things, so she was the only female on any of the squads in her area. She'd heard some had several women on them. No one said anything about them because they knew they had worked hard to gain their position on the squads. It was only here where, for some reason, some of the warriors felt like she'd been given her position.

Kasey was a fully trained warrior but rarely went out in the field. Before, it had been because she was expecting her son, and then he needed her, but why did she hold back now? Maybe she was expecting again? Majuri warriors wanted that from their females—one child after another or barefoot and pregnant. That wasn't her and never would be. Jacks sealed her wound, and it looked like she'd never been injured.

"Thank you," Hel mumbled, and then she hurried away.

She headed to her room where she could have some time to herself even though she wasn't tired. There was just a need to be alone, at least for a while. It wasn't like they would tell her anything that was going on anyway. Everything was a secret, and it was one that she wasn't allowed to know. She only found things out when she was present and needed to recover the information that the Majuri wanted. There was a

knock on the door, so she yelled to come in.

It was Kasey. "I thought you would come back."

"I didn't feel welcome. I'm never told anything important."

"You made this possible. B3PO was the main reason for the mission. I made a deal with the Emperor, and they will start manufacturing B3POS and use them to clean up the planet. We'll be able to rebuild."

"Will that matter to us?" Hel asked.

"It will. I can't stand seeing our home like this. Someday, I want to live there again."

Hel had to admit that surprised her. She thought someday Ranni and Kasey would live in the palace and rule the whole Empire. The Emperor might live a long time, but eventually, that would be her brother-in-law's position. Maybe they could use this as a vacation home, but she didn't think they would ever be able to live there.

As far as her life went, she had no idea where it would go. Some would say it was good that her whole life was like a clean slate before her, and she could take it in any direction. Her outlook was dismal, and she had no idea how she would ever succeed anywhere. Hel didn't know what she wanted to do for a living because she was torn between two careers. There was no romance in her life. The only one she wanted would never work for her.

"I can't deny that I'll be glad to see the planet brought to order and the rebuilding beginning in earnest. But where is the money going to come from? Everything of value has been removed from the planet, and most buildings are total rubble."

"That's where Mercury is going to come in. As soon as the planet is brought to order,

the Majuri will help rebuild the company. We'll hire people, and the money they make will help them rebuild their homes. There are enough projects that were begun and even a few that were finished that we didn't have time to start manufacturing to make enough money that we can build other things like apartment buildings for the people working on the planet." Kasey admitted.

"Big plans. I hope you're able to pull this all off."

"I need you and the rest of our family to help. It will take all of us to do so much."

"We'll see what we can do once the robot police get the planet in order," Hel said.

"You're right. They are starting to manufacture right away. Not all the robots are coming here, but a squad of ten will be brought in within a month."

"You must have done a great job negotiating. When did you do that?"

"We did a video conference. Not all of Chief Radvar's blood are impressive. He's a pig, and he hit on me. I thought Ranni was going to reach through the screen and choke him," Kasey admitted.

"No family is perfect. Look at our family. Everyone is a genius but me."

"You are a genius and a warrior. Give yourself a break."

Her sister patted her on the back and left. Kasey never knew what to say when she made comments like that. She couldn't help it because she didn't feel as smart and capable as the rest of her family. Even Lane, her young brother, had found his spot as an engineer. He was a talented one and in constant demand. Maybe her sister was right that she shouldn't compare herself to the rest of her family because there weren't many people who could compare to them.

Hel wasn't sure what to do now. She took a shower, changed her clothes, and went to sleep. The physical effort hadn't been difficult. It was the mental challenge of going home. When she woke up, home was all that was on her mind. Sixteen wonderful years spent on that planet with her family before it all went to hell. It was hard to come to grips with. Seeing it as that had brought it all back, she couldn't get it off her mind. She might have never really dealt with what had happened and how it had affected her. Usually, she would have discussed it with her mother, but she couldn't do that. Her mother had been through so much. She'd been through even more than she and her siblings had.

Kasey had moved on with her new life and her mate and son. Lane loved the life they had now even more than their life on the planet. She was the only lonely one who hadn't managed to adjust and find something else to hold on to. Even her mother had returned to work, and her job meant a lot to her. Mom was still looking to find a way to get their father back, but if she discovered that he was gone and she was sure of it, Hel had a feeling she would move on, too.

Hel decided to go get supper. The cafeteria was crowded, and she'd managed to get there just when everyone else had. She saw her squad, so she got her tray and joined them. If she didn't, she knew she'd catch hell.

"Hey, Girl," Tomsin greeted.

"Hey." She sat down by him.

Ronner, Jaid, Tanen, and Flander all sat nearby. The squads had six people in them. Hel had been lucky that someone had transferred out, leaving a spot for her at the right time. Even when it happened, she wondered if Ranni had a hand in it.

"Did you get rid of someone to make room for me?" Hel had asked.

"No, I talked someone into staying until you were ready. Otherwise, he'd have left a year too soon," Ranni grinned.

Hel had to admit her sister's mate was gorgeous, but Flander drew her in. Too bad one of the other guys didn't. She tried to concentrate on her food because she was hungry, but her eyes kept moving to Flander. Why couldn't she just forget about him? A good question with no answer.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:19 am

Head of the Squad

Flander was head of the squad, and that was usually something he lived to be. Now that his mate was old enough to be on the squad, he wasn't sure where he stood. He knew that she was talented and capable, but he had lost many warriors who were both. She'd been hurt today. Not seriously, but that was still possible. If he didn't control his feelings, he wouldn't be worth a darn in the job he loved. His mate had been perfect doing the job that they had hoped for. She'd remembered everything needed and reacted to every situation appropriately.

On this mission, he'd been the weak one. He'd been so afraid for his mate that he'd been slow in making his decisions, some of which had been wrong. Flander went to the gym because he needed to let off some steam now that supper was over. Hel had ignored him. She'd not even sat beside him, choosing another squad member instead. His stress level was high, and even though the mission had been successful without any losses, he didn't feel the sense of accomplishment he usually did.

To make matters worse, his squad was on a roster to start patrols of Purgatory. It was the home planet of his mate Hel. She would be a big help on the planet, but it would also put her in even more danger. The only bright side was that since B3PO plans had also been found and brought back to the ship, the robot would go with them and start in the morning. Even though they had taken out most of the gang that had attacked them, reports said that there were multiple gangs just like that in all the major cities and he had no doubt that they would be sending more people to join that gang. It was an equal opportunity employer since it took men, women, and old and young.

Children as young as eight had been found in the gangs, and one gang was said to be

run by a woman who was sixty-three. They had that information because they had sent someone undercover. They said they had sent several undercover, but only one had made it out with information. Desperate people would do whatever they had to do to survive. Once a fleet of robots was turned loose on the planet, most criminals would not survive. After they ensured that the robots were safe for the regular residence, the robots would be the ones patrolling the planet, and his squad would only be going on missions, targeting areas where Mercury had stockpiles of plans and technical equipment.

That might sound easy, but that company and stockpiles of equipment, plans, and sometimes both in forty-eight different places. The most important ones were the ones that Kasey had worked at. Those would be the ones they would be hitting first. Many missions would be overnight because they would get the equipment or plans in an area where the ship could flash them up. It would take time to get all that done.

No one seemed to be in the workout room, so he went to the weights first. They were the most popular because most warriors like to keep their muscles built up. Thirty minutes later, he was sweaty but still had energy to burn. The treadmill and the bike helped a little, but now he was ready for a fight. He had to be careful. The robots could not take the powerful hits he could dish out. If he destroyed another one, he would have to pay the full cost, and they were high. It was a better place to take out his anger than in the ring, where he might cause significant damage to some other warrior.

They had counselors you could talk to, but he didn't feel like that. Sometimes, when certain things occur, they make you talk to those people, and he doesn't like that either. This robot was not as strong as he was, but it was fast. Since he couldn't manage the speed to win, he had to anticipate what it would do. The problem was that he couldn't count on the robot doing the same things as last time. It had been made to adjust and improve. He'd used it before, and it knew him as well as he knew it.

The robot came to life, lights blinking, and it ran at him, veering away just as he sent a punch at it, barely missing. Then Flander turned quickly and got a small piece of the robot. This was a small robot that floated in the air and had no legs. It only helped train a warrior for head and chest shots. That made it harder to catch it, and only high kicks would work, and those were very hard because if you missed, you ended up on your ass. All he did today was get little hits here and there that didn't disrupt the robot at all. After half an hour, he decided to settle in and get some rest. Tomorrow would not be an easy day on the planet with his mate in the highest-risk position on the squad.

Once in his room, he felt so tired, but he needed to shower because he was covered in sweat and dirt from the patrol. He stripped out of his uniform and put it in the hamper where it would be clean tomorrow. Stepping into the shower, he lathered up and rinsed off. This shower had an air dry, and he was done. Flander felt too tired to even find some personal release. Setting his alarm, he went to bed and immediately fell asleep. He woke up the same way. In an hour, they would gather to go on the first patrol.

Flander entered the cafeteria and saw his squad at their usual table. Other squads were spread around the cafeteria because fifteen would soon be headed to the planet. The only squad going into a heavy enemy area would be his because they had the robot. He filled his plate full and sat with his squad. As usual, his mate had chosen a spot between two other squad mates. Why couldn't she just take things easier on him? Didn't she think it was hard enough that he would have to watch her put herself in danger?

She shot him a cool look and nodded, acknowledging his presence and nothing more. He dug into his food because the other members of his squad were nearly finished eating. Right now, he had to think about his job. Other things had to be pushed aside. Ten teams would meet on the bay and go down to the surface, while five teams would join them from their sister ship. They each had their own location to go to. The

remote locations the other teams would go to would be safer, but their area would be more challenging and dangerous. They would have B3PO to help protect them. They were also considered the best squad.

He finished his meal and noticed the others were already waiting for him. There was no point in them leaving without him since he was the leader, and they could not load until he told them to. Flander rose and headed toward the bay, his team following closely. His mind was on the mission, and he tried to put all other thoughts away. As soon as they arrived at their shuttle, the others loaded first, and as leader, he loaded everyone else, and all other necessities were on the shuttle.

Hel was the pilot today, and she received the order to go, and they lifted off. It didn't take long for them to land. This location was within fifty miles of the last one. The population was slightly lower than their first mission. Flander could only hope that it would make things easier. Not that he'd ever been lucky like that before. From the crowd outside the shuttle, many of them dressed like those who had attacked them on the first mission. He saw his luck wasn't going to be any better now. The robot exited. As soon as the first shot was fired, it returned fire. That was the only way to ensure it hit enemies and not allies.

The damage to the enemy was devastating, and the robot continued until shots were no longer fired. Flander went first to be sure that it was safe, and that was something he had always done ever since he had become a leader. The others followed behind, and they began to move. As soon as the last person, the pilot, left the shuttle, it was locked down. That prevented the enemies from attempting to steal it. It would be difficult but why give them anything that might make it easier.

Hel moved up to the front of the squad to lead the way to the next place they would attempt to enter. Flander looked up at a tower that was about six stories up. It looked like it was made of copper and glass, yet nothing damaged the tower. What did that mean it was built out of that it could resist everything sent at it? That was where they

were headed, and the robot cleared the way. When they reached the tower's base, Hel put in the code and opened the door. It was a double door, and everyone hurried in, including the robot who brought up the rear.

“Where are the things that we're going to need?” Flander asked.

“Top floor. The roof opens, and we should be able to gather everything and have it flashed to the main ship,” Hel explained.

“That should make things easy,” Jaird offered.

“Nothing is ever easy until it's done,” Tomsin observed.

“So true,” Ronner chimed in.

Only Tanen stayed silent and watched the others. He was a good member of this squad. Flander trusted him with his life many times. That was the most important thing about being in a squad. Everyone had to be trusted to protect each other. He had no doubt the members of his squad would risk their own lives to save a fellow squad member. Flander knew that he would, and even his newest member, Hel, would do the same.

He wasn't sure what his mate was doing because she wasn't going up the stairs. She had disappeared into a room on the side, and suddenly, the power came on. Most of the squad jumped because it was such a surprise. She came out and found the elevator.

“B3PO, you'll have to go up the steps because the elevator can't take your weight. We'll meet you up there,” Hel directed.

The robot immediately started heading up the steps. When she opened the elevator,

all of them got in. She pushed the top level, and the elevator moved incredibly fast. They were lucky that none of the people on the squad were ill in any way because it was that fast. When they reached the top floor, and the door opened, he almost grinned when he saw how quickly the rest of the squad exited. He and his mate were the only ones that didn't rush to get out.

“What now?” He asked.

Hel pointed at several doors, and she went to the first one and opened it. This one held a mini robot half the height and narrower than the first one.

"This is SR3, and he will help us. He has many skills. SR3, we need to find the plans Kasey left here for you to give us," Hel said.

“What is SR3?” Flander asked.

“Small robot model 3. I told you I don’t name them.” Hel replied.

"Looks like the little guy is getting things done," Ronner observed.

“It looks like he has all the plans we need now. He's filling another tub with computer gear I'm not sure we can use, but we'll take it anyway.”

“Looks like he’s done. What the hell is he doing?” Jaid asked.

SR3 lifted into the air and attached to B3PO’s head.

"They are joining and combining their abilities," Hel explained.

“Why?” Flander asked.

“SR3 isn’t fast enough to keep up with us, but he will give B3PO added energy and firepower. It's the perfect solution under the circumstances.”

“You know a lot about your sister's work even though you weren't involved.”

“She ensured that Lane and I kept up with her work. I can't repair the robots, and I can't tell you everything they do. I have the skills of an operator, and that's all," Hel explained.

“I think that's pretty cool," Tomsin declared.

“It's coming in handy now," Ronner mentioned.

Flander had to admit it was true, and that was probably what Kasey had in mind when she started training her siblings. She had been a forward thinker and planned for the possibility that she and/or her dad wouldn't be available when needed. Her mom hadn't worked with them and had her own career and concerns. That only left Hel and Lane to pass the information on to. Most employees had run when the planet was attacked, showing she had made a good choice.

It was time to exit, or at least it would be as soon as the ship flashed up the tubs of plans and technical items. He thought about it, and there it went, and everything was gone. Flander motioned for everyone to exit, and the robot began down the stairs. It still moved fast, but he was sure they would have to wait for it to make it all the way down since there were six levels. They loaded into the elevator to conserve energy in case things were worse on the way out. He knew they would be happy even if they only ended up with the robot.

The wait wasn't as long as he expected it to be. He'd admit that he worried as he waited, thinking that all the gangs that had seen them come in would still be waiting outside for them. When the robot arrived, it headed directly to the door, which

opened automatically, and went outside, guns blazing. He had to admit that having a weapon like the robot would save many of their lives. Since they had made a deal with Mercury, he was sure that they would be available everywhere before long. Because his race was warlike, that was the number one cause of death among men.

It was true that many females signed up and trained to be warriors before they ended up doing something else. None of those wanted to be here in the hot zone. Many of them came to find a warrior mate. Flander couldn't prove it, but that was what he thought. He had been hit on by many of them, but they weren't the right ones for him. They had found someone else willing to accept someone who wasn't their one where they had seen the one for them.

He should feel lucky that he had found his one, even if he would have to fight for her. Flander was sure he was about to get the promotion he wanted since he had begun as a warrior. Why did he feel so sad when everything in his life was moving forward? Maybe he was afraid that Hel would reject him and that he would lose his chance at the promotion, or perhaps that he or his mate would die going down to this dangerous planet. Weren't those good enough reasons to be worried?

Even with the robot who was firing more than he had before, the bullets were going everywhere. His squad moved fast, and he was relieved when he saw his mate open the door and rush in, moving to the pilot's seat so she could get the ship going. That was good in multiple ways because the automatic guns on the shuttle would begin firing at those trying to hit them. In a way, it was sad because they were killing young people who had been desperate, and that was why they had signed up with this gang.

He'd prefer if they could bring them in and turn them into useful citizens. The Emperor didn't do things like that. He couldn't care less about what happened to those he considered the enemy of the Empire. Ranni's father had never been nice, and it didn't look like he ever would be. The shuttle lifted up, and they all took a deep breath in relief. It was a shame that they left a pile of bodies behind. A warrior didn't

enjoy killing, at least not one that was a good person.

They landed on the ship and unloaded. Ranni and Kasey met them in the bay. The robot took two tubs and carried them off the ship, then returned and got two more. Now, he stood by the tubs, waiting for further orders. Kasey gave him some directions, and he picked up two tubs and exited the bay. Two warriors came forward to carry the other tubs away.

"Good job," Kasey observed.

Everyone in the squad nodded. It was good to be recognized for a good job. Ranni was less likely to do so. He was more likely to jump on anyone who messed up. The warriors not getting in trouble simply knew they were successful in their mission.

"Flander, I need you to give me a report," Ranni directed.

He followed as they headed toward the office that Ranni used. That was where he gave him a full report on everything that had happened and what had occurred.

"The enemy had heavy losses, and many of them were young. It just seems to me that a better way could be found."

"My father has learned old earth terms and would call you a bleeding heart," Ranni admitted.

"Is that what you have to say as well?"

"No, come up with a plan, and we will see if we can implement it. I hate to see anyone die, especially for a doomed cause."

"Hel can help me," Flander suggested.

“I concur. You two get to work.”

Flander was glad for an excuse to spend time with his mate. He wondered if she would be angry that she was forced to work with him. Hopefully, he will make it up to her in time. Hel could be anywhere, and he needed to find her. It was lunchtime, so maybe the cafeteria. Was he lucky he found her?

"After lunch, I need to talk to you," Flander whispered.

“Why can’t you just tell me now?” Hel asked.

“These are orders from Ranni.”

Hel went back to eating and ignored him. Flander decided to eat his food, and when they were both done, he motioned for her to follow him. He led the way to his small office, and after she sat down, he closed the door. Moving to his seat, he sat down and looked at her momentarily.

“Ranni has instructed me to work with you to devise a plan to prevent so many enemy deaths. We need to find a way to convert them so that being with a gang doesn't sound so good. Offering them a better life among us is what I want to do. We will work on this project on the side, which will take time and effort. I hope you understand the importance of this plan," Flander explained.

“Why me? I know nothing about this. I’ve never been around people much. This isn’t something I’ve ever done.”

“That's probably why he assigned you this job. A warrior must be able to do many tasks and be willing to learn new things. Don't you understand how important this is? It could save lives. Many of those in the gangs are young, some even younger than you.”

"I understand its importance. That is why I question why I was selected when I am no good at this kind of thing," Hel explained.

"If you try and give it your best shot and find it impossible, then we will find someone else. We ask that you give it a good try.

"Fine. I'll give it a shot. When do we start?"

"We won't be going to the planet tomorrow. The rest of the squad will be assigned other duties while we work on this project," Flander admitted.

"Fair enough," Hel agreed, then she left.

Flander watched her as she left and wondered if this would help him advance in his cause. He knew she should be his, but he didn't know how to make her understand that. In the morning, they would begin, and he hoped they would learn a little more about each other, and maybe she would admit that she needed him too. Breakfast was like usual, and everyone in his squad was there.

"Where did you get stuck at Tomsin?" Ronner asked.

"The cargo bay. What about you?"

"The trash chute. Ain't I the lucky one?"

"Hey, I'm in the garden," Jaid said. "What about you, Hel?"

"I got office work."

"You poor thing." Ronner grinned.

He was probably glad he wasn't stuck in an office, but did he prefer the trash chute? No one asked Flander where he was going, and he didn't volunteer. Flander couldn't wait to spend some time with Hel alone. His priority was his relationship with his mate, but saving lives was an excellent side benefit. Most people would look at him and never believe he cared about helping people. They would be wrong, and the only reason that helping people wasn't his top priority was because he needed his mate.

Everyone finished eating and scattered, going toward their assigned work. Hel followed him to his office, where they would devise a plan to save some of the young gang members from certain death. Many had no hope. They needed Flander and his squad to give them hope for a better future. How would they spread the word? Somehow, they needed to let them know there was a future if they just reached out and grabbed it.

There was a planet next to Purgatory that was livable but barely populated. It would be a good place to resettle gang members who wanted out of that life. They could farm, or Mercury could open a business there. He saw options there and hope.

“What do we need to do?” Hel asked.

“We need to find a place to send gang members that want out. Where can we send them?”

"If you need a planet in the system everyone avoids, Venus is livable but rough. My mom might be able to terraform it."

“That’s a good idea. It’s close but on another planet. We could establish a military base there.” Flander suggested.

He wouldn't mention that a military base was already being planned. They would push up the deadline and get it in there sooner. Some of the younger gang members

might even be able to be turned into Majuri warriors. That would be one more possible job they could hold.

“The problem now seems to be how to get the information out so that the disillusioned will be able to find it and us.”

"Why not dump pamphlets with the information on them? We can tell them how to contact us," Hel suggested.

“Why don’t we print up a few and see if it works?”

“We need to decide what information to put on it.”

"The most important is how they can make contact," Flander suggested.

He watched her print up a page with information.

Tired of fighting just to stay alive? We can help you find a new life. Turn on the radio to AC radio waves. We can help.

"That looks good," Hel approved.

“We’ll put this on small pieces of paper and spread it everywhere.”

“We’ll see if it works. If it does, we will work on the next step.”

“Okay, what now?” Hel asked.

"We'll print these out, have them cut to size, loaded on a shuttle, and dumped somewhere many gang members are."

It was easy to print and cut the small slivers of paper. They loaded the shuttle and dumped the papers on the largest population center. They were surprised when they were contacted. The radio was set up to give a contact number and a rendezvous spot. A team was set up with a shuttle, and they joined them to pick up the first group of people. The robot went with them, and Hel gave the robot instructions. It was shocking how many people were at the pickup point. More people were there than they could pick up. Taking those, they could, they lifted off with no issues and brought them to an area on the other planet that the Majuri had started to set up for workers they planned to use to build a base.

Flander had set the place up, but he needed more people and supplies to take care of the people that would be there. They'd not been prepared for this response. He planned to handle it anyway. The shuttle returned, but it wasn't as easy this time. It was obvious another run would not be possible. Organizing the drop spot and managing the people they'd brought to safety was a priority. He'd not expected this overwhelming result and hoped Ranni wouldn't be angry at him. Arriving with the second and last shuttle drop; they would have to stay and try to organize those already here and figure out who they were.

Hel had some organizational skills because she had a laptop and was taking down names and information. There were a hundred people, and she had selected someone to be in charge. That person would be giving other people jobs so they could get the work done so everyone would have a place to sleep and some food to eat. It was a shame that things hadn't improved because he wasn't sure what would happen to the people left behind. Flander also worried that there might be people here that didn't belong. Infiltrators that had come hoping there was some way they could take advantage and find out who wasn't committed to the gang.

Squads had been left behind to handle security for these humans. Two squads were experienced, but the others were younger and needed to learn. This could be a good thing if it was worked properly. The next time they did this; a larger ship would pick

up those who wished to escape.

“Did you get much information on the people we picked up?” Flander asked.

“Yes, at least a fourth of them were locals, not gang members. They've had enough of the crime and danger on the planet and are ready to leave now. I don't know if this was what they were expecting.

Some locals can be sent elsewhere, especially if trained in something worthwhile.”

“We'll have to take them at their word because I don't know them. I never got out into the population much,” Hel admitted.

Flander wondered if he had made a mistake taking this on. Once this was organized, he and his mate could walk away and leave others in charge. The issue was that this might take a lot to get organized, and he was sure that the boss would expect him and that he would be made to work on it until it was done. The base they had just created was in complete chaos, but everyone would have a place to sleep and food by nightfall. It was time to leave and get back to the ship.

The computer would run through the names and find out everyone's secrets. Flander would talk to the boss and see precisely what he wanted them to do. His squad had been set up to go to another location tomorrow, but Flander wasn't sure if Ranni would cancel their mission and put them to work setting up the base planned to house the people that were now there. He had to admit that he would prefer this mission to one he had to babysit people he did not know. Those locals would be fine and could be put into positions where they could accomplish something. Many of those from the gangs would have no practical skills and have to be trained. They could only hope they would have some talents and abilities to be used on the base.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:19 am

Base Kasey

Hel was amazed that her brother-in-law had named the new base after her sister. That was crazy, but apparently, it was not unusual among the Majuri. Today, they would go on a mission, and she thought that would be easier on her. It was what she had trained for, and she was good at it. That didn't stop her from getting up early and reviewing all the information they had gathered on the people sent to the new base. Most were trained in something. Many of them had worked for Mercury in some form or another.

Those people could immediately be put to work, but some of them would have to come on the ship to do the work that would be required of them. For others, a building would have to be put in place with the necessary equipment for them to get their job done. Those who had been part of the gang had little education or training in anything worthwhile. She had found two that could cook and one that had worked in housekeeping at a motel where they came from. They could be put to work cooking and cleaning for those at the base.

The others had interests they could be trained for, and a couple wanted to be warriors. Once they received training, they would be security on the planet. It would be impossible to be a hundred percent sure of them since there was no way to run a background check. These people simply had no background that could be confirmed. Hel sent the instructions to the person in charge, hoping they would follow them. It was a start, but now it was time to go to breakfast and meet with the squad.

Everyone was waiting at the table, but they were already eating. Hel had her food and drink and went ahead and dug in. The food on the ship was good, making it easier to

eat quickly, even though she wanted to savor it. Certain foods were rarely served because of the expense and the difficulty of cooking them, and today was the day they had one of the more expensive meals. Steak and eggs were always popular, and few people missed the days it was served if they knew. Today was a surprise because she hadn't been expecting it. This meal would stick with her and help her through a difficult day.

They all got up and headed out as soon as she was done. It was time to get to work. Ronner was the pilot for the trip, and the rest of the team sat in the back. The robot loaded last, and he stood by the door, ready to exit as soon as they landed. She couldn't deny that the robot made her safer, and maybe it was partly because she had a history with it and had played with it as a child. It was about five years old, so she had already been a teen when it had been made. Manufacturing would have started about the time the attack did, which delayed it.

Now, the Majuri were setting up a plant and getting ready to put out robots in large numbers. Hel couldn't say if they produced the large and the small robots so they could combine them into what they had with them right now. She thought that would be a good idea because the small robot had some capabilities that the large one did not. No one would care about her opinion. Hel needed to get her head back in the game.

The shuttle slowed as it prepared to land in the middle of an empty lot near their destination. This wasn't one of the better-known research facilities that Mercury used. That might be why there were no gangs gathered nearby. Entry was no problem, but she suspected someone would figure out where they had landed and gather a welcoming party before they left. The research center was underground except for a small entry area. She would compare it to some guard shacks she had seen in pictures.

They ran to the entry, leaving the robot to bring up the rear. Hel punched in the code,

and the door opened. She stood there, keeping it open until the robot made it in. The following code opened the door to an elevator with stairs beside it. Her squad took the elevator, leaving the stairs for the robot. When they reached the lowest level, they exited the elevator, and the lights turned on automatically. The robot joined them quickly. She looked around, and memories hit hard. She and Lane had done their schoolwork fast so they could play in an area set aside for just that purpose. Many of the employees who worked at this facility had children who came to work with them.

This was a beta test to see if providing employee childcare was feasible. Only infants were excluded. It had been a resounding success, and the place was usually full of children daily. Many of the older ones had been her friends. Most of them were probably dead. The others had either fled or were hiding from the gangs. Hel shook her head to clear the ghosts of the past. She moved past the play area to the large safe that held anything of value. It was a shock that the door was open.

"I suspect that should have been closed," Flander observed. "Can you tell if anything is missing?"

"It's hard to be sure, but I suspect they were hurrying to get out of here. At first glance, nothing is missing."

She hoped she was right, but if something had been taken, it would already be in use by now. No one had seen any tech like this, nor were there rumors of it anywhere. Hel couldn't say if they produced the large and the small robots so they could combine them into what they had with them right now. They got to work immediately. There were several tubs already packed up, and they packed several more. There was another robot that differed from the other two. This one looked human. The word Android came to mind.

Hel remembered this robot discussing her and Lane's lessons with them. This was an intelligent robot, but it could also shoot a gun. Kasey had planned to make these

personal guard robots. They were more expensive because they were intended to eventually blend in with people. The Majuri could have moved forward in robotics generations ago, but their emperors had not been thinking forward since Chief Radvar. This current Emperor would have disappointed Radvar immensely. He only planned to use robotics because he didn't have enough warriors for the new areas he intended to add to the Empire.

She was against him extending the Empire beyond its old limits, but nothing she could do would change that. Unlike Radvar, who extended treaties and protection but left planets under their control, this Emperor would seize complete control. The old fool wanted to be known as the Emperor of the largest known Empire ever. That is his goal. He needed robots because he would never have enough warriors to cover those large spaces, especially in lawless areas. That was what had convinced him to step up the technical aspects that were available to his warriors. He said it was because he wanted to see his warriors safe, but the truth was, Everything he couldn't care less about.

Everything was ready to go and flashed up instantly. The Android would exit with them. She suspected they would find gangs hanging around when they left, so she locked up as they left. They rode up in the elevator. The Android rode with them while the other robot took the stairs. Once they were on the ground floor, she saw a crowd waiting for them. A mother pushed her child toward them, telling him to go to them.

Are they sending them children now? The child joined them, and they had no choice but to take him and do their best to protect him. Hel picked him up and ran toward the spaceship with the Android, giving what protection it could. She turned to look out of the shuttle and saw that other children had been sent forward toward her team. She should be more understanding because this was no place for a child to live. Many of the children on the planet died, and many more would if something wasn't done.

When they lifted off, they had a dozen children and no parents. Some of the parents may be able to join them later. She could only hope that would be the case. Their shuttle lifted off the ground and returned to the ship with twelve scared children missing their parents on it with them. They hoped they could track down these parents and get them back to their children. Meanwhile, they would have to have a plan on how to handle the children until their parents were found.

Hel couldn't say what had happened lately had shown her that her work was essential or a terrible mistake. This was all Flander's plan, but it seemed he hadn't been expecting many things that had occurred. She would never have thought that he was the type to dole out mercy to his enemy, but it showed that she didn't know him. She'd known him for two years, which was as long as she'd known anybody on board, and yet she still did not know what he felt deep inside. That was a sign that he didn't share his true self with her.

Flander was a quiet man most of the time and difficult to understand. Most warriors were like that, and she applied the saying still waters run deep. They were back on the ship now, and she needed to get her mind on business. Finding places for the children and getting them set up shouldn't be too hard since some of the warriors had mates and children on board. Setting up these children with families already on board might also be possible. That might help them feel a sense of belonging so they wouldn't feel so bad about being here instead of with their parents. Hel could understand how they felt since she had lost her parents too and thought they had both died. She'd been older but had seen what Lane, her younger brother, had gone through.

A couple of the kids were older teenagers, and she knew they would be put in the warrior program. It had not been so bad when she was placed in it, so she had hoped it would work out for them, too. They all exited the shuttle, including the robots. The children stood there waiting to see what would become of them. Hel could remember feeling the same way. She moved forward, and both robots moved with her.

"All you guys from Purgatory, if you are hungry or thirsty, follow me, and we'll all get something to eat." Unsurprisingly, they all followed her, and she headed to the cafeteria.

It was lunchtime, so she got her tray and showed all the kids how to get their trays and fill them with food and drink. Some of the little ones needed help, so she helped them. Even though it was usually a busy time in the cafeteria, many warriors went to the bay to see what was happening. She claimed two tables that were close together, and all the children set their trays down and began to eat or drink. She realized that most of these kids didn't get enough food. This was a good way to distract them until someone decided where the children would go.

A medical team began removing the children one by one. Another team, probably mates and all females, started taking some children to clean up and get new clothing. It was good to see that the children were staying calm and that things were going well. After eating, she went by medical to pick up some of the younger children and take them to the play area. It was alright to do so since they had been cleaned up and given new clothing while they had been checked out. Some of the children had never seen a playground before. Those were probably children of gang members. There had been a lot of playgrounds on Purgatory at one time.

Hel loved children, but she was exhausted by the time everyone was settled. That it was such a job with only a dozen children made her wonder what it would be like to resettle hundreds. It was what the plan was when it came to the gangs. The plan wouldn't be worth anything if a good portion of the gangs weren't resettled and removed from the equation as far as the battle went. Admittedly, she was beginning to see the value of Flander's plan. Since it would reduce the number of enemies, it would save people on both sides. That made it an excellent plan and well worth the time she would have to put into it. Tomorrow, they will be hitting the planet's surface once more with the little slips of paper, hoping to get more of them to accept their offer.

The larger ship they would be taking would accommodate more people. Hopefully, the positive results they've had yesterday will increase today. Those in the gangs were treated poorly and often died after a few months of being in the service. Why would anyone want that? Hel hurried to her room so she could clean up and check on the place where they were resettling people. There was a lot of work to be done there. She checked to see if her suggestions had been followed. She was glad they had been and that other things had been done, moving the project forward.

A warrior should be able to see the value in saving lives and preventing unnecessary fighting. Flander had seen it, and Ranni had agreed. Hel had seen the value; she just didn't understand why she was the one who had to do it. Maybe she was beginning to understand that this was not a job anyone wanted to take, but someone had to.

"Come to supper with me," Flander suggested.

Hel checked the clock. It was past her usual supper time. How had so much time passed?

"Sure. Lead the way."

They headed to the dining room where the others were waiting. The two teenagers were sitting with them as well. A boy and a girl sat at the table, looking uncertain. Hel remembered when she had joined the military. She felt like her background had been more stable and that had made it easier. These two had left one bad situation and felt like they were headed into another one. What she didn't understand is why they were sitting here at her squad's table.

"These are two new trainees, and they will be working with us," Jaird explained.

Hel wasn't sure it was a good idea to put two new trainees with the squad that handled the most dangerous missions. Maybe there was a reason for it that she could not find.

It was also possible they would only be working on the ship and not going down on the missions. They might also be assigned to work at the new base, which she hoped would be safe enough for them. She was glad making these decisions was not her job because she would have difficulty deciding where to put trainees, especially when they didn't know what talents or skills they already had.

The next day, as they were loading the shuttle, she noticed that the two trainees were on board. At least going to the new base would be safer than going to the planet. These two were too young to be placed in any danger. Unfortunately, there was danger everywhere they went. They were heading to Base Kasey and would work with those there to get things organized and ensure that everyone brought there recently had been resettled in the best way possible. She wondered if they would leave the trainees at the base with some of the veteran warriors.

Hel was disappointed when they arrived to see that chaos still ruled. At least a tent was set up to serve meals to all the residents. Those residents had been housed in a large tent and were sleeping in sleeping bags. Since the weather was comfortable, things became easier. The building had begun, but it was impossible to tell what it would look like. They needed many things like an armory, housing, offices, and a permanent cafeteria.

Once things were proven safe, civilian builders would be brought in to complete the base. Knowing how many people would end up living there was hard, but she suspected the number would be significant. How would they deal with more people arriving tomorrow, possibly in larger numbers? She needed to find a way to get the necessary supplies and personnel to do the job. The situation of the refugees wasn't much better than it had been on the planet. The only difference was that they were fed and didn't have to fight for their meals.

The two new recruits watched with wide eyes, unsure of what was going to happen to them. Hel wanted to reassure them, but she didn't know how.

“Do either of you know how to cook?” She asked.

They both nodded, and it was no surprise they had been taught by the time they reached their age. She led them to the cafeteria tent, where an overworked and frustrated lady looked at them with concern.

“Did I need to do something else?” She asked.

"No, I've brought you two helpers. Take good care of them, and don't overwork them."

“I will.” The lady smiled and rushed the two kids away.

Hel assumed they would be doing some boring but easy kitchen jobs. It was time to hurry to find those organizing the base. She was surprised that she was among the few officers around. Hadn't they put an officer in charge? It didn't look like they had. She immediately gathered some warriors and put them to work. Things were beginning to happen, and it was a relief because more people would arrive tomorrow. If things didn't change here, they couldn't handle the extra people. She wasn't even sure what resources they would have available for the base.

Her plan was to order needed things until she was told no. She began her list, and when she completed all the things needed immediately, she passed it to one of the sergeants that was currently working on supplies.

“Wow. You think they're going to send us all this?”

“We'll see. If they don't, we'll just start with what is sent,” Hel observed.

“I'm not sure if you're an optimist or just ordering a lot and hoping they'll send at least half of it,” he said.

“Why can't I be both?”

The old warrior laughed and began to input the requests. It would be a while before a reply came, and then they would know what to work with. The good thing was that they had at least a small number of supplies in hand that they could work with. Hel went in search of her squad. They were in the building zone, working on the first building.

“What is this going to be?” She asked.

“Because of the large number of refugees, we are going to build an apartment house. I've also ordered some prefab buildings that can be easily put together, so we will need a foundation to set them up. We will use that for offices and the cafeteria,” Flander explained. “Are you ready to go because we've been called back to the ship.”

“What about our two new recruits?”

“The cook thanked me and said she would be training them. She'll also take them somewhere to settle them in. Time to go.”

It wasn't like she had a choice. She had to follow orders, and it was time to go. She would check on them the next time they came to base, which should be tomorrow. They all headed back to the shuttle and then back to the ship. It was lunchtime; they ate their meal, and then she went to the office to do more work.

“Are you ready for supper?” Flander asked.

“What?” She hadn't realized it was anywhere near that late. “I didn't know it was this late. Let's go.”

He was trying to look after her, and that was sweet. It still made her feel like a little

sister. Would he never see her as a grown woman? It did look like it. Three months after she'd turned eighteen, he still didn't treat her as anything but a little sister. She thought about moving on, but no one else appealed to her.

"You look disappointed," Flander said.

"No, I'm fine," Hel replied.

Flander grabbed her and pushed her up against the wall. His lips covered hers, and he kissed her hungrily. Oh, dear. She couldn't resist him. Her lips opened slightly, and his tongue sunk into her mouth. Her tongue moved to dance with his, and her nipples hardened. She felt the dampness between her legs and knew he could scent it. It didn't matter because he was making her feel so good. Loud laughter was headed their way, and he stepped back. A group of warriors were heading their way, and she moved in the direction they had been headed, with Flander following her. Hel hurried, hoping to outrun the warriors so they wouldn't pick up on the smell of her need.

She was embarrassed and confused because of that kiss. It was the first time she'd seen any sign of desire from Flander. Hel had no idea how to deal with it, and now she would have to adjust her feelings about him. Why had he waited so long to show her any sign that he might desire her? It was hard to understand, so she pushed it aside to join the others for supper. Everyone looked at her as she sat down. It could be embarrassing to work with guys that could smell so much. Hel ignored them and started eating. What else could she do? Tonight, she would have sweet dreams about Flander.

It was the next morning, and they had their next mission on the planet. Everyone was eating breakfast. When finished, they would head to the shuttle. Hel was the last to be done. She finished up quickly, and they all headed out. This ship wasn't a shuttle, but a small ship docked under the large ship. It would hold at least five hundred people and supplies. The pilot was one of those that usually flew this ship. They all found a

seat in the front, sat down, and put on their harness. The ship took off as soon as they were loaded.

This ship was faster than the shuttle but sized to land on a planet. The landing was fast and attracted the attention of everyone for miles. They were on the opposite side of the planet. The small facility looked more like a warehouse. It was metal and locked down and had managed to avoid being infiltrated. Hel moved to the front and put in a code that opened the door immediately. Their robots took a protective position in the rear, but no one had tried to shoot yet.

Everything was on one level, making it easy to find. This was the simplest of the facilities so far. It took no time to get the tubs flashed up to the ship and they were leaving the small warehouse. They were mobbed with people trying to get on the airplane when somehow, she was separated from her squad and the robots. She was knocked out, and she assumed she was dragged away.

When she woke, she was tied up completely with ropes. Hel began to work on those ropes while she tried to figure out where she was and who had managed to capture her. There was no one around, and she was in a small room. It smelled musty, which was common in unused rooms. Without seeing more of the building, there was no way to be sure of where she was. Hel thought they had made a mistake because the Majuri would search for her. Few people knew that every warrior had a tracker implanted in them once they passed their training. Finding her wouldn't be difficult.

When they caught those who had taken her, they would be hard on them. That's why few of their enemies tried to capture a warrior. Warriors expected to die in battle, but to be abducted, they considered that an insult to their kind. These people didn't realize what they had unleashed upon themselves. Hel still didn't plan to wait to be rescued. She was working on her ropes when she heard the door open. Pausing, she waited to see who had taken her. Hel almost gasped when she saw her captor.

“Darian? What did you do?” She asked.

“They took you, so I got you back.”

“They'll come get me, and they will destroy anyone that had anything to do with taking me. You must let me go.”

“Remember when we were younger, and we talked about how we would always be friends. They took you and your siblings, and I couldn't do a thing. Things are different now, and I've saved you. You're safe here. You don't have to worry,” Darian explained.

“I've always been safe. You're the one I'm worried about because they are going to come after me, and they will kill you and anyone who helped you. They don't tolerate abductions of their warriors.”

“Are you telling me that you're one of them? They've brainwashed you because there's no other explanation.”

“We all make the best choices that we can. When we were caught, they gave us some choices. My choice was to divide my time between learning to be a doctor and being a warrior. It was better than being in Purgatory and being hunted constantly. I'm not sure why you stayed here. This is not a good place to be right now.” Hel mentioned.

“This is our planet; this place is home. Where else would I go? These others that came here need to leave. We don't need them or want them.”

“I don't believe that's going to be your choice. We are just pawns on a chessboard. Others make the major decisions. If you let me go and I get back quick enough, maybe they won't come after you.”

“You really want to go back? I thought you wanted to be free of them.” Darian observed.

“The truth is that we will never be free of them no matter what we do.”

“You're not the girl I used to know. They have changed you. Take some time and think about what you really want.”

He turned and left, leaving her to think about what he had said. She didn't need to think about it because he had no plan. Even if he did, he didn't have the resources to defeat the Empire. She didn't know anyone that did. Hel got back to working off the ropes around her hands. If he really thought that she wanted to come back, why had he tied her up so well? Deep inside, he had to know that there was no going back. Purgatory would never be where it had been before the Grabber attack. Nothing would have been left had the Majuri warriors not descended upon the planet and driven the Grabbers away.

Darian had to know it was the truth, but now that the Grabbers were gone, he wanted to eliminate the Majuri, too. She also wished for the old days when the emperors would have saved the planet and then turned it back over to the population, asking only for a trade and defense agreement. Those days had gone when the previous Emperor had died, and this one had taken over. He was not a credit to his line and never would be. Hel felt that one of the ropes was loosening, and she continued to work on it. Her blood soaked into the rope. That would help make it slippery. Eventually, she would be able to work herself free.

It was her hope that he would give her a reasonable amount of time so that she could escape. When they saw her, most males thought that she was defenseless, and she had been taken easily enough that he would probably continue to believe that. She was upset that she hadn't been able to put up a fight because she was a warrior. Hel had not even seen it coming, and no one had expected it. Her squad would be upset not

only at her but also at themselves for allowing this to happen.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:19 am

Gone and Back

Flander looked around and couldn't see Hel anywhere. He could only hope that the crowd had swallowed her and that she would work her way free. A few minutes later, he realized that that wasn't the case, and his mate was gone. Her name left his lips in a blood curdling scream that immediately made everyone stop and look at him. His squad immediately realized how serious this was and began to herd people on the ship in large numbers, hoping she would be among them. That wasn't the case, and there was no choice but to order the robots on board and head back to the ship.

With just his squad, there was no way that they could roam the planet without getting killed or captured. It was a serious matter that needed to be brought to Ranni's attention. He was sure the sub chief would mobilize many of their forces and begin sweeping the planet until they found her. Gods help whoever had taken her because the Majuri would show them no mercy. If he had been the one who had found them, he would have destroyed them, and he didn't care who it was.

When they docked with the ship, he left Jaid in charge and immediately headed to Ranni's office. He didn't find him there, so he went to his quarters and knocked on the door. It took a few moments for the boss to arrive at the door because he had been busy.

"Hel got separated from us because we were overwhelmed by people wanting to go to the new base. She's gone. We couldn't find her and had to leave. Jaid is in charge of getting the refugees to the new base, but I want to lead a group of soldiers to look for her." Flander explained.

"No. We will set the ship to scan the surface until we find Hel, and we will not go back until we do. It is possible that they took her off the world. You need to go eat and rest because I may be sending you down there at night to recover her," Ranni decided.

Flander was unhappy because he worried about what was happening to his mate while they were waiting. He knew it was the logical choice for a leader and the choice made in the past under these same circumstances. That didn't make him feel any better, but he had no choice but to follow orders. His mood was not good when he hit the cafeteria, and everyone jumped out of his way. There was no way any one of them had heard about what had happened yet, but they could gauge his mood by the look on his face.

He forced himself to eat his food to have the energy for what would happen. Even though he was hungry, his food tasted like sawdust. Once he was done with that, he went to his quarters, where he took a shower and lay in bed thinking about what had gone wrong and how he could have prevented it. He must have fallen asleep at some point because his radio buzzed and woke him. He was sure they must have found her.

"Come to my office," the boss said.

Flander dressed and headed to Ranni's office. "Did you find her?"

"No, she found us. She said she got carried away in the crowd, caught up in a gang war, had to hide out until it was over, and then headed back to see if we sent someone to find her," Ranni informed.

"Where is she?"

"Hel was exhausted, filthy, and smelled bad. We sent her to her quarters to clean up and rest. No one is to bother her until she comes out on her own."

"I'll let her rest. I'm guessing the missions are on hold," Flander assumed.

"For now. Your squad will work at the new base assisting wherever you can."

Flander was frustrated. He wanted to see Hel but was being sent off the ship. He wasn't sure what had happened, but from the look on Ranni's face, he didn't believe her. Flander didn't believe her either. Maybe she was protecting someone, but they had kidnapped her, so why would she do that? He needed to talk to her to find out what was happening. Instead, he had to gather his squad and head to the new base.

He knew that he should look at it differently because at least he had her back, and his squad could move forward a little bit on the new base. His guys could do construction, which would help with the work on the apartment building they were putting in first. Everything else would stay in big tents until the apartment building was completed.

It was lunchtime, so rounding up the guys was no problem since they ate in the cafeteria. He got his food, then sat down and gave out the assignment and the fact that she had been found. Everyone was relieved because they were all friends on the squad. None of the guys seemed to mind going to the new base, which would make things easier. Flander didn't mention the story she had given or that he didn't believe it. They all finished their lunch and headed to the bay.

"Load up," Flander directed.

Once they were all onboard, the shuttle took off. It would be a short day, but he hoped they would accomplish something. As soon as they landed, he sent the others to the building site, and he went to check on the trainees.

"You are checking on us?" The male, Kunos, asked.

“I am.”

“Where is Hel at?”

“She had a bad day yesterday. It’s LT to you.”

Satisfied that those two were doing fine, he went to join the rest of the squad. Construction work was hot, sweaty, and physical. Flander knew the hard work was good for him. They ended up putting in a full day before they headed back to the ship for supper. He wasn’t sure if it was a surprise that Hel didn’t join them. That was alright because he had an excuse to go see her. She would want to know how the two new recruits were doing.

Once they were done with their meal, he headed to her quarters. He couldn’t think of anywhere else she could be. Flander knocked on the door and heard somebody moving in the room. Hel opened the door and peeked out.

“Oh, it's you.”

“Yeah, it's me. The squad has been worried about you.” He wondered if she would leave him standing in the hallway, but she finally invited him in.

“Did you come by just to check on me?”

“That, and I checked on the two new recruits because I knew you would worry about them. They are fine, but they wonder why you haven't been around. I told them you had a rough day.” Flander admitted.

“Thank you for checking on them. Everything is fine now, except I wanted to rest more. I'll see you at breakfast.” Hel hustled him out of the room.

Why did he let her do that when he only wanted to pull her in his arms and hold her tight. He knew if he questioned her story, she wouldn't talk to him anymore, and there was no way to make her do so since the boss had accepted it. He shouldn't be surprised since there had to be people on the planet who were still alive that she cared about. It was probably one of them that had taken her, and he had caught a hint when her sleeves had moved of rope burn. There was no doubt what that meant.

It was obvious to him that she had been abducted and restrained. Ropes were usually one of the easier things to escape from, and it was clear that she had. What this meant was that he was going to have to keep a closer eye on her when they were on Purgatory because he was that whoever had taken her would not be happy that she had escaped, and they would try to get her again. Flander wanted to tell the rest of the squad to look out for her, but he couldn't think of an excuse unless he admitted that her story didn't ring true.

He headed for his own quarters, prepared, and eventually got in bed, hoping to sleep. That sleep didn't come easy, but eventually, he settled down and got his rest. The alarm in the morning woke him immediately, and he looked around, confused for a moment. Getting up, he dressed and headed to breakfast, where he was glad to see Hel was already there. All the guys were giving her a hard time about getting separated from them without even questioning the story she had given. It seemed he was the only one, other than the boss, who didn't believe her.

The rest of the squad was happy to have her back and didn't worry about how that happened. They all rushed through their meal, knowing they would be back on the planet again today. Flander believed that all of them would keep an extra eye on her after what had happened. As soon as they were done, they headed to the small ship.

Their trip to the planet started right away. Flander couldn't help but wonder how many facilities Mercury had on this planet. Even in the facilities they owned, he had far more plans and items that still needed to be picked up. He wondered if Kasey was

working on the plans that had already been picked up. It was easy to admit that the emperor was hard to please and difficult to work with. Otherwise, they would have gone about this at a much slower pace. This time, the trip went well, and other than plans, what they brought back was a small spaceship that looked like a child's toy. Hel told him that it might look like a toy, but it could shoot a beam that could destroy something of value on a ship and bring it down.

He didn't know if that was cool or horrible. The way things were looking, he would figure it out before long. It was good that there were no problems on this trip, but he's still worried about future trips. At least they will be going to the base tomorrow, and there shouldn't be any concerns about that day. That didn't matter because there were more days ahead when they would take trips down to the planet. Flander was giving a lot of thought to his mate and how he should proceed as far as claiming her. The problem was that she was much younger than him, and he hesitated to tie her to him at such a young age.

Flander wasn't sure he could wait to claim her. Thinking he had lost her when she disappeared had almost driven him crazy. His plan was to wait and give her a little time to try new things and explore what she wanted to do. When he was young, he'd done many things. However, he couldn't stand to watch her do the same. At her age, he'd not known who his fated mate was, but she did. Soon, a choice would have to be made.

The ship landed, and they hurried to the facility, which looked just like a house. It didn't look as much like that once they got inside. This time, they went to a room just under the roof. It could be called an attic since the building was an A frame. It took the least time, and he wouldn't be surprised to hear that it was a place where only one or two employees worked and maybe one lived. Besides a handful of plans, this one had a box full of round globes. He couldn't even imagine what something like that would do being so small.

They got back to the ship and began to load the refugees. This worried him because he was afraid, they were overloaded with people they weren't sure they could trust. A handful of enemy soldiers claiming to be refugees could cause much damage. They wanted to protect these people, but it would be hard to ensure they could as they took more and more of them. They needed a plan, but he didn't have one. Their best plan might be to stop taking refugees and worry about the ones they already had. He wasn't sure what his mate would think about that.

They headed to the other planet, where they would unload the refugees and do their best to help settle them. As soon as the first floor of the apartment was built, they would begin to fill the rooms with people. The floors would get residents as they were completed. The first floor was almost done. Once finished, the second floor would start. Another building was already being put in, but it was one of those buildings that would be snapped together. It would be built quickly and house offices and a few living areas for those working here full-time.

Flander could not deny he'd be glad when they were done. Today, they would eat lunch at the base and do as much work as possible. Hel would not stay with them. She would help organize the refugees. The rest of the squad's hard work helped settle his busy mind. When he mated, it would settle most things. He would still worry that she wasn't ready and would resent him. That was his biggest fear. This fear may have come between them and made her doubt that he wanted her. Now, he would have to convince her that he did. First, they needed to get over what had happened with his mate getting lost and lying about it.

Now that the work was done, Flander was ready to get back to the ship for supper. While hungry and needing a big meal, he looked forward to seeing Hel. She had returned to the ship around lunchtime, so they had not seen her. That may have made sense since she had returned the plans and the items and was going through them with Kasey. He hoped she would join them for supper, but he feared he would have to find her and escort her to the cafeteria.

He was the first one off the ship when they landed, which was unusual because he usually went last. He hurried to his room so he could take a shower and clean up. Flander hurried by the cafeteria to see if she was there but was not surprised that she wasn't. Now, he went straight to her quarters and knocked on the door. She was inside because he could hear her moving around. Hel opened the door but looked down, surprised to see him standing there.

“Did your day go well?” She asked.

“It would have gone better if you had been with us.”

“I doubt that, but I was sent to do other things. We all follow orders. That's just what we do.”

“Have you had supper yet?”

“Actually, I have, and I brought a snack back with me in case I get hungry since it was early.”

“Why do I feel you're avoiding the squad?” Flander asked.

“The squad or you?”

“Is it me? Just tell me if it is.”

“You've changed our relationship. I'm not sure what you want from me,” Hel admitted.

He stepped through the door and closed it behind him. “I think you know exactly what I want from you.”

Flander pressed her against the wall and gave her a kiss that told her exactly what he wanted. He could smell her desire, but he was afraid to take it too far. Humans like to date, and he wasn't sure exactly what he could do that would count for a date. It would be different if they were on one of those planets with nice restaurants, pools, and the other things many did in their downtime. It would also help if they weren't working every day.

It was a fight to come to his senses and not just take her where she stood. He wasn't sure if he shouldn't have just done it and asked for forgiveness later. Instead, he stepped away and left without saying another word. Maybe he had not handled things well, but if he hadn't left when he did, he would have probably stayed all night. One of these days, he wouldn't be able to stop. Flander knew he should discuss this with her and explain his feelings and wants. It was true that she had to see that he wanted her, but he wanted her to know that he wanted a relationship and a life with her, not just her body.

She might not understand that what he wanted was so much more than just sex. She probably remembered all those times when she had hit on him, and he had turned her down cold. When it happened, he had explained to her that she was not legal, and he could not give her what she wanted. Had she believed him? It was hard to say because she may have convinced herself that he didn't want her. Flander felt like they had become friends. Everyone said that was the most crucial step between mates.

The squad was waiting for him. They shot him funny looks. He knew it was because Hel wasn't with him.

“Someone missing?” Jaird asked.

“She already ate supper.”

“I'm sure we'll see her at breakfast,” Tomsin observed.

As usual, Tanen didn't join in the conversation. He just watched and listened. He was the quiet one who rarely said anything, but when he did speak, it was important.

"Maybe she's avoiding someone," Runner declared.

"Maybe she's avoiding you," Jaid mentioned.

Flander didn't even want to ask because he had too much on his mind already. He dug into his food, barely listening to the conversation around him. A few of the men liked to talk too much. He had nothing to say and a lot to think about right now. He should stop worrying about what happened yesterday and let it go. That's what the boss was doing, and he should know best.

It was already difficult enough for her to deal with the change in their relationship without becoming possessive and trying to figure out everything that was going on in her life. He knew her well enough to know that she wouldn't like that, and it would be like pushing her away. Flander would still watch closely because whatever happened might happen again, and she might not return this time. Flander was torn between sharing with the rest of the squad and fearing she would be taken again without help.

Finishing supper, he bid his males goodbye and returned to his quarters. Flander had some good whiskey, but it wasn't strong enough to do more than take off the edge. At least that was something, and he enjoyed the slight burn as it went down. Some humans said the burn was too harsh for them. That way, he didn't have to share it with them. Swirling the brown liquid around in the glass, he finally downed it and felt a slight burn down to his stomach. He was relaxed enough to try to sleep. Hopefully, he would.

It was morning, and their orders were simple. Every other day, they would go to the planet closest to Purgatory and try to settle refugees. On the other days, they would target Mercury's facilities and grab the most essential information. Those facilities

were spread all over Purgatory. There were twenty-one locations, but he wasn't sure they would go to everyone. They were only being sent for the most critical plans and items, and none of those facilities had anything essential or items of interest to the emperor. His interests were in items and plans for war, defense, and planet protection. Mercury made items of other kinds that would not interest him either.

Flander noticed that two facilities made farming and food production equipment. Unless something else had been hidden at those facilities, those would be left alone until the planet was safe for civilians to manage. Today was one of those days when they would target one of the facilities. He wouldn't know which one until the pilot sat near it and his mate headed toward it. Flander wasn't sure that she knew until they arrived. All of the information was locked down in a ridiculous amount of secrecy.

The way those facilities were locked down, someone who didn't have the code to get in would have to destroy it, too. That's why this secrecy seemed ridiculous. Most people wouldn't even recognize the facilities that they were now targeting. Flander was a warrior. It was his place to follow orders, even if it killed him. It was why he never asked, never questioned an order, and just did what he was told. But this secrecy might cause harm to his mate. No warrior should have to deal with the results of that.

Flander would see how things went today but thought he might talk to his boss because the secrecy started there. It began with Ranni and Kasey, and he didn't understand what they thought would help. They couldn't protect against what they didn't know. He had to admit that when Hel had disappeared, it hadn't had anything to do with secrecy. His concern was that next time, it might.

As usual, the squad gathered for breakfast in the cafeteria. Hel Showed up as well. He was glad to see her. Things could get back to normal as long as they could prevent another occurrence of what had happened previously. Once they finished eating, they all headed to the ship. Since so many of them existed, the shuttle was no longer used

for refugee pickups. Looking at his mate, he considered tying himself to her so that no one could take her without taking him too. The only thing that prevented him from doing it was that he knew what her reaction would be.

They were headed in on a side of the planet they had never been to. This was an area that had a limited population. No facility was in sight when they landed, so Flander assumed it was underground. Hel went directly to a spot where he saw a metal hatch. It was heavy, with a sunk handle and a keypad for the entry code. Hel knew precisely what she was doing and could even pull up what looked like a heavy hatch. She must have been to these places enough to know precisely how to get in all of them.

This one required going down a ladder. They headed down the ladder one person at a time until they reached the bottom. That was when the robots came along. He was surprised, but the largest robot just dropped into the hole. The Android climbed down cautiously, acting like a human not used to ladders. This small place looked like it had once been outfitted with enough food to last for several months. The occupants had probably waited until all the food was gone before exiting, thinking it would be safe now, not because the gangs had moved in.

He wondered what had happened to those people, but he pushed it out of his mind because he had to concentrate on what was happening. This was a mission, and it needed to be a successful one. Hel had immediately shown Tomsin where the surveillance could be viewed. That was smart. He sat down at the panel and watched. Now, she and the Android went to where the plans and a couple more war toys were. They looked like drones, and that was something he was familiar with. While it took no time to gather the tub of plans and the three drones, the problem was it would all have to be carried up because they were underground, and there was no way to flash from there.

Hel ordered the large robot to exit first, and he jumped up. She then had the Android lift one of the drones, and his arm disconnected and extended upward so that the

robot could take it. That was how all three drones were removed, and then the tub was removed last. Flander had to admit that watching the Android remove the items inside was cool. It had made it much easier for all of them, and now, with the robots standing guard, the rest of them went up the ladder. This area was remote enough that no one was around, which made him glad.

Everyone hurried to get on the ship because if you waited long enough in one spot, there would be no telling what might turn up. They were loaded and headed on their way with no issues. Flander knew he wasn't the only one relieved they'd had no trouble. It was a shame they also had no refugees. He glanced at his mate, who was working on the Android, and checked out his arms to be sure everything was as it had been before. She seemed satisfied with it, and she sat down.

They quickly made it to the ship, and everyone headed to their rooms to clean up. The squad met for lunch, but they were all assigned separately. Flander would catch up on his paperwork while Hel would assist Kasey. The other males were spread around the ship with various duties. Ranni said it was to give others time off because everyone worked daily. That was because the emperor tried to make things complicated for the boss. A few refugees could be put to work in domestic positions, such as cooking and cleaning.

The emperor said they couldn't find enough people willing to work in this part of space. Lander didn't believe him, but if pay was no problem, he was sure they could find some refugees willing to work in those areas. That would relieve the problems in certain areas. Given time, some of them might be trusted enough to work in more critical areas. Ranni had a good record, and the number of injured or dead on his crew had decreased significantly. The last chief in charge of this area had a horrible death and injury rate.

The robots should improve things because they would be led in battle. It couldn't completely erase the risk to warriors, but it would help. Flander was sure the emperor

was lying about it like he lied about everything. Ranni was lucky that the days when emperors killed anyone they wanted, including their sons, were long in the past. But that didn't stop the emperor from trying to put his son in as much danger as he could. Being the first son in that family wasn't a good thing. The boss was lucky that he was tough because two of his brothers had already died, and Flander was sure it was because of the situation the emperor had put them in. Why did the idiot think that if he killed all his sons, he would rule forever? Who could say?

Flander went to his office, where he started his paperwork and began to go through it. Ranni had a secretary who did a good deal of his paperwork, but he wouldn't get one of those until he made subchief. Even then, it wouldn't be the wonderful secretary that the boss had; it would be somebody new who needed to be trained.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:19 am

Life For Hel

Hel had been called in to help Kasey with her work. She would assist with the drones to see if they were still working. It was too much fun to call work, especially when one of her squad mates would be working in the trash chute or water treatment. Yuck! It was hard to deny she was glad it wasn't her. She could get over it if she felt a little bit guilty about that. She would see the guys at supper. If she kept avoiding that, they would start asking questions. They would bother her until she answered with something. If they didn't believe her, they would just keep pestering her until they came up with what they thought was the truth.

“Let's try this one out first.” Kasey pointed to one of the drones.

They all looked exactly alike, so once one was tested, they would move it to the other side of the room. It was odd that the same remote worked on all three. She had to put a number on the drone and put it into the remote so it would work. Hel used the remote to start the drone. Once the drone began, she had it lift off and move around the room. Next, she had it fly upside down and then roll around.

"Looks like it is working just fine. We'll wait until it's outside to test the weapons. Let's do the other two," Kasey directed.

“Sounds good.”

Hel tested the other two, and they also worked fine. She'd thought they would because they had been stored in a dry place where no one had bothered them. It hadn't made sense that she would be called in here—not yet anyway.

“How are things going with Flander?”

"Flander? Same as usual," Hel observed.

“I thought there was something between the two of you.”

“Why did you think that?”

“He always paid special attention to you. I suspected you were his mate. It’s such a surprise that I misinterpreted that. Flander has always been very protective of you. I’m sure you’ve noticed because everyone else has. I thought as soon as you turned eighteen, your relationship would change. Maybe I was wrong. It could also be that he’s trying to give you a little time since you are so young.” Kasey explained.

“Nothing has changed, and I don’t believe it ever will. You have taken on an overly romantic view since you mated.

“Perhaps, but I’m still not sure it isn’t true.”

“Maybe you’ll have more luck matchmaking, Lane," Hel declared.

“Don’t be silly; that never works with boys. They usually move forward quickly as long as the girl is age appropriate.”

“So, you’re saying that I have messed this up? Why Are you sure that we would make a good match?”

“It’s always seemed obvious to us. I could see how he felt in his eyes and that it hurt him when you flirted like you didn’t mean it," Kasey admitted.

“I never saw any sign of that.”

“You're young, and you weren't looking for it. You thought he was hot and wanted to have a little fun. I'm not sure what's changed, and maybe he's not sure either.”

“If that means I'm not sure what I want, maybe you're right. It's not like he's shown any interest or at least not anything that counts for much.” Hel said.

You guys will have time to figure things out after this assignment.

“From what I've seen, this assignment won't be done anytime soon.”

"I'm sure you've heard I made a deal with the emperor. They are going to protect and rebuild Purgatory. It will be one of the few protected planets allowed to self-govern," Kasey observed.

“Are you sure you can trust him?”

“What choice do we have? Right now, the planet is not a fit place to live. Our people are dying and need help.”

Maybe it was not what she wanted to hear, but it was the truth. They might be exchanging one enemy for another because this alliance would be hard to keep in check. The emperor was known for back sliding and looking for ways to get by with things. How could Kasey control that situation? Hel didn't think she could. Ashe knew they were trying to find peace, but right now, all she saw in population centers on the planet was chaos.

They finished testing the drones and went through some of the plans, and then Hel headed to her room. She changed clothes for supper and wanted to meet the rest of the squad at the cafeteria.

“We were beginning to wonder if you would show up,” Timson observed.

“I heard you got a real easy job,” Jaird said.

“Are you going to take a turn at the refuse chute?” Ronner asked.

Only Tanen stayed silent and said nothing. She ignored them and sat down and began to eat noticing that Flander was not there yet. Today, most warriors were eating burgers and fries. The meal was rumored to be an old earth dish, but she figured it wasn't served like this. These buns were small, and the burgers were huge. Those fries were fresh cut, and this meal was one of her favorites. She wasn't the only one and that was why they served it once a week.

“Don't you got nothing to say?” Jaird asked.

“Aren't you busy eating? I'm surprised that as much as you like to eat, you guys are busy talking,” Hel observed.

“They were too busy being nosy,” Flander said as he sat at the table.

“Just curious, Boss,” Timson mentioned.

“It's not a warrior's place to be curious. We do the job without complaint and only worry about our assigned job,” Flander instructed.

“That's bullshit, man,” Ronner declared.

“No, that's part of being in the military,” Flander admitted.

Obviously, he was waiting for everyone to leave so he could talk to her, so she waited, too. She was curious about what he wanted to say, especially in light of what her sister had just told her.

"I'd like to take you to supper tomorrow at the officer's cafeteria," Flander explained.

If a person was going out on a date and had either the money or the rank, it was the only place available in this area. There were none other for entertainment or food.

"Okay." Why had she said that? Maybe it was because she'd been caught off guard that he had even asked.

"I'll pick you up at your room," Flander said. She assumed he meant at the usual time.

He hurried away, and she wondered if that was because he feared she would change her mind. Once she had given her word, she wouldn't go back on it. Maybe she was still curious about what he might have to say? Was it even possible that her sister was right and Flander wanted her in a permanent way? It was hard to imagine, but nothing was impossible, and she might find out more tomorrow night. She couldn't deny that she still found him the most handsome warrior she had ever seen. Throw in smart, capable, and a true leader, and the fact that he'd never reacted to her had really hurt.

Could she turn back the clock to a time she didn't resent his lack of interest? Maybe because if she was honest, she still wanted him. She understood why he couldn't act on any interest before she was eighteen, but couldn't he explain that to her? All she had felt was rejected, and at sixteen, that was hard to handle. Hel decided to wait and see what happened. Maybe he would just tell her he wanted to be friends and hope she didn't expect anything. It was also possible he wanted just a quick roll in the hay, but she didn't think so. He'd always told them not to mess with other squad members. She always felt that talk came up because she had joined the squad, and before, she didn't think there were any other women in it. Not that it was unusual for male warriors to sleep together until they found their mates.

Another problem that came to mind was she had nothing pretty to wear. She'd ask her sister, but Kasey wanted to know everything, and she wasn't sure she wanted to tell

her. Hel could go to the store onboard and find something that would work. It wasn't like she had ever spent any of the money she had been paid because there was no place worth spending it most of the time. Hel had to admit it would be exciting to dress up like a girl for a change.

Hel finished her makeup, did her hair, and put on the dress she found at the ship's market. It was sexy and a huge surprise because usually there was nothing like it in the market. Even though she didn't buy much there, she checked monthly to see if anything worthwhile would be there. Something like this dress never was. It was red, tight, and showed off her long legs and flat stomach, and dipped in the front to show off her full breasts. She hoped that it would knock Flander for a loop.

There was a knock at the door, so she opened it, and there he stood. She'd never seen him like that before. He was dressed in human clothing. His black jeans were tight as hell, and a silky black shirt unbuttoned at the top with only his boots, the type he usually wore. Her mouth watered. She just wanted to jump him. Hel didn't know why. She'd never been with a man before and didn't know what to do. She felt the heat between her legs. She was wet and knew he could smell it. Looking at his groin, she saw he was reacting too. Good! But she intended to make him work for it.

Hel was ready. Flander opened the door so she could exit, then closed it behind her. He followed her because she knew the way to the officer's area. When she entered, everyone stared. She had to admit that it made her feel beautiful. She had never felt that way before. It was a feeling that she could get used to. Flander moved in front of her, leading her to a remote seating area in the corner. It would give them some privacy.

He ordered food for them. They brought her wine, whiskey for him, and an appetizer. It was something that hadn't happened to her since she was young. Her parents often took them out when they were younger, and money was available. Mom had always said she wanted them to understand things like that and not have to learn it when they

went out on dates. They'd even attended concerts and other events when they were off world. Hel had to admit they'd had a great childhood until their planet had been attacked.

She worried about what her sister's children would face in this new world. Hel Understood why Kasey wanted to reclaim Purgatory even if she had to make a deal with the devil. Everyone knew that the current emperor was the devil. He was the most hated emperor of all time.

“What are you thinking about?” Flander asked.

“Nothing important.”

“Looks pretty important to me.”

“I'm thinking about the past and what's going to happen to the planet in the future,” Hel admitted.

“Since the planet was your home, I guess it's hard to turn that off.”

“It is, and I worry about this deal to try to make the planet safe.”

“I don't know much about it. Maybe I'm not meant to know much. It seems that anything they can return your planet back to something like it would be worth it,” Flander suggested.

Maybe he was right, but she couldn't help but think it wasn't that easy. They were inviting the devil in and trusting that he would do as he said. In all the stories, when had the devil ever kept his word?

“Maybe you're right, but this isn't the time. We're supposed to be relaxing and

enjoying a nice meal. Speaking of which, what is the special tonight?" Hel asked.

"It's something called fettuccine Alfredo, served with chicken. It's an ancient earth dish that is said to be delicious."

"It's funny how many things the empire has adopted from Earth."

"You know why?" Flander asked.

"No, I'm aware that there are some Earth genes in most families in the empire, but is that enough reason to adopt so many Earth recipes?"

"Yes, because Earth has been part of the empire, and I believe it was in some way before it disappeared. Humans are completely compatible with Majuri."

"I've heard it say they are a slightly weaker, smaller form of Majuri," Hel admitted.

"I've heard that said as well, but you forgot the part about Majuri living longer and being smarter."

"Yes, I should have remembered that since I've heard it often enough."

"You need to learn to laugh it off, or other warriors will give you more grief," Flander advised.

"I know, but they were like a pack of wolves if they sense the slightest weakness."

It was true, and they made it very difficult for her to be a weak human. She managed to ignore them most of the time, though there were a few she considered bullies. Those weren't attractive under any circumstances or in any race. That just went to show that there were those who were unattractive in every race.

“It’s okay. Your squad supports you no matter what.”

Hel nodded. She knew that was true, and she supported them. A waiter approached with a cart, and their food was served. It smelled wonderful, and the waiter set their food in front of them. Hel gave her food some attention. She had to admit it was great.

“What made you decide on this dish?”

“Kasey recommended it. She thought you would enjoy it.”

Damn! Her sister always seemed to know every move she would make and who it was with. It would be nice for once to get something by her. That certainly wasn't going to happen tonight. She was sure Kasey would hunt her down soon and try to find out what had happened. Hel put it out of her mind and tried to concentrate on this wonderful experience. Flander looked so sexy sitting across from her. The food was good, the wine was sweet, and the background music played soft and low. She could have imagined this when she first met him had he shown any interest. It was impossible to deny that she still liked it.

As soon as they finished dessert, Flander suggested they leave, and he escorted her back to her room. “I'm not ready to leave you yet. Will you ask me in for a drink?”

She nodded, and he followed her into her quarters. Like most officers, Hel had a kitchenette. On the cabinet, there was a bottle of wine and a bottle of expensive whiskey.

“Where did you get this?” Flander pointed to the whiskey.

“Ranni got it for me after I babysat because I had to use my leave. I don't know why he thinks that I would like this. It's very expensive, but it burns going down.”

“Maybe he was thinking of guests.”

“That's possible, but Kasey saw it, and she bought me a bottle of perfume instead. How do you like it?” Hel asked.

“I like it very much, but I like the whiskey, too.”

She took the wine he had poured for her, took a sip, and set the glass down. “What is this all about?”

"It's about us and a happily ever after. This is about where we should have always been, but you were too young," Flander admitted.

“You never said anything then. It seemed like I annoyed you more than anything. Even when I turned eighteen, you didn't say anything. It's been two months since then. Now, you're going to open up to me?” Hel asked.

“You're so young, and I'm afraid it's too soon. There are so many things you haven't done, and I'm not sure you will thank me for being in your life now without allowing you to really live it. When I was your age, that was when things began to happen. I had choices to make, and the whole world was before me. At that age, most people aren't sure what they truly want. I don't want to make those choices if you're not ready.”

“But you've decided to do it anyway?”

“It's so hard to stay away from you. I want you in my life because I don't know what to do without you there. You are my one and only. If I lose you, there's no reason to go on. Do you know what you want out of life?” Flander asked.

“You've caught me off guard. I don't know what to say.”

Flander put his glass down and moved toward her quickly. He pushed her up against the wall and pressed his body up against her. His mouth dropped to hers. He kissed her deeply. His tongue entered her mouth when she gasped. He moaned, and she thought that he was going to do more, but he pushed away.

"You need to think about things. I will give you some time. Just remember that I care about you and hope we can be together," Flander moved away and left her quarters.

Should she have answered him? Hel worried he believed she didn't want him now because that wasn't true. She wanted him to work at winning her since he had never done that before. He pushed her away when she was younger and now wanted her to return when he snapped his fingers. She wanted romance and sweetness. Hel wanted him to work for it and prove he really wanted her, even though it was something that a Majuri warrior rarely did.

Hel planned to be strong and hold firm because she had gone through a lot, and he needed to make up for that, didn't he? This was a good start, but she needed more. There was a voice inside her head saying just give in. Tell him what he wants to know and show him how much you want him, but she hasn't listened to it yet. She got ready for bed, and in the morning, she would see how she felt. If he genuinely wanted her, he would do what she needed.

The next morning, she was up and at it as she dressed and headed to breakfast, where the squad would be waiting for her. It was funny that she couldn't remember how many facilities they had on the planet. She was sure she had been to all of them more than once, but some stood out more than others. Today, they would be going to the base in the hopes that they would see results, but she couldn't help but wonder if anyone would be coming back to base with them tomorrow since none had come yesterday.

She was the last one other than Flander to arrive at breakfast. Hel sat down with her

tray and began to eat. It wasn't long before Flander showed up. She began to eat faster so she would be done when he was. It worked, and she was done when the squad was ready. She would need her energy today; she was sure of it. They loaded the shuttle and headed to the base. There was a lot of activity when they arrived. She went to check on the two trainees that were working in the kitchen.

"I could use a few more of these. They were doing a great job," Cook said.

Hel was glad to hear it. Since they seemed to be doing fine, she headed down to the office to review the records of the others there. It looked like she would end up in construction with the rest of the team because there wasn't anything else to do in the office. She could apply herself to the building that was being snapped together. That was more her style than getting down in the concrete and the dirt. Did that mean she was too much of a girl?

No, because when they went out into the field, she was down in the dirt, and she looked like shit. Hel didn't mind that because she was doing what she was good at. She'd never done construction, so she didn't know if she could do it. Learning while she was working with her team was not something that she enjoyed doing. Flander had not given her an assignment, so she decided to go where they were snapping the parts of one of the new buildings together. They seemed happy to see her, and she jumped in and got to work.

It wasn't as easy as it sounded. It didn't take long until Hel was covered with sweat. She felt gritty from the dirt that was nearby. The new building was coming along great. It wouldn't be long before the floor would be done, even though they had just started. These buildings were alright, but they didn't hold up like the old-style buildings. The places they snapped together often gave way in ten or twenty years. These were more like emergency buildings used because they were needed. Frequently, work was done on them to get them to hold up longer.

The building where the rest of her squad was working was also moving along but slower. The work was much more complex and physical, but the building would hold up much longer. It wasn't long before they took a break for lunch. She headed to the cafeteria, where the food was available. That was where she ran into her squad because they were sitting at a table eating.

“Where are you hiding out at?” Timson asked.

“I've been at the snapping building. It's coming along well.”

“Snapping? Is that what you call it. You ought to be working with us.” Timson observed. The others were eating and not taking a break to talk.

“We should divide the various tasks to help move them forward. This building will have offices, but it will also have places for people working on this planet to live. That's just as important.”

The guys paused to look up at her, making her nervous. Everyone returned to their meals, and she began to eat. Hel wondered where Flander was but didn't ask. She didn't want to show too much interest. She didn't want the other guys to suspect anything. Once she finished eating, she hurried back to the building they were putting together. The rest of the squad had already left before she had. Putting together the prefab building wasn't as complicated as she thought it might be. It would make things easier for now. She could see where the guys were working on the old-fashioned apartment house that was being built. The guys were working hard, and the job was going slow. The difference was that once the apartment building was complete, it would last a long time.

She concentrated on her work. Suddenly, a siren blared, telling her that the day was done. Hel finished what she was doing and left the site. They now had two stories complete on this building that had just been started a couple days ago. That would

help a great deal, and it would make a difference. Her squad met at the shuttle but had to wait for Flander. He showed up a little while later. He was working on something that the rest of the squad wasn't.

They got back to the ship quickly, and they all scattered. They would meet up again for supper soon. Hel showered, dressed, and headed back to the cafeteria because she was starving. Most of the squad was already there when she arrived, but it usually didn't take men as long to take a quick shower. Flander was the last to come, which was beginning to be the way things were.

“What's up with you lately, Boss?” Jaid asked.

“Nothing, just too much paperwork.”

“You'll be happy if you get promoted and get a secretary.”

“If I do.” Flander observed.

At that point, no one else had much to say because they were worried about getting their meal eaten. They were working hard and didn't have much time left after supper. Not that there was much entertainment available to spend time on. Most, if not all, of them, would go to their room and either watch whatever shows they had available on their computers or sit and drink to relax. At that point, they would go to bed and catch whatever sleep they could to prepare for the next day.

Today, they would head to the planet again. Hel wondered if they would have enough refugees to make it worthwhile and which facility they would visit. There were many of them, but this should be one that held worthwhile plans and items that could apply to war or security. Those were the items that were a priority because of the agreement with the emperor. Hel would do anything she could to help her sister keep that agreement and try to keep that emperor in line. She knew it would be hard for her

sister to make this work. She thought her sister had given him enough items and plans to cover her side of the deal. He was a greedy douche bag who could never have enough to keep him satisfied.

As far as she could tell, no one liked him. He kept people in line through fear and greed. No one wanted to lose their position working for him because they paid well. Those who didn't work for him didn't want to lose their lives. Hel disliked him intensely as others did, but it didn't make any difference since she knew that. If he didn't die a natural death, eventually, it would be up to Ranni to take them out, and that's what the emperor was afraid of. That's why his heir was covering the most dangerous part of the empire instead of being protected. His forces were inadequate, making his people overworked. That was why they worked every day, but at least they got overtime.

That emperor said that money wasn't the problem. The problem was finding people willing to work in that area because it was dangerous. To the average person, that might make sense, but Hel knew that warriors were willing to come over and work that weren't allowed to come. Those who worked here got hazard pay, and many warriors wanted to make that extra money to get a home for their families. Hel had been around enough warriors; even some had tried to get on this ship but were denied. It was an open secret that the emperor wanted Ranni dead.

Breakfast was crazy today, and she wasn't sure why. Everyone was loud and rambunctious, but she accepted her table, where the squad was their usual self. She exchanged looks with her squad. They didn't seem to know the deal either.

"What's going on?" Tanen, the quiet one, asked.

"We're getting a weekend off as a reward for our work. We'll get paid and shipped home for four days. How cool is that?" The warrior asked.

It wasn't cool that they would be even more short-handed now. Hel was sure there wouldn't be any extra sent to cover all the time that everyone would have off. Sure, they deserve some time off after working such long hours and not having time off, but extras should have been sent in to cover them. The fact that none of them would only put the others at higher risk. Hel hoped they would devise a way to cover the shortages. They had been trying to use some of the refugees to cover nonessential positions that didn't require the use of a weapon. That had helped, but now they would have more shortages.

"Sounds like more problems," Timson observed.

"Yeah, guys don't see that because they're so happy to have a visit home. Because of that, some of us will go home in a pine box." Ronner offered.

"You're getting very human. We don't use pine boxes anymore; even humans don't," Timson said.

"It's just a saying, and to me, it's good. Not like all of you don't know what it means," Ronner admitted.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:19 am

Working Short

He'd seen something like this coming and had been working to prevent it. Flander had contacted everyone with the influence he knew, but they were all too scared. Cowards! None of them should be in a position of leadership, and yet they all were. Now, they were stuck with the results, and many warriors might die—all because of their worthless emperor. That cause would be taken up someday, but not now.

Hel's idea to fill nonessential positions with refugees had helped until this four-day leave program was canceled. Flander wondered if using some of them in essential positions was worth the risk. The problem was that sometimes, someone seemed trustworthy and let you down. How could you know? Trust could be full of pitfalls. This was one they might have to attempt because they were ridiculously shorthanded. Flander knew that any losses would be blamed on Ranni and used to discredit him. That was unacceptable. This was just one reason he hated politics.

The emperor was playing from a strong position. He was in control of just about everything and using it to return his eldest son. While it was true that he was doing other things to other people, he could multitask. Kasey and Hel would know which people were more trustworthy than others since they knew some of these people and had known them for years when they were younger. They needed some way to sort out the most likely safe and those that weren't safe.

After all the work he'd done trying to find someone that would help with the situation, he ended up being late for breakfast. Maybe late was an exaggeration because he got there in time to finish eating about the time that Hel had. Today, they would be going to the planet, and there was never a way to tell how that would work

out. They all headed to the ship because they had been taking that every time in case they got large numbers of refugees. That was unlikely since none of the places they were going were in highly populated areas. The ship had its own pilot, and he was the one who would fly them down and out. That might be better because somebody was staying with the ship and ensuring it wasn't attacked.

The pilot could also have the engine running and be ready for a hot takeoff in case there was a large group of people, and some of them were hostile. They were headed toward the planet, another remote location, so the possibility of a large group of people was remote. When they landed, it was in a small cluster of what looked like houses. The one they headed toward was small and looked almost like a child's playhouse. Hel managed to get into it quickly, and they headed in. Inside, it still looked like a child's playhouse with slides and seesaws,

“What was this intended to be?” Flander asked.

“This was the child's play area because most people had children and brought them to work with them. The work areas are upstairs and downstairs. Everyone loved working in the building. When there was peace, it would become a workplace again.

“I don't see any signs of disrepair. It's holding up well.”

“It's built out of a special product that should last longer than any of us live,” Hel admitted.

He could see that the company had been very family oriented. That made it easier for the employees and inspired loyalty that other companies did not have. Flander had heard that they had paid well and had a generous employee package that gave leave, medical and life insurance, and other things. They could do so because their products were high-tech and top-notch. Unfortunately, that was what had brought the Grabbers to the planet. Things might have turned out differently if they had robots and some of

the other protective items. It made him wonder if the company got back on its feet, would they put out more items that would protect the planet? He felt Kasey would want to, but he wasn't sure if she had complete control of the company.

Just because they were making protective equipment made him feel like whoever was in charge would want those kinds of items. A few squads of robots might have made enough difference to discourage the grabbers because they did not like losses. A ship or two would have turned the battle in the planet's favor. Especially if they were outfitted with some of the weapons they had planned. Ironically, the things they attacked the planet for were unavailable to them. The lockdowns would cost them a great deal of artillery. They would also have had to destroy the buildings and what was in them.

It made Flander wonder why they had not tried to get the information about entering the buildings out of the father. Maybe that was a sign that he had died, so they could not get anything out of him. Kasey had admitted that their mother did not work with them and didn't have the code to enter any buildings. That explained why they didn't get anything out of her. She didn't know. This did make him wonder where she had worked and if she had any research in her lab that they would want.

Everything in this facility had been packed up, and he had no idea what they had retrieved. It was flashed up to the ship without an issue since it wasn't below ground. That had been almost too easy, and now they headed back out. The robot went first, and then Android followed them. A few people gathered, and they took them with them. Their ship dropped them all off on the second planet at the base. It was easy to settle these people since there was such a small group.

Hel would review the files and assign jobs to some of them. It depended on what they were able and willing to do. Some of them would be assigned work at the base, but if you, hopefully, they would go to the ship for duties there. First-year warriors were often assigned duties in medical, the greenhouse, laundry, and the kitchen. A dozen

warriors or more could still be freed from those positions and put into those positions where they were needed. While it was true that there were reasons that first-year warriors weren't immediately put into fieldwork, it was done when it was necessary, and right now, it was.

They would be closely supervised by their leaders. Flander hoped that that would work because they needed warriors so badly. Refugees from previous trips still had to be listed by their abilities. These new ones wouldn't be enough to make a difference, although they might make a difference here, where many workers are needed. This latest situation just made him angry at the emperor, but there was little he could do about it. Eventually, there would be a time of reckoning, but that also wouldn't be his doing.

Everyone went where they were supposed to, and he went to his spare office and began to work. Flander was checking the list his mate made. It listed what some refugees could do and where they could be put. From the first list, he saw they had people for the kitchen on the ship, one at the base, and people for the greenhouse. Some even said they wouldn't mind working on the trash chute and other areas that didn't require skill. Those people needed to be sorted out and taken to the ship a few at a time to see how they could handle those positions. These people would help with the shortages immediately. Putting skilled people into security positions was a whole lot different. That required a measure of trust. At the moment, he didn't feel much confidence in anyone.

It was lunchtime, and he went to join the squad, noting that Hel was there. She looked so young, but she was sexy and drew him in. What he felt for her continued to grow stronger. Flander couldn't see that same possessiveness on her face. He'd thought he'd seen it the other night, but had he been wrong? Flander decided he needed to move forward in his relationship, or he could lose her. His mind was made up, and he would start once they got back on the ship. It was time to get over the fact that she was young and just remember that she was his. Everyone finished eating and spread

to the wind, going to where their work was.

He continued to work with the names and got thirty people who could do various jobs on the ship. Hopefully, they would work out. While that would only be a small help, at least it would help. That was all he could do for now, and he gave the list of today's people to the secretary working nearby. She would notify the people on the list, and they would get to choose whether they came to the ship or not. If they decided not to, they would work down here, but the work did not pay as well as going to the ship did. Some of these people might be able to slide into security jobs.

It was time to return to the ship, and he met up with his squad. A shuttle was there because the ship had long since returned, and that was what they would ride back. Those who agreed to go to the ship to work would go there in the morning. Security on the ship would monitor them to ensure nobody was there to cause harm. It was a start, and they would see where they went from there. The emperor would be hard to thwart because he would just devise another way to take away some of the warriors here.

Flander found it hard to believe that he would do this when he had a deal with Kasey for her high-tech plans. Contracts were something that the Majuri had always followed through on. They were considered a race that kept their word, which would not help their reputation. It seemed he wanted to get rid of his son so badly that he was willing to do anything, even messing up a good reputation that the warrior race had for a long time. This was a bigger concern because it would affect everyone who worked in the field. They would all be at risk, and he wasn't sure what to do.

He made it to the shuttle, where everyone was waiting for him, and it didn't take long to make it to the ship. Everyone was waiting for him, and then they left immediately. They landed and had just enough time to clean up and change before supper. Flander planned to ask Hel to work in the office with him to get some of these potential workers sorted out. She understood what the problems would be and what they

needed to be. The other guys were great warriors, but office work was beyond them. They could find enough people, especially if they stopped in a population center in the morning, where they might find more qualified people.

Flander made it to supper when several of the other squad members did. Hel wasn't there yet, and he worried she might not show. She did about the time he was halfway through his meal. He ate slowly so he could wait around for her. The other guys left one by one until it was just the two of them.

"I could use some help going through the lists of refugee names," Flander said.

"I can help you. What jobs are you looking to fill?"

"Honestly? I want to fill some of the low priority jobs, but I want someone that can move over into security after we are sure they are trustworthy."

"I can help with that. This critical shortage will not be good for us. I'm not sure why the douchebag did this because this doesn't just affect Ranni. It affects the whole ship," Hel admitted.

"That's true, but he's a selfish bastard. I fear he's only going to get worse. Ranni has not attempted to challenge him or get his position, so I don't understand why he's doing this."

"I think he has some kind of mental issue. It will only worsen, and we will all suffer for it."

"Maybe that's the case. We've never had an insane emperor in all our history." Flander admitted.

"He may have been dropped as a child."

“That’s not funny.”

"It's not meant to be. Babies, even Majuri ones, are sensitive to being dropped, shaken, and mistreated in other ways," Hel observed. "It's clear something is wrong with him."

“I can't deny that, but wouldn't it have shown up when he was young?”

“Maybe it did, and people wrote it off because they couldn't question him. He was the heir apparent and could do no wrong. That would make it hard to deal with those kinds of issues when they showed up and were brought to someone's attention who could do something about them.”

“There was a rumor that his father was about to name a different heir, but he died suddenly. Some think that he killed his father," Flander admitted.

“This whole thing is unfortunate. He had potential, and it may have been stolen from him by an abusive caretaker.”

“It was more than sad since the whole empire has suffered, and we will continue to suffer until he is gone."

"That won't be easy to do," Hel offered.

“It won’t happen anytime soon. That would require support that we don’t have. That’s what he is counting on.”

“Our work for now is done. It’s time for rest.”

"Is rest what you really want?" Flander asked, and his eyes glowed.

Majuri often showed strong feelings that way. Was rest what she really wanted? She wasn't sure. It was apparent that wasn't what Flander wanted. Hel needed to decide what she wanted from him. Could she sleep with him and walk away? Maybe that was something she wanted to find out. She could do it and then decide if that was all she wanted or wanted more. He seemed to realize she was having difficulty deciding what to do, and he was there next to her in a second. Flander pressed her up against the wall, and she could feel the heat from his body and the bulge between his legs. Heaven help her, and the desire seemed to take over. It was like it was just the two of them, and there was nothing else.

His kiss sent heat through her body, and she was wet between her legs. Flander's fingers pinched her nipples, and she moaned. Yes, this felt so good. This was going to happen right here in the office. Maybe his desk was not the best place for her first time, but she was ready and willing. That's why she was confused and more than a little upset when he pulled away. Did he just not want her?

"Let me walk you to your room," Flander suggested.

She thought about refusing, but then she just nodded. Hel was too tired to try to figure him out. Did he prefer to do this in a bedroom, or was he just letting her down easy? He escorted her down the hallway to her room.

"Ask me in."

"Come in if you want," Hel said.

He did and kicked the door closed. This time, he picked Hel up and carried her to her bed. After he laid her on it, he began to undress. Gods, he had the perfect body for a warrior. She could find no fault with it. Hel knew it felt good to touch, and she could see that it felt good to look at. The male was muscled like a warrior should be, with a narrow waist moving up to broad shoulders and arms that looked like they could lift a

mountain. She'd always loved his lips. Now she knew how good they could feel. When he pulled off his pants, she was surprised at how large he was. Maybe she shouldn't have been since she had felt it pressed against her, and he had a massive package. It worried her because she was small and tight. That would be even worse this time since no one had ever been there.

“Aren't you going to get undressed?” Flander wondered.

Hel began to remove her clothing, but she was too slow for him, so he helped her. She felt the cool air hit her hot skin and got goosebumps. He kissed her, and then his mouth began to move down her neck and to her breasts. First one, then the other, as he slowly sucked them in until they were hard. His fingers feathered their way down her stomach to the point between her legs and slid into her slickened center. His tongue moved to her clit, which he began to circle. That felt amazing, and she just wanted more.

She began to lift towards him, and her hands sank into his hair so that he wouldn't quit what he was doing. This was amazing and made her wish she had done it sooner, except that she couldn't because he hadn't been available then. Hel stopped thinking and just tried to enjoy everything he did to her. Something inside was building, and she wanted it to continue. She sensed that she was about to reach the end of something, and she wanted it badly.

“Don't stop!” She moaned.

He didn't, and he continued what he was doing, but now he moved faster, and that was both his fingers that were moving in and out rapidly and his tongue that was circling her clit faster and faster. There was a pinch, but she ignored it, and the pain disappeared. Suddenly, she exploded, and the feeling was incredible. Hel cried out with pleasure, and her hips bucked. Her hands gripped him, and she was willing to let him go. Her breathing was faster, but it began to slow down. Flander slid up her

body, and his enormous cock began to inch its way in.

It amazed her that it seemed to make its way inside her. She'd expected more pain, but apparently, he'd prepared her in the best possible way. There was little pain and a whole lot of pleasure. Flander began to move slowly, but she wanted more. She wrapped her legs around his hips and pulled up every time he pushed down, making them slam together. That felt amazing. He sped up, seeming to realize what she wanted. What amazed her was that it wasn't long before she began to feel that explosion building again.

That feeling was building, and she knew it wouldn't be long. Flander began to pound into her, and she felt his tongue lick her neck. It felt good, too, but it seemed out of place. The lick seemed to set off the explosion raced over her, and she felt a pinch on her neck. That set off another explosion, and it seemed to go on and on. Her mouth had a funny taste, and she realized she had bitten him too. Maybe biting was a thing that occurred during sex.

He fell, moved off her onto the side, and lay there as they both gasped for breath. That had just been a hell of an exercise session. As breathing became easier, she thought about things like that he hadn't worn protection. Maybe he didn't realize that she didn't have or take anything to prevent pregnancy. Perhaps once wouldn't matter, and they'd be fine. Hel had enjoyed what they'd just done and hoped they would do it again. She understood now how easy it was to fall into a relationship and be addicted to the sex.

Flander moved and curled around her, and they both fell asleep. She was so exhausted that she was still tired when she woke up. Her alarm hadn't gone off yet, but she felt it was time to get up. He was still with her, although she wasn't sure why because men usually left early. She wasn't sure what it all meant, but she would figure it out. Hel got up and went to the bathroom to shower and dress. Although she was tired, he was still in bed, but at least he was moving around, so she didn't have to

worry about him. His eyes opened, and he looked at her.

“I'm sorry for not asking you. Okay, maybe I'm not sorry because I've wanted to be with you for so long,” Flander observed.

“I'm not sure what you mean.”

“Do you know nothing about mating?”

“Not much because no one wanted to discuss it with me when I asked questions,” Hel admitted.

“I mated you last night, and you're mine. That's just the way it is. It will not change unless one of us dies.”

Holy shit! Was that true? If it was, how did she feel about it? There was a time when she wanted his attention more than anything. The question was, did she still want that now? If she decided that she didn't, what would she do with Flander? She would have to work this out, and her room wasn't the place to do it. She left and figured that he would get ready and go alone. Hopefully, he would remember to lock her door, not that she had many valuables in her room.

Hel wondered what kind of life they might have together. Did he want children? Of course, he did because all Majuri warriors wanted children. But did she want children? She did. Unfortunately, they wouldn't have her sister's children to play with because they were too old. Lane was too young and wouldn't have children until hers were teenagers. He didn't even have a genuine interest in girls yet, though that might come soon. Her life was too crazy because she was a warrior, and there was no time for children yet.

Maybe she just needed to leave thoughts of a family alone and worry about what kind

of couple they might make. After all, that was where everything started. Moving toward the cafeteria, Hel felt sore all over. It wasn't necessarily a bad sore because it reminded her of what they had done last night, which had been fabulous. As she entered the cafeteria, everyone looked at her, and she remembered that the warriors would be able to smell the mating. They would probably even know who she was mated to. Her face heated, and she knew she was perhaps a bright red.

All she could do was ignore it, and she filled her tray with extra food because she was especially hungry, and they would notice that, too. She wondered what ability she would pick up because her sister had picked up several after she had mated. Extra talent was never a bad thing. It made her wonder what extra talent Flander would pick up from her. Ranni had picked up some from her sister, Kasey. Hel wasn't sure what talent she had that Flander wasn't already better in. All the physical areas he could beat her in. The guy was already smart. So, what could he possibly gain from her?

Her squad looked up at her but said nothing. The surprise was that no one looked like they didn't know already. The surprise wasn't that they had mated but that Flander wanted to. It was something they had expected would happen eventually. Why hadn't she seen it? All she'd seen was disinterest in him. Was she so blind to the emotions that Flander felt? Apparently, that was the way things were. Everyone had seen it but her.

The guys were eating quickly, so she ate to replenish her energy. Today, they would be going to the new base and doing as much as they could. There were issues that they would need to deal with, and safety was the most important one. Safety bunkers were what they wanted to manufacture, and these would keep the people safe from all but the worst attacks. These would be put together, and families would get priority on using them.

Others would find what safety they could, and warriors were never safe under battle conditions. They would fight and die if necessary. She looked up and saw Flander

had joined them. There was no place to sit but across from her. Hel tried to concentrate on her food but looked at him occasionally. What could she say? He was nice to look at. The other guys were finished eating. She was usually last, but today, she beat Flander.

Hel wondered how they would get so many buildings built. Refugees had flooded the base, and places to live were needed. They couldn't bring any more refugees there until most of those there were settled. That was the way that things were done. A bit of doubling or even tripling was allowable, and they even had people camped out for a certain amount of time, but the chaos they had at the camp was unacceptable and could not be continued. All of them would dig in and work as hard as they could. Her job was often easier because she would find people among the refugees trained to do specific jobs, and they would put them to use.

This was something she was good at, and it would help. Flander finally finished eating, and they all headed to the shuttle with some available other people, or maybe he'd even volunteered. The planet wasn't far, and after landing, everyone left the shuttle and headed to their assigned place. She headed to an office and immediately reviewed the refugees' records. The skills and abilities that the last group had were amazing. She'd recognized a few names from Purgatory, and these were talented, capable people who could be put to better use working for Mercury.

That was impossible, but she'd discuss it with Kasey later. Meanwhile, she'd found cooks, builders, and a lady with experience supervising a cleaning crew. There was also an experienced maintenance boss. It was like hitting oil. This would help them both on the planet and on the ship. Hel was pleased with her work. It was lunch time, and she decided she needed her energy, so she went to the cafeteria. Her squad was there, but they finished their meal while she was just beginning. She felt like she was starving, and the food had a powerful scent. It was a good one, but more than she usually noticed.

Could it be that her sense of smell had improved, or was she just imagining it? Time would tell. Hel would keep a close eye on things. Her whole life would change now, but she didn't want to think about that now. Her squad finished their food, and they all left without a word. She didn't mind. What was there to say anyway? Hel could only hope the changes would come slowly.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:19 am

New Base

Base Kasey was going well, with several buildings built or partly built. The new problem was that they needed another base to watch Base Kasey to ensure it wasn't attacked. The choices were a domed base on one of the nearby planets or a location on a mountaintop on the same planet with a view of it. Flander knew that Ranni was having a hard time making the decision. The wrong decision could put lives at risk. These were lives that they had saved once and did not want to have to save again.

Robotics were being built, and Kasey was building a large drone flying over Base Kasey. The problem with this was that any unauthorized flights would be taken down, and someone might forget to get their authorization for a pleasure flight or even inadvertently move into the area the drone was protecting. It might not be an issue with an established drone that had been tested and approved, but this wasn't one of those. This was new research, and who knew how it might react.

It made them all nervous while they considered what the best thing to do was. The most important thing was protecting Base Kasey. Some other teams were helping get people off the planet and up to the new base. They would have to be sure that the people they hauled there weren't destructive or enemies. It was not an easy thing to do the way that people flooded the shuttle to get off the planet. The robots were patrolling certain areas of Purgatory. It was no longer an easy place to be for gangs or maybe even for anyone at all. Parents were worried about their children, and they should be, but with the state of the planet's surface, they should have been worried about them long ago.

Hel had made a cyborg that Kasey had checked. It oversaw the robots. It did well

finding the enemies and sending the robots after them. When they attacked them, it was a bloodbath because they would not give up. Flander didn't know why they wouldn't either give up or run. The gang simply dug in and fought until they were all gone. While it reduced their numbers, it was disturbing. It would be better if they left or gave up. That was the plan, but it wasn't working out that way.

Flander tried not to think about his relationship with his mate. He'd moved her things to his room and made sure someone else was in her former room. He'd not expected the meltdown Hel had. His room was larger and better. What was the problem? It was hard to understand human females. Hel had been angry, and he'd spent two nights in his spare room, but he was done with that. They'd be sleeping together tonight regardless of what she said.

“Sweetheart, are you ready for breakfast?” Flander asked.

“I'll be out in a minute.”

It was almost like she didn't even want to talk to him. All of this over giving up her room? He knew that he was going to have to speak to someone, and he thought that Kasey would be the most helpful and usually the least judgmental. All he had to do was find a time when Hel wasn't around and her sister was available. Yeah, that would be easy, not. He needed to get to breakfast and then move on with his work.

Breakfast was as usual, with the whole squad there and his mate, the last one finishing her food. Now that several buildings were finished, they switched back and forth between Purgatory and Base Kasey. They were headed to Purgatory today to check out the last Mercury facility and load up more refugees. While this wasn't the most populated area, it wasn't totally remote either. They would be taking the ship, and there was a good chance it would be filled up completely before they headed to the base.

Hel shot him an angry look, and he knew it was because he was looking at her and trying to figure out what she was thinking. He needed to stop doing that before they were going on a mission like this. He knew that sometimes going into these old facilities influenced her. She remembered the good times and felt a loss over what had been. The squad knew she had mourned the past, and he hoped the others would help him look out for her. He hoped today wouldn't be one of those days.

They loaded on the ship, and it wasn't long before they headed down to Purgatory. He didn't know why anyone would call their home that. There were no good meanings associated with that word. He could only assume that the planet hadn't been easy to live on when they first arrived. His mate was already withdrawn; part of it might have been because they weren't getting along. This was not his fault because he hadn't done anything wrong. Hel was upset about something that needed to happen. They were mated. There were rules. They had to live together. It freed up a room for someone else by ensuring that someone got put in her room. He moved her stuff and ensured she didn't get in trouble for not following the rules. Why didn't she understand that? Flander knew he needed to stop thinking about it because it drove him crazy.

The ship was ready to land, and everyone needed to be prepared. A small crowd was forming outside, and he knew that would cause confusion when they tried to get into the facility. Everyone was aware and prepared, so they headed off the ship and straight to the facility. Havoc ruled as people tried to get close to them even though the robots were holding them back. Brave or foolish people pushed forward anyway, trying to get their children on the ship.

“You will be able to load once the warriors come back, ” the Andriod announced, but no one seemed to listen.

All they could do was get into the facility and finish the work as quickly as possible. Hel Remembered everything about this facility as she had about the past ones they

had gone into. She put in the codes, opened the doors, and they all entered. This facility didn't seem any more special than the other ones had. She quickly packed things into handy boxes and set them in the middle of a circle with a dot on them. It flashed up quickly. She moved some equipment to the same spot, which also flashed up.

“Are we done?” Flander asked.

“We are,” Hel said.

“It's time to get those people loaded and get out of here before we draw even more attention,” Flander instructed.

They all hurried to follow his directions. As soon as they left the facility, it was almost like a mob pushing at them. Even the robots were not enough to keep them under control. All of them rushed to the ship, where they would allow refugees to start loading slowly.

“One at a time and no pushing, please,” the Andriod directed.

There was no end to the pushing. The crowd seemed almost panic-stricken, and he wasn't sure why. That was answered soon after as gang members appeared and started moving closer. The Andriod remained at the entry to the ship, but the robots took position outside of the refugees and were ready to attack the gang members if needed. The slow and careful entry that Flander had suggested went out the window. People pushed and shoved as they attempted to get on the ship where they felt safe.

People loaded quickly. Somehow, they managed to get everyone on even though not everyone had a seat. The robots would stay behind and patrol the area since it was obvious that gang activity was high here. The Andriod came with them, although Flander wondered if he might not be better served staying behind and commanding

the robots. That wasn't what their orders said, so they shut the doors and headed to the sky.

He could feel the nervous energy as refugees worried if they had made the right choice and what would happen next. A few children cried, sensing their parents' confusion. Their parents tried to hush them as if they thought they would be punished if they continued to cry. Flander remembered many years before when the ship he was on had stopped near Purgatory, and warriors had gotten the opportunity to take a break for two or three days, depending on rank and available leave.

This planet had been so different back then. It had been prosperous, and even though it was mainly a family planet, there had been a small section of the larger towns devoted to entertainment for singles. Nothing like those places where crime was out of hand. There had been a place where the warriors could find female entertainment, a few bars with various types of alcohol, and a place where they could go to indulge in some of the drugs that were labeled for entertainment and legal in certain amounts.

Flander remembered this place as one of the best leaves he'd had the whole time he had been a warrior. He'd enjoyed himself and indulged without fear of being attacked or catching some unknown illness. Ships had docked there in controlled numbers, so the planet hadn't been overwhelmed with visitors. The entertainment areas had strict rules, and the females were there voluntarily and got the best medical care. Hel probably wouldn't appreciate hearing about his fond memories of the old Purgatory. He had never shared them with her. It made him wonder if Ranni had ever shared it with his mate.

The comparison between his first visit and the next one was night and day. The second visit was after the grabbers attacked the planet, and everything was in chaos. There were dead and dying everywhere, and those who lived needed everything because it had all been taken from them. Flander knew at one time that the grabbers had been victims, but after seeing what they had done to several different planets, he

felt they needed to be destroyed. His mate might even agree with him because she had been through the worst of it and seen her neighbors victimized.

Two years later, the planet didn't look much better. The attack by the grabbers opened the door for others to come and created even more chaos. Their ship changed direction, and his attention was drawn to the fact that they were landing. About two hundred people needed to be processed and found somewhere to sleep. That was what Hel and a small team of others would do. She was remarkably good at finding places for people and putting them into jobs they could.

His mate had even found a number of trustworthy enough people to work on the ship and fill in on positions of low priority. A few had been moved to squads, but only one per squad so that they could not cause too much discord if they were there to cause trouble. The average citizen would never make a squad, so there was only a small number of people who could even qualify to work on one.

People streamed off the ship in a far more organized manner than when they had entered it. Families went one way, while couples and singles went one another. Families would have priority over any houses, apartments, or even single dwellings because of the children. It meant that they would have more privacy, but they would be crowded, and that meant they might not be any better off than couples or singles in the long run.

Couples and singles were often in dorm style accommodations. Cots were lined up on each wall, and bathroom facilities were in the center of the building. Females and males had separate bathroom facilities because humans were very private. Other races valued their privacy, too, but most didn't mind being seen naked by others. Flander certainly wasn't bothered by it since warriors had no privacy from when they were young children. There was no choice but to get used to it.

Hel went one way, and the rest of the squad went to the construction areas.

Construction was going well but not keeping up with the large numbers of people that were incoming. The good thing was that his mate kept finding more people to work construction, which was speeding things up. If she could find more, maybe they could actually get a handle on this. It was hard for him to concentrate on things when he was worried about his relationship, and that was the most important thing in his life.

They were trying to help Purgatory, but as important as that was, his relationship with his mate was more important. Flander felt bad, but he wished they were anywhere but here while they were trying to work their relationship out. Ranni had been the lucky one because right after he had mated, they had been recalled to one of the other areas, and the ghosts of the planet below did not interfere with his relationship with Kasey.

That would not be the case with his relationship because not only was the planet below, but they were going to it every other day and working with the people that came from it on the other days. As if that was not bad enough, they were unbelievably short-handed for the significant goals that had been set. Flander pushed his thoughts aside and put his shoulder into his work as they tried to start another building. A team would build the foundation, and then his guys would come in and start work on the building. There was a specific style to all the empire buildings of the time, and they were built with as many local materials as they could find.

There was a red rock that was scattered in locations all over the planet that had been pulled into work as building materials. The rock was hard. Once cleaned, it was attractive. Most warriors knew how to lay rock and stone, which wasn't a problem. They each took a different wall and worked as quickly as possible. As soon as they reached a certain point, refugees would come in and begin to do their assigned work. The rock was heavy, and warriors did a good job with that kind of work. Interior work had lighter materials. Anyone could do that if they knew how.

Flander was watching Jaid, who seemed distracted by a local girl. He'd checked into Donna, and she was a distant relative of Kasey and Hel. Maybe it would be a good

thing for him. He was in the right age range for mating if that was what he wanted. If it was just sex, then it wouldn't matter. He would keep an eye on things because that was what he did. That was what it meant to be a leader. Flander stepped back, looking at his wall, and felt accomplished. The first floor was always the easiest.

Maybe romance was in the air, and he also needed to watch his other guys. It was also possible that he needed to get his own romance in order before he worried about everyone else's. Ronner got his attention.

"It's lunch time," he said.

"That's good because I'm starving," Tannen admitted as he approached where they were. Tomsin trailed behind him, and they all headed to the cafeteria.

They all had trays and were sitting at a table when Hel arrived. She got her food and sat with them. Flander enjoyed having his squad together because he knew it wouldn't be long and significant changes would occur. He wasn't sure where everyone would end up going. If Ranni got the Chief position, he would get subchief. Most weren't squad leaders, but he could keep his position if he chose to. With all Kasey's work, he was surprised that she had not already asked for his mate to assist him. He saw that possibility coming soon. The other guys were all good and would probably be considered for squad leader positions, but he didn't know when they would get those positions, only that he thought they should.

He'd already recommended his males for leadership positions several times, and eventually, it would happen. Eventually, he knew the squad would be disbanded and spread to the wind. There was no way to say if he would ever see them again. They've been together for five years, a long time for a squad. It was sad every time that a squad disbanded like this. This was not the first time he had been in a squad that had disbanded and would not be the last. All of them knew it was coming. They just didn't know when or how.

All the males were finished eating. Hel was finishing up her plate. He'd wait if he could, but they were in a hurry, and lives were on the line. He nodded at his mate so that she knew that he was acknowledging her presence and that he had to go. Flander led the way, and the rest of the squad followed, except Hel, who would again go in a different direction. Her talents were different, and that's where she would work while they did the grunt work in construction. Most warriors were trained in construction and had a talent for it. They could lift more and work faster than almost any race. That's how this would get done, through hard work and perseverance.

They all worked hard and waited until the end of the day came around, and because they were working hard, it didn't seem like it had taken long. The shuttle was waiting for them, and his mate was already seated, so he sat next to her. They were filthy, and a place to clean up would have been nice, but they didn't have one. The few showers that were available were for the refugees and those working among them, which made them off limits.

Everyone loaded on the shuttle, and it headed back to the ship. As soon as they landed, everyone hurried to their shower. Routines were important, but they had fallen into one over the last few months. They knew what to expect and where they would be most of the time. Maybe it was time to shake up his mate's routine. Still, a shower was needed to remove all the gunk from a hard day's work. Now that they had landed, everyone was rushing to get clean. He enjoyed his shower. The hot water relaxed his tired muscles. Once he was through, he was ready for supper. They had all worked hard. They needed energy replaced, so they would be good to go tomorrow.

Majuri ate more than the average person, replacing large amounts of energy used when they worked or fought hard. Flander dressed after he was dry and then headed down to the cafeteria. He had not seen his mate in their room, so he had no idea if she had gotten clean faster or was still in the shower cleaning up. When he got to the cafeteria, only Jaid was there before him. He had their table reserved. The food smelled wonderful, and he loaded up his tray and sat down next to Jaid. Now, they

both watched to see who would arrive next. There was no guarantee that they would all show up, even though most usually did.

They didn't wait for the others to arrive; they began to eat immediately. That was just the squad's rule since you never knew who would show up or when they would show up. The one he was waiting to see was Hel, but she ended up being the last one there. Flander had worried that she would try to avoid him. Maybe she had decided to avoid him and then changed her mind. Tonight, they would deal with their relationship for good.

Flander was done, but he sat sipping his drink, waiting for his mate to finish eating. The other guys finished and left one at a time.

“Are you waiting for me?” Hel asked.

“I am. We must deal with our relationship when we get to our room.”

“Fine. Just remember I have something to say about this, too.” Hel took her last bite of food and picked up her tray to drop it off in the pan.

Flander stuck with her so she would not try to escape him, and they headed to their room. This was important, and he tried to remember that he hadn't asked and had just mated her. She wouldn't appreciate what he had to say, but he was going to say it anyway. They would be together for the rest of their lives, and she needed to wrap her mind around that. The moment they entered their apartment, he grabbed her, pressed her up against the wall, and kissed her passionately.

Flander whispered in her ear. “You are mine!”

She shivered in his arms. He knew she wanted and needed him, but for some reason, she was fighting that. It was hard to understand why she would do that, but human

females were hard to understand. Sometimes, even human males didn't understand them. He had seen that personally.

“This doesn't seem like a discussion. It seems more like an instruction session.”

“I'm not trying to tell you what to do, but I am telling you what we are, bonded together for life. Neither of us will ever be able to be with anyone else. If you reject me, we will both be alone. Is that really what you want?”

"I want some say in my own life. Someone making all the decisions for me was never my dream life, and it still isn't. You don't seem to understand that." Hel observed.

"All this because I moved you into my apartment. Once we mated, we had to let one apartment go. Why did that upset you so much?"

"You never asked me and never gave me any time to adjust. You just decided and implemented the decision, and I got to live with it. That's not how it should work, even if you think your decision is a foregone conclusion.”

“You would have had to move anyway, and my apartment was the best of the two.”

“We could have asked for a different apartment neither yours nor mine. You could have given me a few days because that's usually allowed. We could have talked about this and made the decision together, which is what mates are supposed to do. If this is what you will always do, then we won't make it.”

“I'm going to show you why we will make it.”

Flander leaned in and licked her ear. He immediately smelled her heat and knew she was growing wet between her legs. Hel wanted him, and there was no denying it. He began removing her clothing and his. Pressing against her, he made sure that she

could feel his hard on between her legs. That was where he belonged and intended to be before very long. Lifting her, he moved her to bed and slid on top of her.

"If you don't want this, just say no," Flander told her.

Hel seemed to have nothing to say. He kissed her and then began to work his way down her body, sucking on her nipples and biting them until they grew hard. He licked his way down her body until he made it to her moist center. It was crying out to him to make love to her. That was exactly what he was going to do. His finger slid in, and his tongue found her clit and began to circle it. Flander added another finger, sliding it in deep, and then added another finger. Three was all she could take, and he started moving them in and out faster. His mate moaned and moved up and down to join him. His tongue continued to circle faster, too.

Hel was moving up to a gigantic orgasm, and he could sense that it would be soon. He sped up, and she exploded, screaming his name. Flander slid upper body, and his large thick cock slid right in because she was so wet. Now, he began to pump into her again, and it wasn't long before her body began to respond. They were made for each other, and by the time he was through loving her all night long, she would realize it. He pounded in harder and harder, and she responded by lifting as he came down. She wrapped her legs around him and screamed as she came, and he followed.

He knew she wasn't ready to get pregnant, but it wouldn't take long. Flander had never felt so wonderful. She was everything he wanted. She would see that he was everything she needed to be. Eventually, he would teach her about making love and being in love. Maybe he would learn something, too, since he'd never been in love. There was no way he would let her sleep, and he kept her up most of the night. They would only get a couple hours when they finally got to sleep. Wrapping his arms around her, he felt like he had begun what would be the rest of their life. Nothing would come between them because he wouldn't allow it.

“What did you do to me?” Hel asked in a grouchy voice.

“Took you to heaven. Are you wanting more?”

“No, it’s time for breakfast. We can’t be late to work.”

She jumped out of bed and hurried to the shower, and it made him feel good to see that she was having trouble moving. He felt a little rough himself, but it would make a big difference once he showered. The hot water relaxed his muscles, and he couldn't deny that he needed it. After drying and dressing, he was ready for breakfast and hoped she was too. Hel took a few extra minutes before she appeared, and they left the room together. Her walk was better now, but it was still obvious that she'd been well-loved. All he could do was smile, knowing the guys would realize why. His mate just shot an annoyed look his way. That wouldn't go unnoticed either.

They entered the cafeteria, and his squad gave them their attention. Both got their food, and the chairs left were side by side. Hel gave the same annoyed look to the rest of the squad, but she took the chair next to him anyway. The guys would make sure that two seats were left for them together from now on. Mates should sit together. His mate needed to get used to that. They finished eating, and today, they would go to the planet, but he didn't believe there would be any facilities that they needed to work with. This would be a trip just to pick up refugees. He wasn't sure they would make this trip so soon when they were getting people faster than they could supply places to live.

The shame was that the emperor made the choices, and they were just playing catch up the best they could. They could see the planet below them as the ship prepared to land. Once they got this load of refugees to the base, they would return to work and start doing more construction. The people Hel had found were working well so far, and he hoped she would find more. Even the ones that weren't trained or capable in the areas where they needed them could do the unskilled labor in other places like the

kitchen or cleaning. Those positions were also required, and people willing to work in those positions were valued.

He saw a crowd far more than this ship could hold as they landed. These people were desperate and would do anything to get on the ship. The issue was stopping them without harming them. Hopefully, the robots could help. The Andriod was good at planning these things. Maybe they could avoid any problems, but he felt bad about this. There were too many people and not enough room, and those in this crowd had expectations that would not be met. This was a recipe for disaster. As the ship set down, the crowd surged forward, preparing to rush the door when it opened. They should realize by now that the robots would come out first and rushing them was a big mistake.

Flander had the pilot announce that the robots would come out first and everyone needed to step away from the plane. Many of them stepped back, but some of them just continued to move forward. It would be horrible if anyone got injured because of their stupidity and desperation.

“No one will get hurt, will they?” Hel asked.

“Do you know a way to prevent it?”

She shook her head, but it was clear that she was upset. The robots opened the door, but they blocked entrance to anyone who hadn't been approved. Some parents were trying to hand their children off, more concerned with their own safety than their own. A few kids managed to make it past the robots, and once on the ship, they would be taken. Their robots allowed a few on but blocked more from entry.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:19 am

Mated Bliss

Hel was sore. There was no denying she had enjoyed it. Even being sore was just a reminder of the excellent night that they had spent together. She knew why he did it. It would cause bonding that she couldn't overcome or prevent. While he had taken the choice away from her, she wasn't sure she wouldn't have given in anyway. For so long, she had wanted him, and now she had him for better or for worse. After Ranni, he was the most powerful and respected warrior on the ship. Even in the quadrant, no one came close to either of them. The emperor himself didn't have much respect, and no one liked him, but they feared him because of the power he had been given when he took the crown.

Someday, if he survived, Ranni would have that power, too, and Flander would move up into the most trusted position. That meant that they would all move to the capital. Another thing she didn't think she wanted to do and would have forced on her. There was little to be done to prevent those things she dreaded, but at least it would be a while before they happened. Her sister might not want any of those things, and she would be forced along for the ride. They said women had some equality, and maybe they'd had more in Radvar's day, but they had lost some of it when this new emperor had taken over.

That's why there weren't more females on board this ship. They weren't accepted into the military. There were very few, and no one was sure why he chose those he did, but he did it personally. She had the impression that he was some kind of pervert, and his romantic life certainly supported that. He never had exes because they died when he was done with them. The only good thing about being on the ship is that they didn't have to be at the palace where the emperor was. She needed to get her mind on

her work because they were about to land, and a crazy crowd had gathered. This might be the most people that had ever been waiting for them when they landed. What worried her was the gang members that could be seen at the crowd's edge. Were they here to attack the ship or the refugees trying to get off the planet? They wouldn't know until it was too late to plan for it.

The robots would go first, giving them a level of safety, but it wouldn't help those in the crowd, and she saw many children. Gang members didn't care who they killed when they killed. A few gang members had turned into refugees and refused to return to the planet, which was a good thing. Cutting enemies by turning them into friends was a good thing. It just didn't happen enough. Most of the gang members were so scared of the leaders they worked for that they wouldn't even consider leaving.

The door opened, and the robots blocked the way as they headed out one at a time because the robots were huge. People swarmed them, and she worried someone might get hurt because the robots wouldn't stop. They moved people out of their way gently, which was a surprise for such huge creations. Kasey must have programmed them to care about people not shooting at them. The problem was that as soon as people began to get on board the ship, the gang members began to shoot, and the robots returned fire. The robots firing wasn't the problem because they were extremely accurate. Gang members firing was a problem because they hit more people than robots. Several of them had been shot, and some of the other ones looked scared and like they wanted to retreat, but they refused to.

Hel suspected that they'd been told if they were treated, other gang members would shoot them, and they would die anyway. If they died because they were cowards, their people would go after their families, and most of them did have families of some sort. If you entered that kind of life, there would be no winning, no matter what you did. Even if you died, you knew that someone you cared about would die after you. What kind of choice was that?

The ship slowly began to fill, but the pushing and shoving were hard to control. Flander decided they could load more quickly. It helped, but it wouldn't be long before they had all they could take, and the rest would have to stay behind. Their ship was loaded and ready to take off, but the gang members attacked those left. Flander ordered the crowd to disburse, but when they didn't, the ship sprayed the crowd with ice-cold water. They all ran for cover, and the ship took off. Things seemed to be getting harder as more people were moved away.

It wasn't long before they arrived at the base and unloaded their passengers. A few buildings were available for families, but little progress has been made toward singles and couples. Sometimes, it seemed like they would never have enough places for people to stay. Still, at least the services were improving because a small hospital would be added on as needed, a cafeteria, and supply buildings would provide whatever was needed. That was something, and she knew, in time, it would be a thriving town, possibly even a city. Once everyone was off the ship, the squad followed and went in the direction of where they were going to work.

She had an assistant who took names and found out what people were talented at. Eventually, they would get more information about all the people staying here, but that was enough for now. Under these circumstances, they only did the basics, and other things were put off until later. This would be a hard day with many people to sort through. It was time to begin, so she joined her group, and they began to go through people one at a time. There was hope that they would find people to fill the positions where they desperately needed someone. It always made her happy when she found people, especially for the more difficult positions to fill.

Trained warriors were impossible to find, but sometimes, she could find someone willing to be trained to become a warrior. It was an average load. Of all the people on it, only two looked good to be trained as warriors. Since they both had families, she was sure they would agree because who didn't want to make life better for your family? Hel found someone who had been a trained chef, which was unusual because

most of those had left the planet as soon as the attack occurred. A good chef could find work anywhere, and she wasn't sure why they had remained, but she wouldn't question it too much. They would start in the cafeteria, but eventually, they might be able to start a restaurant once this became more of a town.

Many of these people volunteered to do whatever work was available for them to do. It was important in building a new town that people were willing to work. That was not true of all the people because some wanted to be taken care of until they ran to the end of the time when the warriors would take care of them, and then they wanted to leave. Majuri had policies in place for dealing with refugees. Those with children would get the longest time, two years. Singles got six months, and couples got a year. After that time, they would ship them off somewhere, and they would have to take care of themselves.

Hel got distracted, but she was still going through the paperwork, picking out people, and putting them in a pile so she could talk to them later. The problem was she couldn't stop thinking about her mate and what they needed to do to get their life on the right track. It was possible. It had to be because she wanted to be with him, and since he had mated her, that showed he wanted to be with her. If two people wanted something badly enough, she believed they could achieve it. Her parents hadn't been a perfect match because they had been interested in different sciences and had often argued about where they should go and what they should do because her mother often liked remote locations. Still, her father needed to be at the hub of technology for his work. They eventually agreed, and that was when they moved to Purgatory. It had been a remote location, but eventually, it had become a high-tech hub, even if only because of her father's company.

All she could do was hope that she and her mate would eventually work things out and figure out what would work best for both. She knew that he was bad at expecting everything to go his way, and that was what she would have to overcome. Her assistant came in to remind her it was lunchtime. Reba knew Hel would work through

lunch if she wasn't reminded. She called the office daily to tell her it was lunchtime. The base cafeteria was packed, but her squad was there claiming a table. Getting her tray loaded with food, she sat with them.

A seat was always left for her next to her mate. She never had a choice about where she could sit because she was usually the last one there. Hel ate a bit less than the guys, but she still never managed to be the first one done. The food seemed to get better every time she ate at the cafeteria, and it might even get better yet. They couldn't afford gourmet ingredients, but a good, solid cook with talent was all they needed. Experienced kitchen help from Purgatory was hard to find since so many had fled when the attack occurred. It was a surprise that she had managed to find a few.

She was sure the kitchen manager would be pleased since she was always overworked and never had enough people to do what needed to be done. The squad finished individually and left the table, leaving only her and her mate behind.

"I need a kiss before I go to sustain me until the end of the day," Flander said.

It was a surprise that he could be romantic, so she gave him a kiss and sent him on his way. He's shown her a side lately that had been warm and gentle. Yes, he was still a warrior, but now he was also a lover. That made her more hopeful that they would find a compromise to please them both. Especially since she thought she might be pregnant. It was a surprise that he hadn't known first since warriors could often smell that change. She planned to go to the doctor, and then she would know. Hel wouldn't tell him until she knew beyond a doubt that it was true.

How would it be to have a child with her mate? She knew pregnancy could be rough and remembered that her sister had difficulties of her own at that time. The birthing process itself was painful and messy, but everyone said that as soon as that baby was laid in your arms, you forgot all about that. It might be true, which might be why so many populations flourished. Hel also wondered if it might be a boy like his dad or a

girl more like her. She wasn't sure she wanted to know until the baby was born.

On the other hand, it might help to know what colors to choose when buying equipment and clothing for an infant. It was also possible that Flander would want to know. If that were the case, then they would both know.

She finished that last bite on her plate and cleaned up her area before returning to her office. Her life was so regimented that she didn't know how to fit a baby into it. Yes, there were people available to watch children, but it had to be hard to leave them behind while you went to work for the day. Babies were so lovable, and even toddlers were cute as hell. Sometimes, when they got older, their behavior was a little difficult. Sitting in her chair, she was lost in daydreams.

"Hel, it's quitting time," Reba observed.

She was a perfect assistant, keeping her on target and letting her know anything she needed. If she had an office she oversaw, Reba would be her personal assistant. Maybe she should recommend her to her sister to get her a better job and out of this place. She knew that Reba was single and had no ties to the camp other than that the planet below was so dangerous. Maybe she was selfish because, right now, she needed help to get this place organized. Later, she would help Reba get a better job.

It was time to head to the ship and load. When she arrived, her squad was already there. As soon as she was onboard, they headed to the ship. She sat in the back and tried to stay awake but failed. When she woke up, someone had their hands wrapped around her throat. How embarrassing for a warrior. Flander immediately seemed to know and headed to the back of the ship.

"Stop right there!" the man yelled.

"What do you want?" Flander asked.

She could smell a terrible odor. This guy never took a bath. Hel could see a reflection in the window. This guy was a gang member. His hands relaxed. She was tired of what he was doing. There was more than one way to deal with this, but the easiest way was how she decided. Relaxing her body, she slammed her head back into his, and he immediately let go as blood gushed everywhere. Hel had a terrible headache. Flander rushed up, grabbed the guy by the back of his neck, lifted him, and threw him across the aisle, where he hit the plane's wall. Ouch! That had to hurt. She knew that because her head hurt too. Maybe she should have picked one of the other ways.

“Who are you?” Flander asked.

“JC. I'm part of the gang, but I wanted to negotiate for a place in the refugee camp.”

“I think you picked the worst possible way to negotiate. Why should we let you join the camp after you've shown your tendency to violence?”

“I didn't plan to hurt her. I just wanted your attention and to have something to deal with. The life down there isn't worth having, and I don't have a family yet, so they have nothing to hold me in place,” JC admitted.

"You'll be locked up while we check out your story, and my boss will decide what we'll do with you."

Hel had sat down while she waited for her headache to ease, and she listened to the gang member who had taken her. If he was telling the truth, this man could help them. He would have information on the gangs that might help speed up their attempts to get rid of them. Knowing their weaknesses and strengths is important when you are waging war against a group like this. She wouldn't have any say in any part of this, but the discussion gave her hope that they could speed along reclaiming Purgatory. Some might say she shouldn't care because it was no longer her home, but in her heart, it would always be her home, and once the planet was cleared, she would

want a place there that they could visit for vacations.

Kasey had mentioned the same desire, and she was sure they would claim one of the places her family owned. Hel had to do everything she could to ensure that Purgatory was returned to its former glory. She didn't know how she would do that, and she wasn't sure that the empire would do what was necessary to get it done. All she knew was that they had to try and that right now, she could only continue as she had been.

Ranni decided the next day that they would go forward with working with JC and see what they might do with the gangs. They would watch him closely because trust took time to develop, and all they had right now was an agreement that they hoped would benefit all of them. JC seemed relieved, as he should be, because had he not been accepted, he would have ended up in a horrible prison, which would have been even worse than living on the surface of Purgatory. Empire prisons were generally not bad because prisoners were usually given hard labor. If you didn't mind working, good work got you out early. Only the worst and most dangerous were thrown into prisons, and few survived in for long.

He would have been given hard labor, but he would not have managed to have a good life until he was released. While he said he didn't have any family or anyone they could hold against him, she didn't believe him. Someone in his life made him want better things, and once they got going, she had a feeling that he would have someone he wanted brought to him. She understood his need for secrecy regarding a relationship that could be used against him. Hel would have done the same thing, but she was interested in how he reworked his agreement to include this mysterious person.

Her squad would be the major group working with him, and they would plan and carry out everything that they determined from the information he gave them. A meeting was about to take place in one of the soundproofed and secured rooms, so no one else would be getting this information.

“I hope you are doing well in the quarters that we gave you and that you're finding the food and other things satisfactory,” Hel remarked.

She had been placed in charge of making sure that he cooperated fully and that he was kept alive, which could be a problem since many people on board knew that he was a gang member who had turned. That placed a target on his back because gangs were the enemy, and there might have been a gang member that had come up here that was hiding and waiting to see what they could do to cause grief. If they were caught, they would be destroyed painfully, but until then, if they managed to hide, they could cause a lot of difficulty.

“Are you kidding? This is almost like heaven compared to where I was. I've heard that the refugees are being treated well, although not as well as I have been. I hope this means we'll get a plan so the planet can return to what it once was. I've heard wonderful stories about the lives that the people on the planet once had. I believe your family was at the center of prosperity, and hopefully, it will be again. There are also rumors about what may have happened to your father and that he may not be dead.” JC admitted.

“Until we get information one way or the other, there is little we can do about that,” Hel offered.

“I understand, but maybe once we get a little work done and things aren't so chaotic on the surface, I can track down some information about your father.”

“I would greatly appreciate that. Meanwhile, it is time for us to work out our first mission so that we will get the most result from it.”

“Agreed. I believe that the first thing we should do is knock out the leaders of the world's largest gang. That is the gang that I was involved with, and they go by the name of Blues. No one knows why, but they think it may have had something to do

with the original leader. If this is not satisfactory, please tell me what information you prefer.' JC observed.

Hel knew they had gotten to the point where Flander would take over as he was the squad leader and highest-ranking warrior present. She also knew that Ranni and Kasey were watching from the other side of what appeared to be a wall, but it wasn't. There was no way a project like this would go forward without the big boss ensuring he was well aware of everything happening. It would be crazy not to. She watched Flander's expression, and he seemed to find what was being said agreeable. He had an earbud to tell him what the big boss was thinking.

"Where do you believe that this gang's leadership congregates?" Flander questioned.

The table was covered with a picture of the map of the planet's surface laid out flat. JC stepped up to a certain area, put his hand on it, and tapped. "Right here is where their base is. Leadership rarely leaves. That means ten percent of that gang will be here anytime we attack. Most of them will be leaders. If gang number two realizes that part of the Blues have been destroyed, they will immediately attack them, hoping to take out the gang and claim lower-level members. That gang is called Ortegas, and according to most people, that name came from the planet from which the leadership came. This battle should take a large toll on both of these gangs and may even have members defecting in the hopes of becoming refugees."

It was hard to deny that that sounded like a good plan. A single surgical strike would start a gang war, but what would the other gangs do once this war started?

"What about the others?" Flander asked.

"There are about a dozen gangs and the top two count for a quarter of the people on the planet. I believe the other gangs will stand back and watch, hoping that numbers are reduced enough that one of the others can take in survivors. If not, and they were

stupid enough to get involved, they would lose large numbers, too. I see no way this can turn out badly, only not as good as we hope for.”

“I have to admit that it sounds like a good plan. Limiting the casualties to confirmed gang members is what we were looking for. We will have to confirm that those present are gang members and determine the best way to take out many of them.” Flander explained.

Now, they would move to the next step: to send down listening devices, which were drones the size of insects. They would look like insects, too. Listening to those in that area, their specialists would determine if the information was accurate. A plan would be set up but not carried out until they confirmed JC’s information. Her squad would be the only ones to know the whole plan from beginning to end. Among the others, this information would be compartmentalized. That way, they would know where the information had come from if the word leaked out. Since they were leading the plan, if they were suspected of leaking information, the odds were good they would all be killed. Majuri justice was harsh and swift when it came to their soldiers leaking information or making mistakes. You learned, or you died.

Even stupidly sharing information could get you killed. Soldiers were taught young to keep secure information to themselves and tell no one, not even their mates. JC would probably never get the whole story about this mission and how it had been carried out. The first thing they needed to do was go to the planet’s surface near the area that he had selected and release the tiny drones. No one could tell the difference between them and the local insects. The only way they might be caught is if someone whacked them and then realized there was a difference between them and something living. Hel wasn’t sure that had ever happened because people just didn’t look that closely at small things. They didn’t realize the danger that something so small could have.

This plan would be initiated in the morning. The rest of the day, they would get off to do whatever they wanted to. A squad was rarely given time off or in the middle of a

mission. She would spend time with her mate, and he was the only one on the squad who would not get time off today because he would be working with the big boss and setting things up for tomorrow. Hel went to the apartment she would probably always think of as his and decided to be a slacker for the rest of the day. Everyone should get some time to slack off and relax. This would be her time, and she would pig out on food she ordered from the cafeteria, play games, and look for a good book.

Hel did all those things, and at some point, she drifted off to sleep only to be woken by a gentle hand and a soft kiss.

“What have you been doing?” Flander asked, and she could hear the smile in his voice.

“I think what I was doing was obvious. I ensured that from the time I got done with work, I did nothing of any value to anyone but me.”

“I can see that, and I hope you enjoyed it. A day such as that is good occasionally.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Hel agreed.

Her mate seemed more interested in getting her turned on than talking, and she was turned on now, so why not? People always said that sex was what anchored the mate relationship. This was a good time to check it out.

It was morning. Hel knew it would be a busy day. They were implementing the plans that Ranni and Flander had made. They met with the rest of the squad in the cafeteria to eat breakfast to fuel their day. Once that was done, they all headed to the ship where whatever they needed to carry out this next part of the plan would be loaded and ready to go. All Flander had told them was they would go to the surface to pick up a group of refugees. Hel wasn't stupid. She knew the listening devices would be released while the refugees were loaded.

That was exactly what happened. They stopped in an area with limited refugees, so loading was not an issue. However, Hel could hear the buzz of the insects as they flew past her and out the door. There was nothing to say, and Hel would not pay attention to it. At least this part of the plan had gone smoothly as far as she could see. Knowing that it wouldn't be long before they knew the next step. They might not be informed or end up in the middle of it. It was possible that since they would be using a weapon for the next step only, a couple warriors would take that step. She felt that all hell would break loose on the planet below when that step was taken.

They went to the planet to drop the refugees, which took less time than usual. At that point, instead of doing what they usually did, they headed back to the ship. She figured it was because Flander wanted to check on the incoming information. A special team handled that part, but those who supervised the mission could check in and find out what information was sent. Hel fully expected to get off the rest of the day. They began to process the refugees the same way they usually did. Because the numbers were low, she finished well before lunch. Hel let Flander know, and the squad met her at the shuttle.

It was lunch time when they arrived on the ship. Once lunch was done, Flander dismissed the rest of the squad for the day, but his work was not done. She was sure that Ranni and him would work on the mission in whatever capacity they could. It was odd to have time that she didn't know what to do with. Usually, they worked a lot, and the little time left was spent eating or sleeping. Wasting another half day seemed like more than she should have done. Hel went to find Kasey and see what she was doing. Her sister was rarely hard to find because she worked on robotics in the technology lab.

Kasey's passions encompassed several sciences, but robotics were the priority because of the work the robots would do on the planet below.

Fight or Flight

Flander selected the weapon that would be used to take out the headquarters for the Blues. This bomb would take out the building and everyone in it with minimal damage outside that area. The building was not in good shape and would have required rebuilding anyway. As far as they could tell, several volatile materials were inside, which they considered innocent. Their mission was on, and it would be completed tomorrow. The rest of his squad would go to the base and work for the day. He and Ranni intended to complete the mission because launching the weapon didn't take many people.

His boss would fly over the target, and he would press the button, and at that point, it would all be over. The location was already programed into the guidance system. All the mini drones had returned and would be dispersed again after the weapon discharged and the dust settled. They needed to know if the Ortegas attacked the remaining Blues. If they did, the Blues would have two choices, fight or flight. There were a few ships on the surface, and leaving was possible for those who could access and fly a ship. That would only be a handful of people.

Flander woke with his mate and his arms, and that made him feel so good. They'd made love all night long, and he should be tired. Instead, he was ready to go. This mission was not the kind that he liked because he would kill hundreds of people, and they wouldn't see it coming. Some said that was better that way, but he had always believed in looking someone in the eyes when he killed them. That way, he knew that they were truly his enemy, and they had a chance to run away. He didn't want to kill women or children, especially not the innocent. Today, he wouldn't be sure who he killed, and it wouldn't matter if all went as planned.

After breakfast with his squad, he gave them their marching orders, and they would head to the base. Once they left, he met Ranni in their meeting room. They would go over the mission again before they left. It didn't take long—just long enough for his squad to be off the ship so they wouldn't know what was going on. They entered the bay and headed to a small, streamlined ship made for no more than four people. Today, it would just be two, and Ranni would be flying.

“It's good to take one of these out occasionally. They changed so much from year to year since these are always the most updated.” Ranni observed.

“This is the latest model. This is considered a test run. We need to evaluate the systems when we get back. I hope there are no problems,” Flander admitted.

They got on the ship and settled in. A good run was all they wanted, and they hoped everything would go smoothly. As they headed toward the surface, the X on the radar began to flash. It was funny how many human things were integrated into their military and their general lives. X marks the spot where the bomb would be dropped. It was best not to think about anyone who would accidentally be in the zone when he pushed that X. There was no way to account for people who strayed into the area. It was only minutes before they were directly overhead, and Flander leaned over and pushed the button. The bomb was small and headed directly to the building that they had determined to be Headquarters for the Blues.

The explosion was small and well defined. Buildings right next to it weren't touched. Flander had never seen such a thing. It was obvious when the building exploded, but it immediately pulled back on itself. There wasn't even a fire left once it was done. All that remained of a building looked more like a wrecking ball had destroyed it than a bomb. Ranni turned the ship and headed back. Flander couldn't see that there would be much to say about it except that it was done. The next step would be to see how the other groups on the planet reacted to it and how the remainder of the Blues handled it or were handled because of it.

They landed on their main ship and got off, period. It was time for the meeting to summarize what had occurred and see if there was any information on what was happening next. With the Ortegas attack, would chaos rule as the others waited to see if a similar attack? One little bomb could cause so much trouble. As they headed into the meeting room, he saw a couple of warriors watching screens. Some focused on the demolished building, while others focused on areas where the other gangs gathered.

“There's nothing to report yet, Sir.” One of the warriors announced.

Obviously, that was true, but he didn't think it would be true for long. The Ortegas were gathering in large numbers, and he suspected they would be marching and searching for those Blues that were still alive. They would either assimilate them or kill them. It was hard to say which. Other gangs had figured out what had happened and were running to hide. Their lives had shifted, and they would never be the same once things settled. He also suspected that as the Ortegas searched, any gang members found from any gangs would also be dealt with.

All they could do now was watch and listen, and once they saw what was happening, it would be time to devise a plan to finish things. One thing was for certain; these gangs could not be allowed to stay on this planet. If they chose not to leave, they would have to be dealt with so the people could return to their homes. It was true that every building on the face of the planet he had seen needed some work, but some were not so bad that they could not be repaired. Others would have to be torn down and rebuilt from the ground up. The places that seemed to be the least damaged had been the facilities owned by Mercury.

That was a good thing because, in the past, Mercury had been the biggest employer on the planet. They would be that once again once the planet was freed from its current difficulties. Purgatory was lucky because they had a business that could come in and immediately start paying workers. Mercury's accounts had been frozen, and

the money was still available to pick up where it had left off. Sometimes, on a planet that had gone through this kind of destruction, getting anyone to come in that would employ people was difficult, to say the least. At least this would not be a problem.

Flander watched a small group of screens and saw that Ortegas were searching for what they considered their enemies. Some were given a choice, but most were just shot dead on sight. That may have been a mistake since the word was spreading, and the other groups were coming together against them. They viewed it as their only hope of surviving. He didn't believe the Ortegas could take on all the gangs and survive. The tide began to turn as more of the other gangs joined forces, and soon, the Ortegas were the ones being hunted. It didn't matter because the attack they had initiated had led to complete chaos among the gangs.

It would be amazing and unfortunate if they could reorganize after this. It would also require that they take another action they hadn't intended to. At that point, they would have to target another gang headquarters, but first, they would have to find one. Ranni decided they had seen enough, and it was time for them to quit for the day. Those working on surveillance would continue until the next shift took over. By tomorrow, they will have more information they need, and they might know what they will do next. It was too early for his squad to have returned, so he went for lunch and thought about what he might do with the two hours he had to play with.

After lunch, he took a shower and decided to try to take a nap because his mate seemed to love them. The problem was that Majuri didn't require the sleep that a human did. It was still unusual for him to lie there even though he wasn't sleeping, trying to relax and think about good things. He tried to fight the dark ones about killing so many people with the press of one button by hoping that they were all bad people or, at the very least, enemies. Relaxing wasn't working, so he pulled up a video and watched two guys try to beat the stuffing out of each other. Those were the kinds of videos he liked and the kinds of things he liked to watch. Even Hel didn't seem to mind watching a good fight.

After the video was over, he noticed the time, so he went to take a shower and get ready for supper. He was barely finished when his mate came in and jumped into the shower to get ready. Maybe he should have been a little slower and could have taken his shower with her. The problem with that is they might not have gotten to supper on time. Would that have been such a bad thing? He didn't think so but wasn't sure what Hel would have thought. She was ready now, and he escorted her to the cafeteria. This was where they ate most of their meals even though, as officers, they could have gone to the officer's dining room. His squad was special and the only squad with more than one officer because everyone was an officer.

He was the highest ranked officer, and Hel was the lowest. They were all highly rated and capable in multiple areas. His squad was sent in when it mattered the most. When the risk was high, then the need was great. Flander was rethinking having his mate on his squad, especially if he ended up moving up and was no longer on his squad full-time. She could be carrying his child even now, and she should know that meant that the dangers she faced daily were too great. They've not spoken of it yet, but he knew he needed to. Normally, he was a courageous warrior, but when facing his mate, things were different. He wanted her to be happy and knew that being dropped from the squad would not make her happy.

Her hands lightly moved up his chest, and he thought he must have fallen asleep. It wasn't like he hadn't done this to her and probably would again. It felt nice just to have her touching him anyplace. Flander needed to feel closer to her, so he pulled her into his arms and on top of his body.

“That bad?” She asked.

He didn't respond because he couldn't admit how much it had bothered him. Warriors had to be strong and couldn't show weakness. Hel knew what was happening and ignored what he didn't say, reacting to what she knew he was feeling. She gave him a soft kiss and a hug. Flander needed comfort, and she recognized that.

This wasn't so much about sex as it was about knowing that there was someone who loved him and cared about how he felt.

They lay wrapped in each other's arms and fell asleep. A few hours later, at the time they would normally have gone to sleep, both woke up. Hel changed into a nightgown, and he changed into a pair of shorts, and they lay back down, holding each other and talking.

“You know you'll have to slow down on active duty since you could be carrying a baby.”

“I know. There are other jobs that I can do that will help as much as what I am doing now, but in a different way,” Hel admitted.

“Just so long as they are not dangerous, you can pick any job you like.”

“You mean as long as I qualify?”

“I can't imagine anything that you would want to do that you wouldn't be able to do,” Flander observed. “We'd best get to sleep since we'll be busy in the morning.”

Sleep found them eventually, and he hoped it would be a good day tomorrow. At least his mate had handled what he'd said, and she'd be looking for another job to work. That worried him a lot, and it was one less thing to worry about. As much as he'd thought about what he'd done when he pushed the button, he worried more about working things out with his mate. She was his priority and the most important thing in his life. She would have to come first even when they had a child or several children.

Maybe she was beginning to understand that because she seemed to be softening toward him. He'd not really understood what Ranni and Kasey had gone through as

they had worked their mating out. Maybe he should have paid better attention or understood it better than he thought because his mate seemed to be giving him a chance. That was really all he could ask for. He finally got to sleep, but it seemed like there was no time before he woke up, just before the alarm rang.

“Wake up, Sleepyhead.”

“Go away. It can't be morning yet," Hel moaned.

“Ah, but it is. The guys will be waiting for us, and you won't have too many more times like this when you get your new job.”

“You don't need to rub it in.”

“I wasn't trying to; I only want you to wake up and get ready," Flander admitted.

It was a relief when she got up and dressed. They headed to breakfast, where they met up with the squad. This would be one of the last times they would gather like this when they were about to go on a mission together. Ranni had heard that he was getting the chief slot in this area, and as soon as he took charge, Flander would get the sub-chief position. Even if he occasionally ran with his squad, he wasn't sure his mate would ever be able to do that again. All he could do was hope that she would find a job that would give her as much satisfaction as working with the squad had.

No one would be going to the surface until things settled down. They would be going to Base Kasey, where they would do the work they normally did. Most of Hel's work would be office work, where she would organize and determine where the refugees would go. The rest of the squad would be working in construction, which was going well and would be going better once they arrived. Majuri warriors were particularly well suited for construction, and all of them were trained in it when they first became warriors. His squad didn't mind the hard work. Afterward, it would be easier to sleep.

It would probably take several days for the chaos on the surface to settle, and by then, several buildings might be built, and the refugees might be settled. Hel was especially good at finding refugees that could be put to good use in the jobs that they needed people for. The hardest part was finding warriors. Since these people were human, they had to be careful who they trusted. The emperor continued to mess with their numbers. Warriors were getting time off, and no other warriors were being sent in. Obviously, some of the Lords who had sons serving in this area were concerned that they might all be wiped out because their numbers were so low. They might mention it, but none of them would take action because they feared that the emperor would take their life as well.

Using as many locals as possible helped, but they were still shorthanded, and while others were getting time off, they worked long shifts to make up for it. Getting the refugees settled and finding every possible worker for their positions was all they could do now. Some of the work, as far as calming the surface down, was being done by the intense battles occurring on the surface. The sad part was that many locals would be killed during all the battles that were going on. None of them wanted that to happen, but there was no way to prevent it. The only ones safe were the ones that they had already removed. Flander worried about what was happening below, but it was out of his control. Once they were done at the base and returned to the ship, he would go to the viewing area see what was happening below. They had removed thousands of people from the heavily populated areas, but there were still many more. Hopefully, those left will try to hide and let the battle play out.

Much work was done today, but there was still so much more. Flander had set high goals, hoping several large buildings would be built by the end of the week. With so much fighting happening on the surface, he knew that a large group of their troops from the ship were down here working. That was making all the difference, and once everyone at the base was in proper housing and all the buildings that were intended to meet their needs were complete, they would return to the surface and finish the battles that were going on there. This was something that needed to end soon, or

Ranni's father would give him grief, and that wasn't acceptable.

It was lunchtime, and they would eat, and then they would come back, and there was a building he had his eye on that they would finish. It was a large building, and the final level needed to be completed. The reason wasn't just because it was a large building. But it was because everyone would see that it was complete, and it would lift morale because working on ten other buildings and not getting anything complete looked bad. Lunch went quickly, and he wasn't sure where his mate was because she didn't join them. Flander worried about her because she would work through lunch and not get anything to eat until the end of the day when she saw someone she knew would ask why haven't eaten. She was a workaholic, and when doing office work, there wasn't a clear beginning or end to what she was doing.

He knew she was getting work done because people kept coming to the construction sites and joining in. That was what she was doing, finding people to complete the work. A few of the guys she had found were big and capable, making him pleased with the new workforce they were acquiring. Because many of the buildings on the planet had been completed and there had been little construction going on at the point of the attack, it had been hard to find builders who could help them complete their work. Some were more maintenance workers, but he found they could do some of the required work. Finding workers that did similar things was a talent that his mate had.

Getting this work done was a passion for his mate, and it obviously meant a lot to her. Once they were done there, they headed to the ship, where they met up with his mate, who arrived just a little after they did. Everyone was hungry but filthy, so they cleaned up first and then met up in the cafeteria for supper. All he could think about as they ate was getting to the room so he could see the screens that showed what was happening on the planet. He knew he was impatient and that this fighting could carry on for weeks or even months, but he just wanted it to end.

His mate watched him carefully. He knew she wanted to be involved but realized he

couldn't let her. The problem would be when they returned to the planet because she would want to go. There was no way to know yet if she was with child or not, but just the possibility was enough that he did not want her there. Hel would be chomping at the bit to get down there, but he couldn't allow it. What he needed to do was find a support position that she could do where she would have the information and know what was going on without actually being in the extreme danger that the rest of the team would be in. Flander just couldn't think of a position like that, but he was sure something would come to mind, and maybe it would be something that Kasey would be doing as well, and that would make it easier for her.

Supper was done, and everyone was leaving. Hel would go to their quarters while the other guys did whatever they felt like doing to relax and then sleep. He would be the only one who would be checking out the activity on the planet. Gods, he hoped things were winding down so that they could begin to take action. He headed into the room where the screens were and was disappointed to see the things were still as crazy as they had been a couple days ago. The fighting slowed, but that wasn't good because that meant that many gang members were still alive and causing problems. At least it appeared that the locals had gone underground where they would not be targets of the gang fighting.

He suggested targeting another gang and removing their headquarters, but they didn't know where they were. A small number of the insect drones had been left on the planet, but they weren't getting any valuable intel. They were small and often mistaken for insects and swatted at. An educated guess could be made about where some of the headquarters for the other gangs were, but what if they were wrong and were a target filled with locals hiding. Maybe he should suggest that they head back to the planet looking for refugees in locations without much fighting. Flander wasn't sure his boss would agree to go along with it. There was no point in making suggestions that wouldn't be accepted. As a warrior, he knew he shouldn't be so impatient, yet he couldn't help himself. Getting this dealt with was mostly for his mate, but he also wanted to see the planet return to the glory it had once had.

Nothing could be done until he talked with his boss, and they devised a plan. They needed more information before they could plan, so for now, nothing would happen. He returned to his quarters and wished he had some good information to give his mate, but there wasn't any. His mate was asleep, which was a surprise because it was early. He stripped naked and slipped into bed beside her. Wrapping his body around her, he could tell that she was tired and not going to wake up. Clearing his mind, he managed to go to sleep as well. Maybe in the morning, he would get a little love.

Flander woke up with a wonderful feeling. Looking down, he saw the top of his mate's head, and his fat cock was in her mouth. He moaned as she tightened her mouth around him, and her mouth moved up and down. She could go all the way down, and she swallowed, driving him crazy. Hel was amazing, and he was getting closer to his climax as she moved her hands lower to cup his balls and tug on them. By the gods, he was fighting his orgasm, but he just couldn't continue. He exploded and sent hot come down her throat as she swallowed every drop.

He lay back, breathing heavily, and she moved to fall beside him. The alarm went off. Neither of them had paid any attention to it, so he rolled over and pressed the button to turn it off. It was time to get up and ready for breakfast, but he would make it up to her later. His day was off to a great start, and he hoped it would continue. Hel smiled like the cat that had gotten the cream, and he hoped that she had enjoyed giving him pleasure. They made it to breakfast, and all the guys were already waiting for them. It wasn't late, but he was usually earlier than the others. Today would be another day like yesterday, and they would go to the base to work construction while his mate worked through the refugee lists.

Time was of the essence, and as soon as breakfast was done, they hurried to catch the shuttle. Construction was the word of the day, and they would finish another building already close to being done. Housing was going well, and the boss was pleased. Hel could take a lot of credit for that since she had found large numbers of refugees that could work on the buildings. She had also found some good at cleaning up and

preparing for residents to move in. Even security was full now, with refugees covering most of the work under the supervision of a warrior. They were doing well, which helped relieve some warriors of those duties.

The way he'd been woken up had his mate on his mind, and it was hard to think of anything else. It was good that his work required little thought because all he could think about was making love to Hel. Flander hoped she was thinking of him as much. He put his shoulder into his work, hoping they would finish this building by lunch. With hard work, they managed to get to lunch a little late. It was a surprise that he found his mate eating at a table. They joined her and had a great lunch. When they were finished, he kissed her and then returned to work. Later, he would give much more than a kiss.

His men didn't mind the hard work, and they worked the hardest of anyone there. They had completed the last building and were working on the next one. Things were really coming together, and he knew his boss would be pleased. Eventually, the base would be a bustling town, and those living here would be happy. If the planet below was straightened out, he knew many of these people would return to their homes, but the base would find new people to take their place. It was obvious that plenty of people were looking for a safe place to live, and this could be it.

They finished up for the day with a lot of work completed. Flander still worried about what was going on below. While the base was necessary for now, the planet below was his true concern because that was what his mate would be the most worried about. They headed to the shuttle, where Hel was waiting for him. Everyone loaded, and the shuttle headed back to the ship. His mind moved to the surveillance room and what he might see on the screens. If only things would settle down. They would be able to act. Normally, he wasn't impatient, but he knew this would mean so much to his mate.

As soon as they arrived at the ship, they all cleaned up. After that, they ate supper in

the cafeteria before dividing up, and everyone went their own way. As he entered the meeting room where the screens had been set up, he began to look at the screens to see if he could get a feeling for what was going on down on the planet. The less populated areas were beginning to settle down, but the chaos in the larger populated areas was worse than ever. Death was everywhere, and he wondered how so many could die and still leave so many behind. Many of the gangs were covered with tattoos or wore certain colors. That was how he could see that most of the Blues had been wiped out. Ortigas had also lost many people. Flander suspected they didn't have enough people to take over the planet.

Baby Makes Three

Hel had difficulty dealing with the fact that she would no longer be on the squad. Flander said that they could find a placeholder and she would be able to get back on the squad when the child was older, but she didn't believe him. There would probably be another child in another because that was the way things were among the Majuri. Breeding more warriors was the most important thing in their society. Nothing else mattered as much or was given as much attention. Kasey was lucky that being with a child would not affect her interests. She knew she would have to focus on her other interests because fighting would be out.

Even though she had not been tested yet and she had put it off, she knew she was pregnant. She had mild morning sickness, and that was unusual for her. Flander wanted her to begin testing for pregnancy weekly. Why couldn't he smell it like other warriors often did? She wasn't sure, but she would have to be tested today because he had made an appointment for her. He suspected it, but he didn't know. She got ready, not to meet the squad at breakfast but to go to the healer and be tested. The results would be in almost immediately, and then she would know.

She dressed for office work because that was probably all she would ever do again. Once ready, she headed down the hall to the healer's center. One of her friends, Jeeter, was working today. She knew them all since she was trained as a healer, but she was closer to some than others.

"Hel, what are you doing here?" Jeeter asked.

"Flander made an appointment so I could be tested for pregnancy."

“I heard you were mated. Let's get this done quickly.”

It was a simple scan, and it only took a second.

“Congratulations.” Jeeter offered. “You don't look so happy.”

“They say the first is the hardest.”

“You are young and healthy. It will be fine. I hope you know you won't be on the squad anymore.”

"I know," Hel admitted.

“That's the problem, isn't it? You're already missing the squad. Why don't you consider this an opportunity to advance your medical career?”

She knew she should, but she balanced both choices even if the squad had gotten a little extra time. The medical career just didn't seem as important to her, given the excitement of being on the squad and the difference that it made in others' lives. Warriors, in general, didn't need so much medical care unless they were in battle, and sometimes, there was little you could do for them.

“I know you're right, but it doesn't make any difference. Not that it matters anyway because the choice has been made.”

“Maybe once you get back into your medical studies, it won't seem to matter as much,” Jeeter advised.

“I never left my medical studies. I just divided the time, and the squad got slightly more.”

Jeeter looked at her knowingly and said nothing more. Hel left the healer's area and returned to Flander's quarters, where she messed around and did not get anything done. Flander returned to his quarters around lunchtime and brought a tray for them.

"What are you doing back here?" Hel asked.

"I hoped you'd give me some news, and I wanted to spend lunch with the prettiest girl on the ship."

"I'm sure you checked, and you know what the news is. We're expecting."

"Why do you say that like life is over? You will bring a new life into the world, and we will have a complete family," Flander observed.

"Your life will hardly change, but mine will be turned upside down.?"

"That's true that I have found an area that you might find interesting, although I'm reluctant to offer it to you."

That immediately caught her interest. Why would he not want to offer it to her? That had to mean it was dangerous, so why would he offer it to her at all? The danger must not be physical.

"It's in surveillance, and that is a particularly tricky area. We are trying to determine our next steps as far as the surface goes. There are a large number of screens that review the activities on Purgatory. The destruction of the Blues' headquarters has left chaos in its wake. Ortegas are being hunted, and their numbers are too low for them to take over as the dominant group. At this point, there seems to be no dominant group on the planet. Ortegas hunted the Blues, and now their numbers are too low to do much with. At least six other groups are on the surface, but none have large numbers. If you manage to get on ships and leave. We need someone to review the

activities and recommend what we can do to eliminate the last of the gangs. One problem is that no one reviewing the screens has determined where the headquarters of any other gangs are.”

“I can do that. I know what you will do with the headquarters if you find them, but the planet needs to be returned to some semblance of what it once was.” Hel declared.

She knew it meant death and destruction, but that was all the gangs had been dealing with in the time that they had been down there. Hel wanted things back the way they were, and she was sure they could have a home down there, at least for vacations. It had been home to her, and it could be to some extent again. This would be where she could hide out when she had to deal with the issues of the Majuri world. Not only was this what she wanted, but it was also what her sister and brother wanted.

The job would be exciting, but the only risk would be if word got out of something she saw, and they felt she was the one who did it. That would be dealt with harshly because that was the Majuri. Hel knew how to keep her mouth shut, so she was willing to take the chance. Anything to move forward to her dream of the old Purgatory. She would do this and hoped that if the others had failed, she would find something they could work with.

It was the next morning, and she was starting her new job. She had a bank of screens in front of her, and she watched them intently. It didn't take long for her to pick up some patterns, and she quickly found the headquarters of the Ninjas. Hel also noted that all these gangs seemed to have human origins. That meant warriors would not have as much luck watching the screens as a human might. She thought that it took a human to catch the patterns humans followed. To a warrior, their behavior would make no sense. Hel forwarded the information she had found and turned her attention to one of the other gangs.

A little while later, Kasey showed up to verify the information that Hel had sent in.

The warriors working in the surveillance room still hadn't come up with anything. It wasn't their fault because their logic was different, and most considered humans crazy. Crazy was hard for anyone to understand. The warriors seemed to realize a breakthrough had been made and cast glances at her and Kasey. She heard a comment about awful humans.

"Hey, you," Kasey yelled. "I can see you mated to one of us awful humans. Then what will you do?"

The warrior who had made the comment turned red with embarrassment and said something that sounded like "I'm sorry." It reminded Hel of a comment her father often made about thinking first and speaking later. Shortly after that, Ranni and Flander came into the room, wanting to know exactly where that particular gang headquarters was.

"How can it be there?" Ranni asked. "There is nothing but rubble."

"On top, but two stories made a warehouse if you go down below. It's the perfect place because everyone discounts it as not being usable. Since they aren't looking for a place perfect to live like the other gang did, they are fine camping out here because there's plenty of room and storage. Ninjas were warriors on earth that were stealthy and almost invisible," Kasey explained. "Once you know where they are, you can watch and see an enormous number of people moving in and out of this spot."

It was true that once you knew what something was, it was easy to see the patterns that verified it. Ranni watched, and she could see when they nodded at each other, agreeing about what had been found. Now, they would have to plan what to do about it. Hel stayed and kept documenting information until she found the next headquarters for a gang. If you knew what to look for, it would take about an hour to determine where they were, and which gang was hiding there. She finished her day finding one more headquarters for the Cobras.

They would never tell her what happened, but she worked it out herself. The next day, Flander gave her the day off. There were reports of bomb blasts on the surface, and apparently, they had decided to take out both gang headquarters. Many gang members who had access to ships took off. Others did nothing, seeing how hopeless it was to carry out what they had been sent there for. She was sure they would surrender and take whatever punishment was doled out. Some would probably be executed; others would be sent to one of the prisons that had been compared to an early Earth chain gang. A few, those with the talent needed by the Majuri, would be given a chance to work off a sentence, and if they did, eventually, they would be freed.

Hel tried not to feel bad because this would move them toward reclaiming the old Purgatory of her past. The people that had been taken out were killers, some of them sadistic in the extreme. She had only done what she had to do. Her problem was she had a conscious, and it was a very active one. That was going to make this harder. It would be on her mind no matter what she did. Hel needed to find a way to settle her mind and deal with her guilt. That wouldn't happen today. It would take time. Flander seemed quiet when she got back to his apartment. She suspected he was dealing with a little guilt of his own.

They had supper together and went to bed, and neither of them felt like doing anything besides trying to sleep. Both wrapped their arms around each other and eventually managed to sleep. In the morning, she wasn't sure what to do with herself because she had the day off and had nothing to do with it. It was better to work so she wouldn't have to think too much. Hel wondered if she could work surveillance again or if this was a one-time thing. She decided to find Kasey because she might need help.

“Get bored?” Kasey asked.

“You could say that. I have a day off with nothing to do.”

“You can help me test some of these miniature robots. We use them on the surface to find out what's happening down there. I need to count them and make sure we got all of them back, and if not, find the ones that didn't come back.”

“I wasn't aware that you were keeping such a close count on them,” Hel admitted.

“We must because we don't want anyone to know about them, and if they do, we need to know. We also don't want them to try to recreate them and use them against us. One of these insects slipped in with the others and could find out everything that we're doing,” Kasey offered.

She understood the need for secrecy and to ensure that all the insects that flew back were theirs and not altered. This would be a good job for her today because she could count, inspect, and see if it was one of the insects that they had sent out. She could also look at it and ensure it wasn't altered. By the end of the day, she felt she would wish she hadn't volunteered.

So many bugs and never enough time. There were ten different kinds of bugs and at least one thousand each. Kasey set up a table with a giant magnifying glass, and she was just running them through, looking for anything suspicious. No wonder she had been so happy that her sister had volunteered. This job was hell, and she didn't understand why Kasey had no helpers. It was too much for one person to do. Hel worked hard, and by lunch, she hurt all over, even her eyes, from so much inspection.

Kasey and she ate in a private officer's area. It was the best food around, and she knew her sister was trying to show her appreciation for the help she'd given. Hel, in turn, was pleased with her wonderful meal. While officers could eat there, they were only allowed one meal a week free. After that, they had to pay, and these meals weren't cheap. Flander would save up to get two meals and then take her here. That meant they were able to eat there twice a month. They were saving their money because, eventually, they would have some kind of house somewhere. With a child

on the way, they needed to save harder.

Some other officers, especially those who weren't married, would pay the price to eat the meals and not worry about it. Some even took dates there, which was why this area made so much money. One night a week, anyone could eat there if they were willing to pay. Enlisted men would often take a date there to impress them. They couldn't do it often because most didn't make enough money. It still didn't stop them, and even a few married ones did it. This was a successful way to raise money for other things.

Flander entered his quarters, moving towards her. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her gently. His hand moved to her stomach, and then he leaned down to kiss her stomach.

“Is the baby behaving today?”

“He is.”

“You think it’s a boy?” Flander asked.

"I don't know, but he could be."

“So, he until we find out otherwise?”

“Why not.” Hel agreed.

“I hope you know that I just want a healthy baby. I love you and the baby no matter what.”

“Just like I love you both as well.”

"I have a surprise for you. We are moving to another apartment, and this one will be ours."

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:19 am

A few months had passed, and Hel touched her swollen belly and was ready for the baby to come. She and Flander had moved to another set of quarters, and she felt more at home there. That had the other bedroom decorated and set up for the baby. It was beautiful and convenient for working parents. She worked with Kasey often and knew her sister appreciated the help. It was still hard to understand why she didn't have more than one person assigned to her.

Kasey had mentioned that if she found some of her former assistants, she would get Ranni to hire them. Hel hoped they were found soon, and she was working on it, too. Everything else seemed to be going well. Her relationship with Flander was perfect and much like the one her sister and Ranni had. She had wondered if they would ever achieve that and was pleased that they had so soon. Their relationship helped her deal with the loss of working with her squad.

Two more weeks have passed, and now they are on the surface of Purgatory. Peace had come, but it hadn't come easily. The gangs were disbanded and dealt with. Citizens could safely walk the streets, and rebuilding had begun. Could an attack like that happen again? Anything was possible, but it wouldn't be the grabbers because they had been banned from the empire, and if they were found within their boundaries, their ships would be destroyed. Rumor was that they had found a new planet and decided to try to settle there. That planet had no indigenous people, and some feared the survival of the animals there. Several of them had been removed and taken by scientists to a place where they could be protected.

She exchanged a look with her sister. Their dream was well on its way. Rebuilding was being spearheaded by the Majuri, as promised. It seemed all warriors were trained in construction at an early age. It was obvious that they were good at it as the

rebuilding was proceeding quickly. Flander took her hand and squeezed it. She looked up at him, and he smiled. Hel had to admit that he and Ranni had a large part in the progress that they had made and that it had taken a toll on both of them.

Hel understood because some of those choices had also taken a toll on her. Maybe now that they were seeing the results of their actions, the guilt would ease. Someday, she could see their family living in a house near this very location. The area would thrive, with residents, stores, restaurants, and many other businesses. It would be much like before, and she loved it there then. Maybe the progress would wipe out the bad memories of the attack and what had happened afterward. So many had died, and while they could reclaim the buildings and other items, the lives would be lost forever.

This was a time of new growth and rebuilding. Others would come, and Purgatory would rise from the ashes of the old and shine with the new.