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## Feral Moon

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The corpses fell from interior of the moon like drops of water from an icicle. The body repatriation team that hung in the open space just outside the blast crater maneuvered back and forth and caught them in a grid of storage modules, one by one. Behind them, the stars moved slowly past.

To Kingsman, the module grid looked disturbingly like an ice cube tray. The repat team filled it in strict order, from one end to the other, then sealed and marked each module.

One body brushed against a twisted length of structural beam and spun slightly as it came down, making the team scramble. If they missed it, the body would float out of the crater and into open space, requiring an embarrassing, and expensive, recovery effort.

Preceptor Dakila Uy muttered in exasperation. "Clumsy. Looks like crap."

Kingsman thought that was a beamed signal, for him alone, but maybe a member of Uy's staff was noting it down, for later discipline. They were all hidden somewhere, out of Kingsman's sight, leaving only Kingsman and Uy on the shelf in the crater torn out of the side of Phobos. From the look of the stretch of tile still left on the wall nearby, it had probably once been part of someone's bathroom.

The team caught the body and flipped it into its module. These were the bodies of enemy combatants, of course. Defenders of Phobos. Their faces were displayed on the black shrinkwrap that protected the bodies. These were mostly file photos from

their dogchips, sometimes cleaned up and reprocessed versions of the dead faces beneath, when no file could be found. Other identifying information appeared on their chests. Kingsman hadn't been issued the proper codes, so they appeared to him as generic scribbles.

The lack of code access was just another annoyance for Kingsman to work through. More serious was the three days he had been stranded in orbit, within sight of Phobos but without access. The official story had been "safety concerns".

Kingsman had a specific sort of power. Strictly speaking, he could only exercise it once. After that, he would be a hollow shell, without power to further influence events. He would need to use the weight of his single authority to gain cooperation in other areas. It was going to be a delicate game.

"Technically, you outrank me," Uy said.

"I suppose all ranks are merely 'technical', Preceptor." Kingsman had expected his encounter with Uy to start with a fight. He supposed he should be glad it was over something so petty. "I have the same rank as you, with three years' seniority. But I'm not here to—"

"That's ridiculous. What, they count time in prison as 'seniority'? You lost all right to anything like that when you were convicted and sentenced."

"I don't want to argue about legal details. That's not my area of expertise. Yours either, I suspect. My seniority might come into play if we're fighting for spots on a ceremonial dais. Otherwise, it's pretty much meaningless. I have no rights of command here. I do have the right to demand treatment appropriate to my rank and role. Which does not include being left in the hull of transport vessel for three days after my mission has already started."

"Oh," Uy said. "My apologies. We were preparing for a major push. Working every minute, preparing. You remember how that is, don't you, Tony? Combat? Everything else takes second place. Everything else is pretty much irrelevant."

The body modules were sealed and marked for chain of custody. Eventually, they would be returned to their families. Some diplomatic relations were still maintained with forces deeper within Phobos, the authority of the counterparties was sometimes unclear.

This crater had been blown out of the side of Phobos during the surprise attack by the Union ship. It widened out beneath Uy and Kingsman's feet, dangling lengths of pipe, shattered transport corridor, and strips of the reinforcing rings that kept the

welded-together outer layer of the moon's regolith stable. Phobos' rotation was slow, creating just enough gravity for orientation. Every few minutes, the vast face of Mars would scrape past, filling virtually their entire field of view.

No one in the busy crater paid attention to it, any more than they paid attention to parade of enemy bodies. Instead, Kingsman felt himself the focus of interest from everyone working in the busy crater space, which was the ingress point for supplies to the Union forces fighting to conquer the moon. Some things could not be kept secret, and who he was was one of them.

"Are you at liberty to reveal the results of your push?" Kingsman said.

"It fully achieved its tactical objectives. Two more levels taken, and a significant pumping node. The Phobs can fight, but they're doomed. There is no reason for your mission here...Preceptor."

Kingsman had expected a desperate effort preceding his arrival. If a rapid success could be achieved, Kingsman's mission might become irrelevant. Uy was showing off its fruits now: a parade of enemy dead. Union corpses would be moved more discreetly, with dark ceremonial. Three dead, five wounded, two seriously enough to be rotated out. They hadn't been able to hide that from him. A reasonable cost, if you had a good basis for your mission.

Unsupported hope was not a good basis for anything, least of all military operations. Kingsman was more relevant than ever.

Anthony Kingsman was a tall man with big joints pushing out against his skin, and he knew that his spacesuit emphasized his boiled-and-mounted appearance. He wore his graying hair long, pulled back from his high forehead and tied back in a queue. Both the receding hairline and the gray hair were signs of his time in the prison asteroid, where aesthetic treatments weren't part of the routine.

Dakila Uy was shorter and stockier, with dark skin and black hair he brushed straight up. He'd even made that hair an element of how his suit displayed him. He had a practiced way of staying absolutely still, as if he was the center around which all else revolved. He was the commander of a five-thousand-troop invading force, a challenging role at this point in a long war, and one that he had to play without a break. He did his best.

Kingsman knew Uy of old, from before his own disgrace, even from before the Rim War had become the disaster it now was. Uy was both brave and smart. More importantly, he was increasingly listened to in higher political circles. So he had

maneuvered himself into command of the Phobos Expedition. Victory there would secure his reputation.

But some operations required more than bravery and intelligence. They needed a level of understanding beyond rationality. They needed a kind of twisted genius. They needed what looked a lot like luck. Instead of an easy victory, Phobos had turned out to be a desperate vortex that sucked down soldiers, resources...and reputations.

Surely Uy had to see that Kingsman was the only way he could salvage his.

"I'll need access to all of your tactical records," Kingsman said. "All pre-op intel as well."

Uy snorted. "You can't possibly live long enough to get through all that."

"I'll skim."

"That's more than I can give you," Uy said. "At least for an operation that's still forging toward victory. But I have something better. I've assigned a unit commander to put you in touch with what's going on, right at the face. Full access, Tony. Just like you like. I think you'll understand things a bit better once you've actually seen it. It'll do you good to get back in combat. Though you probably got more than your share of action in the prison hulk. I hear the place wasn't well managed for a while."

Kingsman had seen more than he would ever want to share with anyone. Least of all Uy. "I could cancel this operation right now. You know that."

Uy was silent for a long moment. "You could. But would it stick? Not with the troops, I can tell you that. And not with your controllers, either. They need you to at least give the appearance of looking things over. All you'd get from a snap recommendation is chaos. Lessened effectiveness. Defeat. Is that really how you want to play it?"

The hell of it was, Uy was right. An order to pull out that could be argued with was worse than no order at all. In addition, Uy knew Kingsman of old too. He knew Kingsman would compel himself to understand everything he could before making a decision. He knew he had a handle on Kingsman's pride.

It was hard to bluff when you hadn't been dealt any cards yet.

"She's my best commander, Tony," Uy said. "You'll be in good hands."

A figure detached itself from some overhead strutwork and dropped slowly down. For a moment, it looked to Kingsman like she would miss. But he had misgauged the Coriolis curve. While the path was straight with reference to the stars, the rotation of the moon made it seem curved relative to where they stood. The officer

landed on the ledge next to Kingsman. He saw dark eyes, cheeks with decorative metal implants.

“Preceptor Anthony Kingsman,” Uy said, with forced heartiness. “Sub-Commander Leila Ferhat. SC Ferhat will serve as your guide to the Phobos Expedition.”

The last of the Phob bodies floated past and was packaged up. Kingsman noted that Ferhat kept her eyes averted. She hated this corpse parade. That would have been a possible way to bond with her, if she hadn’t clearly hated Kingsman even more.

Ferhat didn’t talk to him. Instead, she shot him a set of instructional and safety icons: click into the air supply on this reaction sled, make sure the partial pressure of oxygen is between these two bars, at least two of these five points must be secure for you to be considered attached to the sled, keep your hands to yourself.

Kingsman did as he was instructed. The sled dropped out of the crater and into open space. Kingsman felt the pressure as Ferhat activated the drive and they moved away from the spinning potato of Phobos.

The space around was crowded with Union vessels, dwelling units, and other gear. A spacecraft vectoring in from a long transfer orbit flared a reaction rocket and readied itself for docking.

None of this was visible to the naked eye, but of course no one used a naked eye in space, any more than anyone had a transparent face plate. Everything that Kingsman saw was intensively processed and information enhanced to interact optimally with his clunky evolved perception modules. The approaching spacecraft was clear in his vision, with its fuel pods gleaming in the light of the distant Sun, its list of combat medals streaming out behind it. Its reaction drive hissed as it slowed.

Every bump in the surface of Phobos was clear. The moon’s surface had once been a loose layer of regolith, which over the centuries had been welded into a thick radiation shield bound with stabilizer hoops, and then honeycombed with support tunnels. Stickney, the disproportionately large crater that had always been its biggest visual feature, was still there, like a beauty mark. The Union assault crater was some distance closer to the hub. The Phobs had expected any assault to come at that hub, since the surface was too thick for quick penetration, and so they had armored and reinforced it.

But the supposed tourist vessel had injected itself into the moon’s side, and detonated. Its shielded contents had ripped deep into the regolith, including its

encapsulated Union troops, who had hatched and dug further in, until they came up through the floors of the lowest inhabited corridors and started their assault.

Even with processing, Mars looked like a plate of corroded metal, broken and crudely rewelded. Phobos had an absurdly low orbit, and moved faster than Mars rotated, so that they seemed to scud above the planet's rusted surface, pursuing something that would never be caught.

Kingsman gloried in the information access. He now had full clearance, the same as Uy and his staff. He would have to watch carefully, to make sure that he wasn't subtly cut off from something crucial. But for now, it was like being let out of a box.

Ferhat's goal out here became clear: a battered vessel that was mostly heavy thrusters pointed in various directions. It was some kind of salvage tug. She maneuvered neatly and linked up to it.

"They really should get this reactivated and operating," Ferhat said. "If we're here much longer, neglecting cleanup is going to come around and bite us on the ass."

She was challenging him. His job was to make sure they weren't there much longer, no matter what.

His mission was supposedly confidential. Obviously, there was no way to keep a secret like that for long.

"That's not why you've hauled us out here," he said.

"Oh?" Her suit displayed a lean woman with a burn scar on her ribs. On leave she let her dark hair grow long, while on duty she kept it bristled. Her high cheekbones were made even higher by the metal implants, which she kept buffed to a high gloss. She kept her face display expressive so that her thoughts and moods could be read, as was standard intra-unit practice. What it expressed now was irritation. "Why, then?"

"You need intel," Kingsman said. "You think you're missing something. But why would you come out here to find it?"

The question was half to himself. He could see her considering how much was aimed at her. But if she was as smart as she seemed, she knew something: Kingsman might not have been her favorite court-marshaled-but-reinstated officer responsible for the unnecessary deaths of fellow soldiers, but he was still a useful resource for her. Would she use him wisely while she had him?

"Look." She gestured toward Phobos, and it turned semitransparent, revealing a maze of tunnels and open spaces. "Settlement, two hundred years ago." The tunnels receded to a cup around the north pole. She stepped the display forward by decades.

The inhabited region expanded slowly, going out past the equator just under the regolith, but much less than that along the axis. Then, in three major jumps, it excavated significant portions of the interior, opening out internal seas, high-pressure vacuoles, and dense residential matrices. Kingsman noticed that a lot of the corridors glowed a red that marked them as “dubious intelligence”. Those were Ferhat’s own markings. The general-access map—he called it up and overlaid it on hers—had no error bars in those places.

“That’s a huge amount of stuff they needed to toss,” Ferhat said. “All asteroid colonies have high-entropic junk to get rid of. But the gravity of Mars and Deimos makes it tricky to really get rid of here, given the cost of reaction mass. Some always seems to come back to become a navigational hazard. They bought this thing from some shipyard. It puts out magnetic filaments hundreds of miles long. They form a field, and herd the debris into sturdier nets that haul it in.”

“But most of the debris must be non-magnetic,” Kingsman said.

“That’s why they hacked up this add-on.” Ferhat pointed and red dots appeared on two massive cylinders. “Seemed to work well enough. Those axial cylinders fire microscopic iron flechettes. No shortage of iron, after all. Radar detects all the debris. Anything that doesn’t respond to the magnetic mesh gets a flechette shot. If it vaporizes, problem solved. If not—now you’ve got a magnetic hook, and the mesh can catch it and drag it in.”

“Are you considering recycling those flechette guns for antipersonnel purposes?”

“You try hauling one of those barrels through the corridors. Might be a hell of a surprise for someone, if you managed to do it. No. Just let me take a look here, and I’ll get you down to the face. Clip in over here.”

She was suddenly brisk. Kingsman figured she felt he’d tricked her into treating him like a regular human being.

The tug clutched two debris-filled meshes like a cartoon miser with moneybags. It must have just come back from a salvage expedition when the Union assault hit. Ferhat loosened one and started going through the chunks of rock it held, scanning each one quickly with several beam generators and sensors she pulled off the sled.

Kingsman allowed himself a few minutes of just letting the stars wash around him. It had been a long time since he’d been able to focus on something farther than ten or fifteen feet away from him. Prison asteroids weren’t much for long vistas.

But now it was time to be useful. She wasn't sharing the data overlay she was using, mildly rude, though not a clear insult. What she was doing was really a job for half a dozen people with automated equipment. The debris ranged in size from tiny pebbles to head-sized chunks. Some was hundreds of years en route, others might have been excavated the day before the Union arrived. And there was several tons of it.

Here and there, amid the rough chondrites and phyllosilicates, bits of inlay glimmered, and a trace of carving caught his eye like a doomed hand reaching from quicksand. He grabbed it. It was part of human face, the cheekbone and the eye, with just a swirl of hair.

"Please," she said. "Don't make this take longer. I'm away from my command too long as it is."

"Look at this. You think it's from one of the transverse connecting corridors? Down in the Kloen District, maybe."

"I really can't rely on details like that." Still, she took the bit of carving from him, and examined it with her scanner. "Isotopes match. Could be Kloen. Or nearby."

"They must really have torn that area apart if they destroyed those reliefs to make defensive lines. They sacrificed a lot. Those reliefs were beautiful. At least, I've heard they were."

She spoke to him reluctantly. "Kloen is just beyond our face. It looks like it will be a problem when we get to it. Plus, it's kind of an independent collective now. Not even part of the same government as other parts of Phobos. Things are different out there."

She finally shared her overlay. The debris she had checked over already glimmered with information. Each piece had a distinct isotopic signature that marked it as coming from a specific location within Phobos. If he called up a 3D image of the moon, he could see where they originated. She had particularly focused on those that came from the volumes marked in red on her own map.

"How long do you think they were preparing for our attack?" he said.

She shrugged, her suit's body language amplification making it an elaborate gesture. "All I know is, we're pressing into a volume that doesn't match our intel, facing political organizations with their own agendas, and taking casualties doing it. I'm no longer sure that our objective is even valid."



Uy had given him her tactical objective: a water node that supplied a good chunk of Phobos. Capturing it would change the balance of combat. But if she was looking for evidence to disconfirm her assumptions, she was a rare commander indeed.

“Could you use help going through this stuff?” Kingsman said.

He could see her struggle with an automatic refusal. Then: “Yes. It would make things go faster. And I think the Preceptor thinks I already have you upstairs, with my unit. I just took advantage of the opportunity to come out here.”

It took another hour, even with his assistance.

There were a couple of pieces of debris that weren’t excavated rock: a ring from a pressurized air pipe that must have blown off a malfunctioning airlock, and a length of shredded safety line marking a rescue attempt that failed at least two centuries before. But amid everything else were pieces newly sliced out of the moon. Given the unlikelihood of any given piece ending up here, they could extrapolate, and see that vast regions must have been reorganized within Phobos.

“You have thoughts about this,” she said. “You know more than you’re telling me.”

“I don’t have a tactical job,” he said. “I just have—”

“If you have information or understanding, I need it. No matter what it is.”

If the dispositions were a disaster, he should leave them the way they were and order a pull-out. He was supposed to judge the situation and make an up or down decision. It wasn’t his job to fix anything.

“It’s possible your mission is the victim of a fairly extensive deception operation,” Kingsman said. “The main water line may no longer be any such thing.”

“They’ve been defending it fiercely,” she said.

“Well, now. They would, wouldn’t they?”

“That last assault was meaningless,” she said, mostly to herself. “Schorsky and Pandit died—”

“We kill them all the time,” Kingsman said.

“Well,” she said, as if realizing she had been getting too friendly with him, “you would know, wouldn’t you?”

The occupied interior of Phobos was a tangled mass of corridors. You couldn’t see anywhere more than a few hundred meters away. Here gigantic doorways swelled

out into the path of traffic, there pits opened beneath your feet, to reveal family compounds with children chasing each other.

Ferhat pushed Kingsman from one security zone to another.

They passed a team of Phobs restoring a string of overhead lights, while groups of their relatives sat on stacks of household possessions and waited for their corridor to be habitable again. Phobs shared no particular physical look, except for the jointless way they moved through their spaces and long hair and loose clothing both sexes favored. No one looked at Ferhat and Kingsman.

Walls were cracked by small-arms fire. A Union casualty memorial glowed at a wider area, where a fountain trickled water. Ferhat gave the three dead marked there a discreet salute. The memorial was virtual, coded to their suits, and was tactfully invisible to the natives, though it was clear from the savage graffiti tattooed on the wall behind it that the Phobs knew it was there.

Past the memorial was another Union checkpoint, where a cold-eyed soldier examined Kingsman's record, exactly as if he had not passed through three such points already. Behind the checkpoint was an encampment of occupation troops, installed in a couple of large apartments with open verandas on the corridor. They had their own power, and kept their spaces much more brightly lit than Phobs generally would. Every captured level of Phobos required a detachment of troops to keep it pacified. Discipline looked good, so far. But they had already been here longer than expected.

The soldier had been looking at Kingsman's records, not at him. "My cousin died at Kalatra."

Kingsman waited for the soldier to say something else, but the bare fact was apparently enough. So he nodded, as if the man had mentioned they had gone to the same high school, but in different years.

"Not relevant, soldier." Ferhat suddenly crowded up.

"Sorry, ma'am. Not relevant."

"We have a job to do here. I do, you do. He does."

"You're good to go." The soldier stepped back, trying to get out of the range of her rage.

"What was your cousin's name?" Kingsman said.

"You wouldn't have known her."

Kingsman waited.

"Murnau. Cassie Murnau."

"Seventeenth engineers. She was power, running cabling up Big Cliff when it came apart."

"That's what we were told. Sir."

They stared at each other for a moment, then Kingsman moved past. Ferhat followed him onto the elevator to the next level.

"Surely you don't know everyone who died," she said.

"In the first months of my imprisonment, my only reading was the personnel records of the casualties at Kalatra. They gave it to me as an additional punishment, not knowing that I would have requested it anyway. I couldn't go meet their families, so that was the best I could do. So, yes, I do know everyone who died, or was wounded."

She thought for a moment. "Wait."

"Yes?"

"If she died during the Big Cliff operation...she died in combat."

"Almost all of them died in combat."

"You know what I mean! During the assault, before the junta's surrender. Straight combat. Part of the victory. Not during the...repacification."

"Well, I guess he didn't see the difference. Most people don't."

"You should have explained it to him."

"Most people don't like to have me explain things like that to them. It's really not worth it, Sub-Commander."

The area above actually had a view, opening out to a high wall. Phobs slid up and down it on cables, passing through big stone doorways that led to yet more corridors. This area was well cleaned up. Plants grow up and down the big wall. People were gathered at tables, eating. One group looked like it was celebrating the wedding anniversary of an older couple. At least, a man and a woman sat together under a kind of canopy. If the Phobs had a family resemblance, it came from the fact that they appeared in Kingsman's display just as their physical selves, without the extra information all Union troops provided. Their eyes were blank, and kept everything deep inside. The flowing gowns that concealed their bodies and the hair that swirled around their faces were just extra.

Two Union soldiers stood on top of a dividing wall, crowd hosers held lightly in their hands, and kept an eye on things.

Kingsman couldn't help but see things tactically, and from that point of view this place was nothing but trap. Dead-end corridors, sudden level changes, sight lines

blocked by a shop selling flatbreads grabbed from rotating platters or an emergency health center that was also a neighborhood social spot: Phobos was nothing but places to be slowed down, stopped, killed.

Anything a tourist found attractive, a soldier found a threat.

But now the moon had fragmented, feralized. The top-level political organization hadn't survived the first demand for surrender. That had to have been planned along with the rest of their subtle defenses. Uy now had to deal with dozens of separate organizations that controlled power generators, transportation centers...and water supplies. Each had to be attacked or negotiated with separately.

Phobos was a trap. That was why it had always been the touristic center of the inner Solar System.

Another two checkpoints and Ferhat and Kingsman finally came to the Lower Concourse, one of the biggest open areas in the moon.

The high ceiling hid in mist and light. The open surface was folded up into rocky hills and stable sand dunes, each one placed to conceal how the Concourse curved. Small shops and restaurants nestled in odd nooks.

Most of the owners had just had time to seal up and remove most of their equipment when the Union assault broke through. Rubble covered the mosaic dining floors. Multicolored glass bottles lay on the rocks, unbreakable and gleaming. What had once been decorative pools had cracked and drained through into lower levels, leaving dry sockets.

The Lower Concourse had been known for its beauty. People had traveled from all over the Solar System to see it.

Kingsman himself had once looked into taking a vacation here with his wife. He remembered flipping through the images: the steaming turquoise pools, the people tucked into the hot sand baths, the quiet spots where two people could be alone, at last, and figure things out.

It had proved impossible on a sub-Preceptor's salary, no matter how he worked the numbers. He had never even mentioned that he was thinking about it. A few months after he gave up on the idea, Elise asked him for a divorce, and disappeared on a refugee relief effort among the asteroids.

A nice vacation somewhere other than her parents' summer house wouldn't have kept them married. It would just have saddled him with debts.

Still, it would have been something nice to remember, to contrast to the years of combat followed by the years of imprisonment which were now most of the memories he had to work with.

Even in ruins, the Concourse was a comfortable space for surface dwellers, and most of the Union troops were from Earth. They'd set up their privacy units, waste recyclers, and mess facilities among the ridges and dunes. No one paid obvious attention as Ferhat led him into the encampment. That showed discipline.

Ferhat was good. Uy had made the wrong choice, putting his smartest subordinate in charge of Kingsman. Elise had understood him, even as she didn't want to be married to him. She told him that the best weapon against him was stupidity. If Uy had had the sense to see that, he would have put Kingsman into the hands of a bland dullard who did things by the numbers. Kingsman would have been dragged around like a piece of luggage, unable to achieve anything.

Instead, with Ferhat, Uy had put a potential tool into Kingsman's hands. He just had to figure out how to use it.

*...Don't expect sentiment from an inhabitant of Phobos. To them, practicality is all. Any position can be traded at any time, if the difference in value is greater than the cost of making the transaction. The difficulty for someone who did not grow up running the corridors of Phobos is figuring out what they value, and what they regard as a transaction cost, rather than entertainment. They hold the value of friendship high, and so are unlikely to trade you. But they seem to be capable of living with a structure or work of art for a century, and then, when there is a chance of improving traffic circulation or providing a convenient storage area, of removing it without sentiment. We had come to Gravad to relax in the Ang, a well-known steam meditation cocoon, but found that it had been excavated, and the entire space around it was under some kind of repair. A cheerful old man offered to sell us bits and pieces of the famous curved walls, with their fine intaglio carvings, but we felt that was a bit like coming to see a famous palace, only to be offered a brick as an example of what it had once looked like. He remembered many happy visits there himself, but the fact that it no longer existed seemed of no concern to him.*

*... we stayed on in Gravad, a zone not much liked even by other citizens of Phobos. It was excavated early in the settlement of the moon, and its vacuole-spoke pattern, once in fashion, is now regarded as hideous. Such distinctions are, of course, invisible to the visitor. After some search, we found a small, uncomfortable room, one that was both hot and noisy. Given our situation, the host didn't even want to show it to us. He had purchased cubic from some defunct*

competitor and added it to his volume. He had not yet brought it up to the standards of his establishment, he said. But its location was just what we wanted, and he was persuaded. So we spent the night, sleepless, sweating, feeling the deep vibration of secret excavation in our bones, like a deep fever....

...when people heard that we were in the process of an initial investigation of the consequences of our wedding, we were recommended Breen Gardens, as appropriate to romance. Its trees grow across the hollow and bury their tops in the opposite wall, where some perverse manipulation of tissue turns them into roots again. It is necessary to bribe the monkeys to leave you in peace. That was not to her taste, she said. Too obvious, perhaps, or unnecessary to our own situation. Instead we visited a spot where romances are best ended. After all, the beginning of anything is inevitably the end of something else. The best spot for ending a relationship is one of the tiny restaurants at the top of Farnum's Wall, with its eternal waterfall, either Left Phleb or Noricum. We visited both, and, if you are in the final stages of a once-passionate relationship that is now congealing around you, there are some features that may be of interest. Noricum's pastries, delicious but stimulating a host of mysterious allergies, put you in the mood to do some serious damage to your once loved enemy. Left Phleb specializes in random blasts of air, sometimes freezing, sometimes smelling of decaying flesh. As it happened, some kind of repairs deep in the water system had left the famous waterfall a mere trickle. That was a disappointment. We could hear the well-rehearsed arguments of the couples at the other tables. For a couple in trouble, that might have been a balm: the absurdities of others' romantic squabbles might lead one to question the significance of your own. As it was, the arguments seemed to indicate the pettiness of the reasons that brought them together in the first place, never an appropriate lesson for a couple who were, after all, on their honeymoon....

...we were told to stay away from Demavend. That advice was well meant. Actually, it was the best advice we received on our trip. The reasons to stay away turned out to be legion: sullen shopkeepers, packed restaurants that felt like emergency pods carrying refugees from some great disaster, children who hid under the heavy corridor furniture and jabbed at our behinds with sharpened wires. And most of the reasons for going to Demavend turned out to be less than compelling: a tomb with no body in it; a famous view down a widening corridor that was blocked by netting as some useless cross tunnel was constructed; a concert hall so poorly designed that all we heard were echoes of the performance, echoes that seemed to last long after the performers had left the stage. But Demavend turned out to be the highlight of our trip. In it the sense of secret negotiation, of grim planning, of determination to remain neutral between two great forces, one controlling the resources of the Solar System, the other desperate to use them, seemed

*clearest and most manifest. It was in Demavend that we realized that we were married for a reason, and that reason might well keep us both alive....*

"Who the hell wrote this?" Ferhat said. "I don't think this showed up in the intel stream anywhere. Maybe that's because no one could stand to read it. How did you get it?"

"Personal communication," Kingsman said.

"In prison? They would have read it and incorporated it into the stream."

"No. From before. Just before I went to Kalatra, in fact."

That dread name gave her pause. "Don't be coy, Preceptor. Who was it from?"

She'd picked up on his one area of reluctance. "A smart guy. One I respect. He's married to...he's now married to my ex-wife. He wrote these notes on their honeymoon."

"He spent his honeymoon writing reports on water supplies and excavations?"

"Nam Lo is the kind of man who gets a lot done every day."

"All I can say is, if that's the guy who beat your ass in the husband sweepstakes, you must have been a real prize."

"I probably could have stood some improvement."

Ferhat and Kingsman sat together on the floor, leaning against a wall. Business went on all around them, and Ferhat occasionally had to answer a question or approve something. She would always let Kingsman know she was doing that, so he wouldn't speak while she wasn't listening. He appreciated the courtesy.

She turned back to him after making some decisions about resupply. "All right. Some of this guy's observations match what I've suspected. But I don't like my own conclusion."

"Of course you don't," Kingsman said. "No one likes giving up a good working hypothesis. But deceptions do happen. And, if I'm right, this is a particularly good one. But this is just another hypothesis. I could be wrong."

"Do you think that covers you?"

"What?"

"Saying 'I could be wrong'."

No one ever liked his method. When it worked, it seemed as if he had succeeded by accident, and when it didn't, they blamed Kingsman for the failure.

"Let me put it this way," he said. "I could be wrong. But I'm probably not."

She examined the exploded diagram of her team's tactical target, even though she had taken it apart a dozen different ways already. "What if you're right? What if we're aiming at a false target? Will you immediately cancel the Phobos expedition?"

"I can't swear that it won't," Kingsman said, after thinking it over. "Will that affect whether you order the recon?"

"Don't push it." After looking it over one more time, she closed the image. They were left alone with each other. "I don't really have a choice. I can't risk chasing an illusion and losing anyone else. I'll give you two guys to check it out: Landor and Tutun. Good guys, maybe not quite nailed down around the edges."

Kingsman checked their records as they flickered past his vision. Exactly as she said: brave men, fast, who exploited ambiguity in orders when it suited them.

"And you picked them because...?"

"Because they'll listen to the main thing I have to say to them, and act on it. And that's this: if you get in trouble and saving you puts them at risk, any risk at all, they're to abandon you. They'll do that."

"They might even enjoy following that order," Kingsman said.

"Don't worry, Kingsman. They'll play it straight. If they can get you out, they will. Let me ask you something."

"Sure."

"Were you surprised when they came to you in prison and offered you freedom in exchange for coming here and making this particular decision?"

Kingsman thought it over. "I don't know about 'surprised'. I calculated the odds as a bit less than one in two that someone would come for me within three years of my incarceration. I figured that after any longer my skill set would be outdated, making me significantly less valuable. It was two years and eight months. That meant things were bad."

Ferhat pushed herself to her feet. "Were you surprised when your wife asked you for a divorce?"

That Kingsman didn't need to think about. "Yes."

*...I have seen asteroids with wet inner walls and dry heights, their interiors tangled with pipes, lifting buckets, rising columns of humid air condensing on cold sheets in the low-gravity zones, modified tree trunks with swollen xylem and phloem, high-surface-tension globules curving like balls in a some invisible game. At the gravity of a spinning asteroid even crude*



*pumping schemes can lift water a great height. After generations of post-collapse life in such a space, cultural adaptations make it seem like a sensible, even noble proceeding, using muscle and improvisation to build an integrated life. But no one would ever have chosen it freely.*

*Water brings life, and it brings collapse. The two are linked. The sequence is inescapable. Human life requires water. And water inevitably destroys.*

*Water dissolves, it erodes, it corrodes, it decays. It is patient and it never stops its work. With it come microbes and other creatures that change pHs, secrete their own solvents, push tiny fibers into supposedly resistant walls, and swell their own fecundity into the cracks.*

*Water freezes. When it does, its pressure is irresistible. If a water-filled vacuole in rock is allowed to get too cold, its phase transition can split an asteroid wide open.*

*No matter how careful the inhabitants are, over time, all falls apart, water works its way through the inertial wall, and spurts, freezing, into vacuum. The result is a dead, hollow rock with an oddly high albedo from the ice crystals coating its surface.*

*Phobos has its secret inner seas. So far they have managed to keep them under control, as servants. That requires constant maintenance and a sophisticated social organization. Social failure would result in environmental failure. In a moon, there is no “state of nature”.*

*Near New South Corridor lies one of the more interesting attempts to unite water supply with spiritual entertainment....*

Nam Lo probably didn't even know that his personal notes had made their way to Kingsman. Elise's biggest flaw might have been her belief that she had the right to keep or violate secrets based on whether she thought the goal was important enough

Not too long after her divorce from Kingsman, Elise had actually gone to the Concourse, sat down at a table—and sent a message to her ex-husband.

He had never known Elise to be cruel, but if sending your ex-husband a message from your honeymoon with your new husband wasn't cruel, what was?

Kingsman had been en route to what seemed a routine military operation at Kalatra when he got the message. He tried to delete it without opening it. Then he stored it for a long time. Then, after his gamble had failed, and a lot of people had died, he had wondered how bad the message could be by comparison, and had opened it.

She had sent him an image of herself sitting at a table in the Lower Concourse of Phobos. Her thick dark hair was pulled back from her high forehead. Her protruding eyes, which showed white all around the iris when she was emotional, seemed even larger than he remembered. The fashion that month was for wind, and she was dressed

for it, in a dress that seemed to be made entirely of velvet ribbons, and streamed out to the side, clinging to the well-remembered curves of her body. On the table in front of her were two plates, one with a smear of butter. But the chair next to her was empty.

Presumably Nam Lo had been off making some kind of observation, and hadn't known what she was doing. That would explain how she had managed to code all of Nam Lo's notes into the image. Despite clues, it had taken Kingsman a while to find them, and then he was just puzzled by them.

Now that he was here in Phobos, they seemed like the most important gift anyone had ever given him.

"This is crazy shit," Lander muttered. "I ain't going to lie about that."

"I appreciate honesty," Kingsman said. "In situation reports. Personal opinions you can keep to yourself."

"Jesus!" Tutun's tone was vicious. "I can't believe she's sending us off to get killed like this. I didn't do anything. You do something?"

"Like what?" Lander rechecked his gear. He was a big man, with pale, pimply skin. His suit displayed his tattoos, and was festooned with way more than the regulation kit. "What could I have done?"

"I don't know," Tutun said. "Like not take care of that stupid ventilator, maybe. Did you screw up on the vent again?" Despite his visible irritation, Tutun kept doing his job, scanning forward as the three men scrabbled down the dark hallway, knee-deep in swirling trash. He had dark skin and oddly delicate features, like a doll.

"That vent's just not working right," Lander said. "Took a hit on the first day, been flapping like it's dying ever since. That's not my fault, Tutun. Not my fault at all."

"You're supposed to keep that vent working. So we can breathe. That's kind of fundamental here. Breathing. Not like the Phobs are going to be sending oxygen down our way."

"It's not my fault!" Lander was sounding nervous. "Jesus, you think she'd send us out here with the Angle of Death because of a busted ventilator?"

"Commander Ferhat hates stuff that doesn't work right. Like busted ventilators. Or the people who can't get off their ass to get them to work. She'll rip stuff out and rewire if she has to. No sentiment. That's what I like about her."

"Angle of Death?" Kingsman said.

"But what about you?" Lander said. "Why would she want to kill you?"

"Come on, Landor, you serious? Me? She'd as soon kill me as assign me latrine duty. Of course, those things wouldn't smell half so bad if that vent was working right..."

"But why, man?" Landor was almost in tears. "What she got against you so bad?"

Tutun slapped Landor on the shoulder. If Landor's suit was at the regulation setting, he felt it on his skin. "Because I'm friends with you, hump. That's pretty much the story. She sees that it unfits me for command. Makes me untrustworthy. Poor taste in shithole bros. But you know what? I'm sticking with you. To the end."

"Screw you, man!" Landor stepped away, as if ready to throw a punch.

"This 'Angle' thing is still bugging me," Kingsman said.

"Typo, for crissakes." Landor directed his rage at Kingsman. "How else? That's the first report we got, after Kalatra. So that's what we stuck with. Like a prophecy, or something. That's what most prophecies are, right? Typos and 'what did you say?' and shit. Like that. So you're the Angler. We know you."

"Mistakes can be intel too," Tutun said. "Are we at the shit face yet?"

"We're not looking for combat," Kingsman said. "This is recon. You've done recon?"

"Not with you. Never with you. And I didn't put getting killed on my list of things to do before I die."

"Good one, Tun!" Landor chortled, wanting to be friends again.

"Come on," Kingsman said. "We've got a specific thing to check out, and we're done."

They scrambled over a pile of rubble into a ruined kitchen cubby. Not too far above them started the Phob-occupied areas, where there were other kitchens that still worked, still fed people. Tutun pushed his fingers against a stretch of wall still stained with the remnants of old food.

According to local informants, there were several different political organizations in the area: a communal supply organization, a gang-run territory around a power unit, and a safety group of families that had started dictating personal dress and rules of conscience. Aside from confusing the geography, Phobos' ruling clique had explicitly dissolved itself into dozens of contradictory and uncooperative political units. No single group had the authority or power to surrender the moon to the invading force. It was self-binding on a vast and deranged scale.

"This way." Tutun blew a hole in the wall.

Kingsman was on point. He knew the other two could let him get ahead, and then leave him there. But if he kept worrying about things like that, he'd completely lose effectiveness. He went through the wall, and into the narrow access space that kinked up from there. After a moment, he heard the other two behind him. All around them was the whisper of occupied apartments.

From all evidence available to Ferhat, the main water lines ran through this volume. They supplied the unconquered parts of Phobos. If they could be seized, resistance would have to end.

That assumption had been the cornerstone of Ferhat's dispositions. But she looked for disconfirming evidence. Kingsman could see that that was her particular gift, a rare one. That she could test and accept his evidence, despite not liking or trusting him, was even rarer.

Kingsman already suspected that the old water channels were no longer in use, that they were now a decoy and a trap. But he hadn't invested himself and the lives of his troops in another interpretation of the intel. It was easier for him.

The three men came to the separation point. Tutun pushed off down a side passage, leaving Kingsman and Landor curled up like grubs, listening to the sounds of children's voices, dishes, a rumbling piece of cleaning equipment just below them. They waited in darkness and silence, their very metabolisms slowed to minimize the burble of their blood. They would outwait anyone who might have heard them and raised the threat level.

Several hours later Landor shook himself, tapped Kingsman's foot, and set off the microdetonations.

They dropped slowly into someone's living room.

"Lie down, lie down!" Landor was yelling before his feet even reached the floor. "Hands over head. Down, down, down!"

The apartment had a complicated three-dimensional layout, with sleeping and other private areas dropping down below the entertainment/eating area that was their initial target. It hadn't been chosen because it was an easy tactical problem. It had been chosen because it was the most likely spot for Kingsman to test the new hypothesis.

And because he had information that led him to think Elise might have been around this volume in the days and hours before the Union assault on Phobos. That was something he hadn't shared with Ferhat.

It was a high room with lights shining upward onto a domed ceiling, a ceiling that now had a hole in it. A few fragments floated down after Kingsman and Landor.

The front of the room opened out onto the main corridor for this residential area. Kingsman, as practiced, jumped over and put up the privacy screens, then shot a preliminary defensive net across the openings. He could hear the hum of conversation from the corridor as people went about their business. If things went as planned, the three men would be gone before anyone got suspicious.

A woman and two children had been sitting down to a meal. For a long moment they just sat straight up as the two armored figures dropped through their ceiling and food flew.

Then, as requested, they got on the floor.

Landor secured their wrists and ankles. "This is a temporary occupation." He quoted the standard message. "You will be informed of what to do. You will not be harmed. You are not the target. We apologize for any inconvenience."

To Kingsman: "Someone ran. We've given them enough head start. Chase them down to the left bottom."

Kingsman had already launched himself out of the dining area and down the passage to the lower sleeping spaces.

There he was, a boy, maybe early teens, screaming. Why fire a disrupter grenade when you could use a member of the household to do the job for you? He couldn't convey any information, only panic. Kingsman let him keep his lead.

The apartment was packed with stuff. Clothes, arranged by color and texture, filled shelves. Elaborate hats dangled from hooks. Spherical aquatic environments full of fish and other creatures hung from the ceiling. Scurrying toy animals crunched underfoot. You took your life in your hands moving around a Phobos apartment even in peacetime.

You needed the clothes to catch skin fragments, because otherwise the moon would have filled with masses of dust, but the rest was just for entertainment.

Turning a corner, Kingsman ran into a woman, her black hair wild, wearing only pale-blue sleepsuit.

"Please stop," Kingsman said. "Stop or be processed."

Instead, she kicked over a case of decorative plates, which spun slowly into Kingsman's path.

Two more kids came out, one crying, one sleepily rubbing his eyes. Not in the records—some kind of sleepover or other annoying social event.

There was a lower exit here, one leading to waste disposal and other support functions. If she got out here, she could raise the alarm, and the local militia would be on them. She half ran, half swam, staying ahead of Kingsman.

As she reached the utility room, Tutun punched through the wall, showering her with fragments.

"Please lie down," he said.

A long moment, and she did so.

"Why is this one part out in the open like this?" Tutun pushed his face up to the braided stream of water that went from one wall to the other in the small room.

Kingsman stopped himself from pointing out that, at the velocity it was moving, the water could rip Tutun's nose off. Either Tutun knew that, or it wouldn't make any difference what Kingsman said. "If we're right, they jury-rigged the whole cycle, fast. Used what they had. This jump makes enough noise that it sounds like a lot more water than it is. Plus it looks cool."

Human physiology required water, lots of it. Every cell needed it. It brought nutrients into the body and took waste out. And regardless of technical advances, it was just as massive and bulky as it had been when the Sumerians started digging canals. Every society in the solar system spent a lot of time and energy managing it. Supply failures led to a quick and unpleasant death.

Extra clothes hung on the room's walls. The Phobs seemed to take this pretty casually. But that was part of the plan. There was absolutely no sign from outside that this was here.

"I saw something downstairs." Tutun pulled his nose safely away from the water. "There's a big ass bladder down there. Heavy bag bigger than this room. I could support this family for months."

Those bags were a specialty of Elise's, Kingsman thought. She'd saved a lot of lives with them in asteroid relief efforts.

Or maybe they were just water bags, like any emergency service would have on hand. He had to be carefully how many hypotheses he was juggling at any one time. He could float away from reality and never get back.

Kingsman pulled out a syringe and put the needle almost parallel to the water. "If this is just a short recirculating loop, like we suspect, the radioactive tracer will come back in a couple of minutes. I'd be happy not to see it."

"Nah," Tutun said. "I doubt you're ever happy being wrong, no matter what you say."

Landor was in the other room monitoring the family. The two mothers were sullen, sitting cross armed in the kitchen, refusing to answer any questions, or chat about family life, despite Landor's somewhat ponderous efforts to create a calm situation. The kids, however, saw this as an opportunity to continue this sleepover with their friends. They had piled decorative cushions in a corner of the main family room and were playing a kind of hide and seek game with it.

The makeshift fortress had collapsed again. Giggling, kids were crawling out from under it.

At that moment, the black-haired woman Tutun had captured in the lower hall brightened up. "Where did you say you were from?"

Pleased at any attention, Landor turned to her. "A little town in the Great Plains, called—"

"Count the kids!" Tutun bellowed. "How many kids in there?"

Landor's head snapped and his eyes wiggled back and forth. The kids chose this moment to run madly around, pretending to play hide and seek. "One...hey, there's one missing, man. That skinny kid. Where--?"

"He's suffocating!" the other woman said. "Help him!"

It wasn't remotely persuasive.

"Watch their asses. You guys, stop moving. *Now.*" Tutun toed through the cushions, weapon at ready, while the kids stood in a row and watched, wide eyed. "Where does this go?" He had found a small opening in the base of the wall, barely large enough even for the child who had gone missing.

"He's going to die in there!" The woman wasn't giving up. "No air. Get him out! Please, mister..."

It had gotten silent outside the apartment. Tutun knelt and looked into the hole, which looked like a passage for a pet. "This leads into the corridor. He's raised the alarm by this point."

"So let's get the hell out of here!" Landor glanced up at the ceiling hole, which dangled dust-covered fibers.

"Easy way to get caught, hump," Tutun said. "These guys are fast."

"No kidding," the black-haired woman said. "You better surrender right now. I'll put in a good word for you."

"Thanks," Landor said. "We all appreciate it."

"You better appreciate it. It's that, or death."

Tutun glanced at Kingsman. "How much longer do you need to know you're wrong?"

"Oh, man." Landor couldn't believe what he was hearing. "We gotta move."

"Just a few seconds more," Kingsman said, looking at the water, and the radiation sensor he had placed next to it. How long would the longest possible closed loop be? Or what if he was actually wrong, and he'd never see the tracer?

"Let us go!" The black-haired woman was getting agitated. "Otherwise, it's bad news for all of us."

"Bad news is something I'm always willing to share, honey." Tutun's eyes flicked back and forth as he scanned up through the ceiling. "Yep. Sly, quiet. But they're there." He started to bring up his weapon.

Kingsman pushed it down. "Will you do anything but make a lot of noise and let them know we're on to them?"

"They'll move on us soon, and that'll be it."

They could try to keep these people as hostages and negotiate a way out. But protracted hostage situations seldom turned out well in combat theaters. The opposition didn't value the hostages as much as you thought they should. Decisions tended to turn brutally pragmatic. People could feel sorry about it later.

But what other options did they have? The route they had taken in was now cut off. There was only the front of the unit, on the main hallway, or the smaller bottom exit, in the utility corridor. The front here was now covered by a mob of angered Phobs. Presumably they'd covered the bottom exit too, but, Kingsman remember, that one had some interesting space constraints that made it hard to surveil thoroughly.

"Tutun," Kingsman said. "Just down the passage from the utility area—"



“Egress there. We looked at it, if you will remember — “

“I remember, soldier. At that point we rejected it as too risky, but right about now it’s looking pretty good. How would you get down to it? I mean, without getting killed.”

“Thanks for qualifying that, sir.”

The three of them sat and stared at each other. The detector beeped.

Landor looked startled. “So it is...”

“You’re surprised?” Kingsman said. “You thought I was wrong?”

“Sure I did. Sir.”

So, they were calling him “sir”. That either meant they were starting to respect him, or they were starting to be sure they were going to die.

“Um,” Landor said. “The water bag. The bladder.”

Kingsman got it instantly. “Brilliant, Landor. You have hidden depths. Tutun.”

Tutun kept his eyes on the prisoners. “What?”

“Let them go.”

Tutun hesitated.

“We don’t really have a choice. No reason to increase civilian casualties.”

“That it? They get out, we die, like everyone else you command?” Tutun, enraged, stuck a gun in a crying child’s face. “What did they do to earn that?”

Everyone knew what had led to his disastrous decision on Kalatra. Or at least they thought they did.

“They had a sleepover.” Kingsman stayed calm as he unhooked the mesh over the front openings. “They sat down in their PJs to have some breakfast. They built a fort out of pillows. Maybe they wanted to skip a day of school so that they could play with their friends some more. None of us earn life, Tutun. We just get it as a gift. Are you qualified to decide who doesn’t get to open theirs?”

“Yeah, hump.” Landor’s voice was shaking. “We’re getting out. Just...he’s got a plan. Don’t you see that? He’s got something that might get us out.”

“It will take those outside a few seconds to process that these are their people,” Kingsman said. “Let’s use that.”

“Run!” Tutun screamed at the family. It was a genuinely terrifying sound. “Before you get killed!”

The kids scattered first, the mothers after them, their toes grabbing the tiny bumps on the sides and bottom of the corridor with the quick reflexes of those who had lived their whole lives in low, spinning gravity.

Their rescuers had concealed themselves at a corner. A couple of them now darted out to gather in and protect the children. Kingsman and Tutun took advantage of the moment of distraction to hang out of their entrance and shoot the Phobs when they exposed themselves. Kingsman got one clean shot, Tutun, younger and faster, two. At least one of their opponents went down and was pulled back out of sight.

Kingsman hoped they would think that was the sole point of the exercise.

Kingsman and Tutun tumbled down the passage to the lower bedrooms. As soon as they were down, Landor hit the microdetonators he had installed in the few seconds he'd had. There was a tiny crack, and the wall of the water storage area crumbled into a side corridor.

There was the big water bladder, a dull red with a rough surface. It had embedded logos but those had been plastered over with stickers from the Coruscating Cooperative: "Water of Life, courtesy of your allies, CC". A childish bit of advertising, but new entities had to establish legitimacy however they could.

All three men put their shoulders against the floppy water storage bladder.

It rolled into the hallway. They could hear the buzz-snap of fire from the other side, but that amount of water could absorb an incredible amount of energy.

Including kinetic, provided by their muscles. It took a few seconds of maximal effort to get it rolling, a slow few feet per second. Kingsman was gasping for breath. But it was moving faster.

The bladder was well-designed—and it was one of Elise's. Kingsman was sure it was her design, and the original logo that of Nam Lo's relief organization, Soft Landing. Presumably it was leaking water from the other side. But it did not give way or explode.

"It's coming up." Landor spoke calmly. "Let it roll... Just a bit farther...go!"

The rolling bladder cleared a side passage. In the few seconds it gave them, Landor dove down it, followed by Tutun and Kingsman. They jumped over the squatting Landor, who placed another set of detonators. Another crack, and the passage crumbled into rubble behind them.

"How did you know to look for that?" Uy looked up at the diagram of the Demavend district as it loomed over him and took a sip of his drink.

"What?" Ferhat said. "You mean this cross passage?" A line appeared in response to her finger gesture, showing where she had taken the unmapped corridors into account.

"Yes. The location of that hit our intel stream...when, Servan?"

The young staffer flicked a pale-lashed eyelid to bring up the data. "Eight hours ago, sir. Rumors before, from local informants. Marked unreliable. But a detonation there gave us a nice solid echo."

"Have you been basing your assault plan on unreliable local rumors?" Uy's tone sounded joking. He wasn't joking.

"No sir. I had supporting testimony. Pre-assault. A tourist report."

"Tourist report. I have to admit, I was never at my most reliable while on vacation."

Uy's staff laughed sycophantically. They sat in a rough crescent around the outer rim of the restaurant terrace, with a nice view of the rolling landscape of the Concourse. Ferhat's troops, obliged to attend this face-to-face, had occupied what had once been the kitchen and support area, and had even meshed some of the rubble into a rough wall, as if expecting an assault from the analysts and administrators up from headquarters.

"This particular tourist's reports have been extremely reliable," Ferhat said. "In fact, they are what helped us scope out the extent of the Phob deception operation around the water supply."

"Well, great." Uy put his drink down so roughly that it spilled. The gesture he made to keep a subordinate from jumping to wipe it up was almost a fist.

"Shall I proceed?" Ferhat said.

"I don't know. Should she, Tony?"

Kingsman had tried to sit unobtrusively. But there was no group with which he fit and he had found himself perched alone between the two forces, his long legs jammed beneath a table that threatened to tip every time he tried to decrease the stress on his knees.

Trying to be unobtrusive was stupid. This ghost wasn't just an uninvited guest at the feast. He was the caterer.

Everyone knew who Kingsman was. Though the fact was supposedly close-held by senior command, everyone knew why he was there. Everyone knew his authority. Everyone wondered why he wasn't exercising it.

"It's an extremely effective disposition of available resources," Kingsman managed. "Aimed at a potentially high-value target."

Uy stared at him in disbelief. "It's a bit late in your life to try to develop a skill for content-free phrasing, Tony. Save it for those of us who have a natural talent for it."

Kingsman had come back from the recon with Landor and Tutun knowing that the entire Union strategy in Phobos was flawed. That was more than enough reason to cut losses and announce a withdrawal. Anything else would be throwing away lives and resources on an unattainable goal.

Ferhat had debriefed the three of them, and had clearly known what Kingsman's only possible decision was. Still, she had immediately gone to her command shelter and started planning another operation, one that would take advantage of the intel she now had. And she had worked with total focus, calling in whatever members of her team could help her, until just before the meeting where she expected to be told that all of her efforts were completely wasted.

Preceptor Uy had come up here to the Concourse with his staff fully expecting to start organizing the logistics of a withdrawal in the face of a still-active enemy, only to get an operational proposal from a subordinate that involved a complex disengagement, change of face, and high-risk penetration into a previously untouched volume. He was confused, and increasingly furious.

And it was a decent operational plan, Kingsman thought. It would hit Phob operations at a weak point, taking advantage of that same feral lack of top-down organization that had thus far been a strength of the opposition. Backed with enough resources, it would seize control of a decent volume deep in Phobos...before inevitably bogging down and failing to make any significant difference in the overall strategic situation. Ferhat was smart, but she wasn't ready for operational-level command yet. It was another level of complexity.

But as it moved into Demavend and established dominance over the water-filled vacuole there, her proposed operation would encounter something else, something that, if managed properly, really could make a difference. Ferhat had no reason to know it was there. Even Kingsman couldn't be sure...but it was a chance worth taking, he thought.

"Preceptor Uy," Kingsman said. "May we talk privately?"

"Goddamit!" Uy stood up. "What the hell are you playing at, Kingsman?"

They had moved into a small enclosed shell with a two-person table, once used for romantic dinners. Uy wasn't as tall as Kingsman, but he was a big man too, and together they packed it full, and were able to feel the heat of each other's skin.

"You need a chance, Dakila," Kingsman said. "This can give you one."

"I don't need a chance. I need a withdrawal. Every day you wait costs me at least two soldiers. Dead, or desperately injured. Given what you've been through, I would think you'd want to avoid even one unnecessary death."

"If you want to withdraw so badly, why don't you simply order it yourself?"

This tiny room was a good place for a cage fight. They could do a lot of damage to each other.

Uy's breath was hot past Kingsman's ear. "What do you want? I knew you would finally want something from me. I voiced my objections to you coming her, but you have some strong protectors."

"I don't want anything from you that I'm not clearly asking for right now," Kingsman said. "Commander Ferhat's mission offers a possibility of a better settlement. A better result. Right now, you pull out, you'll leave chaos. And lose people while disengaging. It will be a mess, probably a long-term mess, years. One way or another you're leaving Phobos soon. Ferhat will let you get out without ripping your skin off."

"She's wondering why the hell you're leaving her up there, briefing us on a mission no one wants," Uy said. "Her heart's not in it."

"Her heart may or may not be in it," Kingsman said. "But her head is. It's not perfect...but we can make it the best odds operation possible. It can get us down to Demavend. After that...one way or another, you're out of here. Will you give her the support she needs?"

Kingsman wasn't even sure if he was right. Could Uy order a withdrawal on his own authority? How much negotiation would that require, and how quickly would it become public knowledge?

Uy still needed his coverage.

"You better give me something other than a rack of corpses," Uy said.

Elise's family had owned a vacation cottage in the Adirondacks, an ancient mountain resort area. It was tucked between two folds of a mountain. Several structures had risen and fallen on the same rubble foundation over the centuries.

The first time he had visited, something about the place had made him uncomfortable. It wasn't just the precise shabbiness that signaled old family wealth. And it wasn't even the sense that he was being tested in some way he couldn't even figure out.

It was the lack of sightlines. Oh, there was one view, very nice, off the porch to the glitter of the lake below. But aside from that, he was blinded. And there were any number of locations in the immediate area that were both more defensible and with better routes of escape in case of disaster.

That wasn't the point at all. It wasn't. So he tried to relax. He paddled a canoe on the lake, getting a blister on his finger for his pains. He hiked the trails, surprised at how hard it was to keep up with Elise, who remembered every turn on the way up, every gigantic glacial boulder, and mourned any tree that had been blown over or died of disease since her childhood. One patriarch had fallen just the previous winter. Rounded rocks were embedded in its complex roots, which loomed above them both. She walked back and forth along the trunk, and then they had sat together in the cool shade cast by the roots.

He bought a present for the house, a slightly convex mirror for the end of the upper hallway, just near the door to their bedroom. It had a mosaic of old piece of dinner china around its edge.

"I never knew you had that kind of eye," Elise said. The beauty of the mirror made her see him a different way. She insisted on standing in front of it with him, resting her head on his shoulder, and looking into each other's eyes in their reflection.

Behind their heads he could see the window, its curtains blowing in at them, and beyond that the road and the rise of the mountain on the other side of the lake.

They left that cottage a true couple. They came back several times, though not often. His career took him everywhere in the Solar System.

And their last, worst fight took place there, after which nothing had been the same. Two weeks after they last time they went there, she told him their marriage had to be over.

"Mashee, you're supposed to be buttoned up." Ferhat's tone was weary. This was the third soldier she'd had to downcheck for being inadequately armored since they had started out.

Without looking at anyone else in her team, Mashee activated her armor and pulled her faceplate down, so that irritated features were sharply displayed. She exchanged a glance with the rest of her team. Then she knelt, slapped the wall, waited for the detonation and let Landor leap over her into the apartment beyond. A moment later, she followed.

Kingsman was in no way in charge. But he was there. And Kingsman had demonstrated that all of their work, all of their casualties had been futile, a gigantic mistake. They might have hated him before. Now it was more personal. And their commander, Ferhat, was willing to cooperate with him. It somehow tainted her. It had become almost a point of pride to be inadequately buttoned up, as of taking proper precautions during an assault was some kind of statement of sympathy for his insane and pointless objectives.

They had been staying away from any transport corridors or open spaces, busting through walls and hopping through dwelling units on an unpredictable path. It was rough, tedious work, with the risk of resistance behind every apartment wall.

Ferhat and Kingsman had moved up now, because things would be changing just ahead. Once the apartment was checked safe, Kingsman slid in and stayed out of the way, behind a cabinet filled with decorative plates that flickered with their own light. Ferhat settled at the kitchen table and waved her hands as she examined a situation display. Two other troopers, Tutun and Gupta, waited next to her, weapons ready.

Mashee reached through a hole into a bedroom and pulled out a little girl in a frilly dress, as if she had dressed formally for the assault on her home. He had her arms crossed and looked up at the armored soldiers expressionlessly. Mashee reached through to help the next person, but the woman shook off her gauntlet and climbed through on her own, a big packet of clothing and other supplies under her arm. A man followed, also not looking at Mashee.

Ferhat and her soldiers destroyed living spaces just to get from one place to another. It gave them maximum safety and coverage, but it was a brutal way to travel. Mashee slapped identification stickers on the apartment and clicked a confirmation to the couple, who would be notified when they could move back to their home and try to do what they could with what was left of it.

"Other side of the wall," Ferhat said. "Make it wide."

Tutun jumped through, knocking over a small cabinet and scattering figurines on the floor, and blew the wall of the bedroom beyond.

There was nothing on the other side. Bright light flared in. They all moved more carefully, as if they could be sucked out by the whistle of wind they could hear. Tutun stuck his head out.

"Wow. Take a look at this."

Beyond was a vast crack that extended up and down. The other side of it was a hundred meters away. It was the first open space they had come to since leaving the Lower Concourse a few days before. Like many things Phobos, it was bleak and disturbing, hard to get to grips with. Even what should have been pleasant balconies far away on the opposite wall looked more like elements of God's own cheese grater.

"A good spot for them to make a stand." Landor said. "They've got to be waiting for us over there."

"A great spot." Tutun was already taking distance readings across the abyss, finding appropriate adhesion points for their transport cables. "I could hold us here with a..." He paused, not having worked out the right metaphor before getting there.

"A pile of rocks?" Landor suggested

"Yeah. Maybe." Tutun was reluctant to take the suggestion. "I could maybe do it with that."

"Tiny rocks. Pebbles. Like...sand."

They both fell silent, contemplating holding the gap by shooting sand, hoping for a more sensible comparison.

"A fart gun?" Gupta had been checking her weapon, as she did obsessively, mostly, Kingsman thought, to try to block out her colleagues' chattering.

The two men laughed. "What? What's that?"

Gupta, irritated, looked across the gap to where someone had left a white cup on the curving railing of a balcony. Once you followed her glance, it was impossible to look at anything else.

"It made that noise," she said. "Like a fart. When you fired it. Little pellets, kind of soft. My brother I and both had them. It was, like, compressed air or something. You didn't have a toy like that?"

The other two weren't really listening, just chortling at everything she said, so she shut up.



“Never mind the gun part,” Landor said. “I could hold that wall through the power of farts alone.”

“Go bo!” Tutun faked enthusiasm and the two men tapped weapons.

None of civilians they had been moving out of the area had any useful military information. Oh, they were full of it, of course: a substantial unit was concealed beneath the shielding of a local power node, the troops had all fled in panic and dropped in survival pods to the Martian surface, ambushes could be expected from soldiers with diapaused metabolisms, encapsulated in what looked like bunches of brown fiber sprayed into dark corners. The civilians weren’t worth the effort of interrogating, but it had to be done.

Interior asteroid combat was a battle of sensors. Scouting, as Kingsman had done up toward the water source, was too dangerous and expensive to do often. So they vibrated the rock, they sent out electromagnetic radiation at various frequencies, felt for density variations, and tried to figure out what the hell lay ahead of them. The enemy, meanwhile, spoofed with fake echoes, misleading density profiles, recordings of gossiping troops on R&R. As a result, troopers moved ahead blinder than any troops in human history, blinder than inexperienced colonial troops chopping their way into a dense jungle. They couldn’t *see*.

They might have been even more resentful if they had known that some of the intel that guided their movements had come from Kingsman’s ex-wife’s current husband. Ferhat hadn’t seen fit to share that information.

But they had their doctrine, and knew how to move and protect each other. At the signal, puffs of impact appeared between the balconies opposite. Lines snapped across, finding adhesion points in the rock of the wall. Reaction-packed soldiers shot across, sometimes hitting balconies, but more often cracking holes in the wall and tumbling through into the spaces beyond.

It was indeed a good place for a stand. Even a moderate force could have imposed heavy casualties on the Union forces as they crossed, exposed. But no one responded. And the apartments on the other side were completely empty.

“You did figure there was under a fifty percent chance that they would ambush you by this point,” Kingsman said. “But that the risks go up from here.”

Ferhat looked up from her planning images. “I didn’t consult you on that. Where did you get that number?”

Kingsman shrugged. "I know how a good unit commander thinks. And you're good."

"Just not as good as you."

"I have more experience." Kingsman wasn't going to deny it. "Particularly with the way things can go wrong."

Ferhat had hauled him into an inner room of a balcony apartment while the rest of the crew rotated through their breaks. She had spent a few minutes going over fairly routine tactical issues. That wasn't fooling either of them.

"Don't tell me about how things can go wrong," she said. "You landed me in the shit with my commander by letting me propose this stupid expedition. It's not what he wants. It's not what anyone wants. But you let me go ahead with it."

"It makes the most of the opportunities we have," Kingsman said. "It uses the space and the resources to their maximum. It's something to be proud of."

His praise didn't interest her. "You know a plan is never completed. There's always a possible flaw, something I hadn't considered adequately, or some assumption that needs to get reexamined."

"And you think the odds don't add up," he said.

"You know that. You've known it since I proposed it. But you let it go ahead. Instead of doing the one job you had and pulling the Union forces out of Phobos, you've led us into its very heart. You've fallen back in love with the idea of victory."

"I—" He had been prepared to make a defense of the opportunity the expedition to Demavend provided. But this hit him from an unexpected direction. "Not victory. There is no victory possible. Just salvage. We can salvage something from the situation."

"If you don't tell me immediately what factors you're using that you haven't told me about, I will scrub this mission. Here and now. You might be afraid to do that. I'm not. I'll pull back, and then we can all wait for you to make the decision you should have already made."

He believed her. And, whether or not she was telling the truth, his respect for her grew. Just at the point that he was about to lose hers.

"There's a relief team interned down in Demavend, near the water," he said. "At least, that is my assumption, based on reasonable evidence. And in charge of that team is someone whose cooperation I might be able to get."

"I don't believe it." Ferhat's voice was full of disappointment. "Victory was bad enough. But is that really what this is about? Finding your ex-wife?"

"No!" the accusation was so unfair he wasn't able to say anything coherent. "That's not it at—"

That was as far as Kingsman managed to get before the air disappeared.

There was a moment while the air rushed out of their suits, and a pain of imbalanced pressure in Kingsman's ears. Then his mask was down, his emergency connections activated, and his suit inflated. By the time he could turn his attention to something else, Ferhat was not only buttoned up but giving commands.

A kaleidoscope of desegmenting floors rotated beneath them. The stars appeared in the gaps, far away. The black grew larger. Everything between them and outer space had disappeared. The Phobs had sacrificed a segment of their own world to kill them.

And Kingsman was falling free. He had environmental protection, and a small reaction capability, but nothing like you would need for serious maneuvers in freefall.

While still talking on several channels, and watching displays run across her visual field, Ferhat reached down and casually caught his harness. She tossed him up to where Landor was ready for him with a spiderline. Landor clipped him in and was gone.

Several of the soldiers had flown out of reach and were dropping into orbit. And a couple had not had their suits close enough to secure. Kingsman watched one struggling with a balky seal, running air generators at full to maximize supply. Smarter to drop air generation to minimize pressure, seal the suit, and then refill, taking the chance of hypoxia. But panic had taken hold. The suit wouldn't seal. As the air generation finally gave out, the figure stopped struggling. Medical indications scribbled across the suit. There was a lot a suit could do to preserve physiological function in emergency situations, but complete lack of air pressure was not something it could help. A piece of debris drifted in between them and Kingsman lost sight of whoever it had been.

Kingsman resisted the urge to query Ferhat on whether she had sent the signal they had agreed to in their contingency plans. Either she had or she hadn't. Still, he found himself worrying, in a way he usually didn't. He looked down past his dangling feet. Most of the loose blocks had by this point tumbled out of the big crack in the moon, and he had a good view of Mars as it ground past.

An explosion at Kingsman's left elbow sent a shock through his chest and tossed him free of his support. His spiderline kept him from drifting. The same explosion caught two troops before they could react.

One lost an arm, spurting black crystals of blood before the suit sealed the wound. The other suffered head trauma, with damage indicators growing across his face. Landor. Nothing to do now. Dealing with them was up to his unit commander, who, sure enough, was shooting a crash cart across space.

Ferhat's troops adapted quickly to the changed rules of engagement. Those assigned def/off responsibilities were firing, either directly at targets or as cover for medical rescues and tactical redeployments.

It wasn't enough. Now that he had incorporated the mass of colorful tactical data, whispered force estimates, and freezing prickles across his fingertips and lips, Kingsman had a good idea of the situation.

If he had been in charge he might have arranged dispositions a bit differently—there were a few coverage zones that were a bit sparse—but by and large Ferhat had done a superb job reacting to an unprecedented situation.

Their force just wasn't big enough to do the job.

The Phob forces had been prepared for this very situation. They knew the locations of every feature down to the millimeter. They had no perceptual ramp-up. They didn't need to exchange any tactical signals, because they already knew what the situation was.

Their fire was fierce and accurate. The only thing that kept them from killing Ferhat's entire force within fifteen minutes was simply the high quality of the armor and weaponry of the Union forces. Phobos specialized in tourism, not war. They were at least an equipment generation behind, and had to fill gaps with makeshifts.

Three Phobs in a prepared emplacement on the opposite wall found that simply being protected wasn't enough. They lay down a good field of fire. But they were too concentrated on hitting their targets, and not enough on their own vulnerability.

Two Union soldiers deliberately exposed themselves, looking pinned down and helpless. A third waited for a screening of debris from a detonation, swung up, and got enough of an angle to bank projectiles into the protected emplacement. The first one ricocheted and chipped rock far away. The second took an enemy soldier in the shoulder. The third detonated and took the position out.

Kingsman looked for something in addition to what was already happening. There was no room in anyone else's mind for anything other than the immediate tactical situation. Kingsman, with no assigned fire cover task, had the freedom to consider contingencies. As always, that meant he spent the vast majority of his time thinking about things that never happened, and never would. To everyone else, the things that happened seemed inevitable. To him, they were only tiny slivers of actuality poking through a vast mass of unrealized possibilities, to the extent that sometimes felt unsure of which possible future he had actually ended up in.

The Phobs had gone through a great deal of trouble to make sure their booby trap had been undetectable. But did it make sense that they were done being tricky? Maybe they had not yet detonated every structure that they had mined.

Ferhat's tactical dispositions were optimal. She was getting the maximum use out of her force, given the situation.

But which as-yet-unexploded wall would flip the situation if it came apart? Kingsman held a complex equation in his head. Any wall detonation decision had been made in the past—they couldn't change those, and he couldn't detect where they would be. But he could see which ones they would *wish* they had, if they wanted to inflict maximum damage at any given point in the fluid combat situation. So he watched those points, which ranged in number from three to almost a dozen at any given time. And waited.

He knew the troops, if they spared him any thought, felt that he was staying out of the way, saving himself. Even though he had been explicitly ordered not to insert himself into tactical operations, since adding new troops into a trained team could only reduce effectiveness, they still resented him for staying out of the fight.

He was moving before he consciously knew why. Tutun and his team had, in coming up against a desperately fighting nest of Phobs in a well-protected corner of the space, had exposed themselves to what looked like an interior wall, still bearing traces of mildew-resistant bathroom material here, elaborate dimensional wallpaper there. They traded protection for speed. Given the known situation, that was a sensible risk.

As the wall collapsed, spilling already firing Phob troops, it proved to be a disaster.

Kingsman accelerated directly at the newly revealed Phobs, at a steep angle along the wall. Just as Tutun's unit had been focused on taking out their target, the Phobs were focused on their target, Tutun's combat group. They had crouched there in

what had once been someone's living room, watching and awaiting their moment. They knew they had to take advantage of every instant of surprise, before the encounter turned into a standard firefight, one in which they had the disadvantage.

Kingsman crashed into them like a bowling ball while maintaining a steady fire.

The next few seconds were just flashes of pain and light, combat faces leering at him from glowing faceplates, complete disorientation from arms and legs pointing in all directions.

He had succeeded in disrupting the Phob attack, but numbers told. He was knocked, twisted...and felt the sear of freezing cold along his side as some cutting tool ripped his suit open. A forearm at his throat, limited armor giving way....

Then, impacts and loosening. Tutun and his troops had responded, taking out his attackers. Gupta was at his side. Without saying anything, she grabbed him and spun him around, spraying sealant as she did so.

"Wounds?" he managed.

"Skin held. You'll have vacuum bruising. If he'd managed to cut through, the pressure would have made your guts burst out. Don't worry, I'll give you a full checkout after."

Not five seconds later, she spun him again and gave him a kick which drove him back to his original observation position.

The entire event couldn't have taken forty seconds. Five dead Phobs fell outward behind him.

Kingsman finally risked connecting to Ferhat. "Assume the vessel," was all he said.

"But that will put us—"

"I know where it will put us. But we need to take advantage of the situation. Surprise won't last long. We aren't the only troops who can react to an unexpected tactical reverse."

This was one of many contingencies they had discussed. It required that she deliberately expose her troops to fire in order to put them in position to take advantage of the arrival of a weapon she had no real control over. For her, that was like a trapped climber letting go to fall off a high cliff because he planned for a condor to fly by and catch him before he hit the ground.

She barely hesitated before sending out the new dispositions.

Everyone could see the danger, and no one knew the reason for it. But they were trained, and moved as directed.

It looked like they were trying to retreat, to pull back into that side of the former abyss that was now a wall behind them. That was what the Phobs had probably originally expected them to do, so they were likely to accept it as making sense.

The Phobs moved to take advantage of the gaps in defense that naturally opened up when a force changed its line of operation.

Kingsman could see past his feet into space. His display amplified all military assets.

And the salvage tug had been reclassified as one, after some frantic negotiations with sullenly resistant officials from Salvage and Reclamation.

He saw the tug slide into view, serenely sailing along in pursuit of vagrant debris. If the Phobs noticed it, they edited it out as a routine part of background maintenance, even though the tug hadn't been operational since the Union assault.

Two Union soldiers had been wounded in the redeployment, and there was no way a cart could get to them under the current conditions. One had lost a lot of blood, and was showing slowing heart rate and shock. The other was stabilized, with painkillers allowing her to keep up a steady fire to hold off attackers.

"This better work, or I will kill you," Ferhat said in his ear.

That wasn't a standardized tactical message.

The tug's short-maneuver rockets flared along one side. The programming that kept it from approaching too close to large objects had been altered. It headed forward, into the new gap that had opened up in the Phobos surface by the booby trap.

A couple of Phob troops finally noticed it, but clearly didn't know what to do, or what it represented.

It fired a flight of metal flechettes, this time into enemy troops rather than non-magnetic debris.

Direction of the flechettes wasn't perfect. The radar wasn't designed to show up a target against a solid background. But the number of them was huge. And human bodies, even armored ones, are much softer than interplanetary rubble.

The effect was devastating.

Crystallized blood puffed out of Phobs and vanished. What was left of their bodies fell out past the tug, some bouncing off its smooth curves on the way out. After an initial shock, the Phobs recognized the changed situation. They pulled back from

exposed positions. And some of them disappeared, through airlocks built in what had once been an interior wall.

Ferhat waited. The tug was a makeshift weapon. It had no ability to distinguish between enemy and friendly. It detected moving objects in a certain segment of space. As long as those were all Phobs, all was well. Otherwise, her force would suffer friendly fire casualties.

The Phobs weren't stupid, and quickly found defensive positions where the tug's flechettes couldn't hit, or stopped moving against the background rock so that it had trouble detecting them.

Ferhat gave the signal. Kingsman commanded the tug to cease fire, and the Union troops switched from defensive to offensive operations, pursuing the now-retreating Phobs and seizing airlocks before they could be used and fused shut. Those Phobs who had frozen to avoid being destroyed by the tug's flechettes were now easy targets.

Within a few more minutes, firing stopped. Ferhat's troops held the volume.

"Here's where feralization puts them at a disadvantage," Kingsman said. "Phobos as a whole might have decided to blow a larger hole, killing us all without combat. This group had loyalty to only a limited volume. The cost they were willing to pay was much lower. Too low to be effective."

"A central government would have been willing to pay a higher price," Ferhat said. "Because they didn't have to pull it out of their own hearts. The price someone else pays always seems cheaper. But we're clear now. I'm pretty sure there's no other force that can threaten us within range."

The troops were busily checking their weapons and supplies, gathered in small personal groups exchanging observations on the last battle directly through voice, not via data feeds and images.

Kingsman's suit had been repaired, and Gupta had indeed looked him over, to confirm her initial diagnosis. Bruising and abrasions, but no serious damage. His tough integument had held his innards against the vacuum. His side still burned.

"You earned something from me there," Ferhat said. "Don't waste it."

"Yes," he said. "That's my ex-wife up there. I don't know how she managed it, but she and her husband managed to get her and a lot of emergency equipment into



Phobos before the Union hit. They were ready. What they put in place is now our best hope for avoiding a large-scale disaster.”

He could see that Ferhat could barely stand to talk to him. She felt betrayed, and her troops put at risk, by a man she knew she should never have trusted.

“The possibility of finding her is why you supported this operation,” she said. “The real reason you let me go ahead with it.”

“Yes.”

He wanted to talk more, to tell her how much he respected her, how much she had managed to accomplish...he was surprised at himself. Why talk more now? Why did Ferhat matter so much?

“And you’re going to tell me it isn’t personal,” Ferhat said.

“That’s what we always lie to ourselves about. But if it is personal, it’s still the best bet we have going. I want you to send me in.”

“Oh. Because you’re the one person in the world she would be willing to talk to?”

“As an ex-husband, no. She doesn’t want to see that man again. But as someone who can keep Phobos from falling apart, I can guarantee you, there’s no one she would rather see.”

With every victory came loss. And this one came with the knowledge that, when this was over, Ferhat would never speak with him again.

“Six hours,” she said. “There’s no resistance in that direction. But that’s as long as we’re moving.”

“Okay.”

“I wasn’t asking you to agree,” Ferhat said. “I wasn’t asking for you to say anything.”

Once its military forces were crushed, the ruling junta of Kalatra agreed to surrender to Kingsman’s force. His operations were now studied in tactical school, though they gave the commander a *nom de guerre*. Because of what happened afterward, Kingsman didn’t deserve to have his name attached to his own achievements: they called him Preceptor Zero.

The asteroid had been packed, not just with its own inhabitants, but with refugees from other asteroids that had already been defeated. His own force was at the limits of its resources, and its sanity. Still, Kingsman managed to find a way to arrange

for the removal of excess population and their transportation to safer areas. It was perhaps an overcommitment of military resources, though nothing that would have led to discipline.

But his defeat of the junta had been too thorough. Too many of the leadership had been killed, and those that remained had been discredited and were not as firmly in control of their people as they thought. And, more importantly, not as in control as they had persuaded Kingsman. They had been facing internal resistance even before his assault. Now, as food was distributed, and stresses relaxed, a mutiny arose. It flared through the displaced population, and there was a desperate attempt at resistance. That action was insane. That was why Kingsman had not anticipated it.

Assuming rationality in your opponent can be the most irrational position of all.

Kingsman waited too long to respond. He couldn't accept until almost too late that his brilliant solution had fallen apart. After that, his dispositions minimized Kalatran civilian casualties, even as those civilians were killing his troops. His troops, well trained and loyal, obeyed his commands, and some of them died for his vision of a just solution.

Eventually, he succeeded. The asteroid was pacified thoroughly, and all resistance was crushed. He believed that a more pragmatic-seeming solution, one that killed thousands of Kalatrans, would have been less effective, and left behind it a disaster. But would he have killed those thousands, if he had, in fact thought it would be more "effective" to do so? Sometimes he thought he would have been compelled to do it, other times that even a victory at such cost would have been unacceptable. He found that the Anthony Kingsman of those moments was forever closed off to him. That man was unknowable, even though Kingsman could remember being him.

Hundreds or thousands, he held himself responsible for not deciding to abandon his own previous, rigorously worked out plan, and realizing that the situation had changed too much for it to be applicable. Though when he was particularly honest with himself, he wasn't sure how much earlier he could possibly have realized it, or what he would have been able to do differently if he had.

As far as everyone else was concerned, the disaster had been the result of pure ego. Kingsman had seen himself as the savior of Kalatra, and had been willing to sacrifice his own troops to maintain that image of himself. No surviving Kalatran saw him as in any way their savior, or course. He was more hated by the people there than by any other Union citizen. He had, after all, killed hundreds of civilians with crisp

efficiency. Of the several attempts on his life, during his trial and after, at least two had been Kalatran death squads.

Given the calls for his blood, the eventual court martial had been a marvel of by-the-book procedure. He had violated protocols by accepting the surrender of a civilian force without official authorization. Every commander at the Rim had to do things like that, of course. Their actions were regularized afterward. Not this time.

So the charges that sent him to the prison asteroid were not the ones that everyone thought were his real crimes. But even a politically driven Union court in the heated atmosphere of the months after Kalatra wasn't going to officially find him guilty of minimizing enemy civilian casualties.

He suspected that Elise liked to believe that he had been the man who just refused to kill large numbers of people. Maybe he was that man. Or that better man existed when Elise was there to see him. If she did agree to talk to him, it would only be because of what he had tried to do at Kalatra.

And what, he feared, she would want him to do again here on Phobos.

*There are beaches in Phobos, yielding spots to lie in the heat and light, water lapping at your feet.*

*We have not come to one of those places. Where we stand is washed by cold water and scoured by an eternal wind that must have some purpose, like clearing out dust. There seems no real reason for the water vacuole to be quite so unpleasant. But maybe there's some kind of message in it.*

*She wades out into the freezing water, challenging me to do the same.*

*I knew her a long time ago, before...almost anything. Then she made a series of choices I still don't understand. But her choices are not to be argued with. And for a long time she was gone to me.*

*Now she is back. Everything else in my life I control. This, no.*

*Did he feel the same when he was with her? Or did he feel he was in control until that last desperate moment? She left him, then he tried to do his duty and keep a private conscience simultaneously, and events went against him.*

*I strip down, step into the water. It freezes, burns, then settles into a dull ache. Why has she picked this particular challenge for me? One that he had favored? Or simply one she wants me to think he favored? She is oddly defensive of his memory, though I never bring him up. I just feel honored by her choice.*

*Then, slowly, I understand. We should not underestimate the people who live here, who create the subtle art we admire, who wipe away spills when we are clumsy, who seem to disappear when we aren't looking directly at them. This is their cold heart. They'll do what they have to, when the time comes.*

*As I did when I asked her to join my mission. I'd like to say I had only the lives we could save from pain and premature death in mind. I would. But she was on my mind too. I'm glad she's with me, even though, if our plans work out, we may never see each other again.*

Ferhat and her troops moved fast, this time taking advantage of the open space of the evacuated crack. Below them, Union repair teams were sealing the space up, trying to keep Phobos from cracking in half. This had to be giving satisfaction to whoever still clung to an idea of victory in Phobos. Only a beleaguered force close to defeat would ever commit an act that desperate.

If it had succeeded, Kingsman thought, it would have achieved its larger goal. The destruction of Ferhat's force would have led to negotiations and a withdrawal of Union force, leaving the ruined hulk of Phobos behind them. No Kingsman with desperate and unusual powers would have been necessary.

But it hadn't succeeded.

The dwelling units on either side of the crack were sealed and empty. And the only effective military force in the volume had been the one Ferhat's force had just defeated. So, when the blew through the final wall and into the volume around the water vacuole, there was no one to stop them.

The team delivered Kingsman to a dark street that ended in a wall of ice with mist spilling off of it. Water sloshed somewhere out of sight. With the exception of a stack of emergency air cocoons, there was no sign that anyone had been here in years.

The cloaked figure sat stirring a pot on a heater, as the freezing mist swirled along the ground.

Elise turned her face up to Kingsman as he approached.

"Hello, Tony."

"Elise." He lowered himself and sat across from her.

She smiled. "It's good to see you."

"Um. Me too."

Humans could go through a phenomenal amount of effort to communicate, only to say absolutely nothing at all.

There might have been a few more lines around her eyes. He wasn't sure. He could see a change in tactical disposition instantly, but he often missed big changes in the way people looked and dressed. He had never managed to make himself care. Then, in the long prison hours, as he looked back over his life, he finally realized that not paying attention to that was missing a very big change in tactical dispositions indeed.

But, really, she hadn't changed. Her hair was thick around her face, so heavy it seemed like it should give her headaches. She still hid her too-large ears under it. And when she stared intently at him, he could see the white all the way around her eyes, and her teeth in her slightly downturned mouth. He knew he did look different, after defeat, after prison, after release. Death and resurrection were hard on the face.

"Want something to eat?" she said. "The soup's ready. I made it myself." She paused. "Don't look so suspicious."

"Sure," he said. "That would be just the thing."

She'd taken that battered travel case with her when she left him. She now reached into it and pulled out two bowls. She spooned soup from the pot and handed him a steaming bowl. It was a hot and sour soup, with insects instead of fish, in the orbital fashion. The hot oil clung to his tongue.

Elise had never been much of a cook. But when she could follow a simple set of instructions if she had to. That is, as long as Kingsman was not the one giving them. She was trying to prove she was somehow different, that she had made progress.

That Kingsman had no reason to think that he knew her at all.

"They brought you out to solve their problems for them," Elise said. "Have you?"

"That kind of depends on you, now."

"I was afraid of that."

"No," he said. "You were hoping for that."

She shook her head, but slowly, so he couldn't be sure if she was denying it, or just reflecting on how stupid everything was. "But why did you agree? What made you do it?"

"They offered me reinstatement, full pension, return to rank. More important, they offered me freedom. They let me out of prison."

"Is that why?" she said.

"You think I'm immune from wanting things like that? I'm not some kind of saint. Maybe I can't be bought for a hot shower or two...but, after a few years in a prison asteroid, my price actually wasn't much higher."

"And what you do with your freedom is fight your way all the way up here, to inner Phobos?"

"I need your help." Kingsman held out his bowl and she refilled it. "As you need mine. We're balanced on the edge of a disaster here."

"Because of an unprovoked Union attack."

"You don't need to remind me of that. But the road we took to get here is no longer relevant. All that matters is what path we pick to get out."

"Ah. So simple. The situation itself will blackmail me. I'm supposed to help you, because the Union is now the only force that can minimize the problem it itself created."

Despite himself, Kingsman smiled.

"I'm not your damn student, Tony!" She was furious. "Don't you dare be pleased at how well I figure things out. I'm not taking any of your tests, and I won't be happy when you give me a gold star."

"I didn't marry you to teach you anything."

"Oh? Don't tell me I didn't spend a few years in the Kingsman School of the Cognitive Arts. Dammit, Tony. Dammit, how are we...going to fix this?"

She could openly use what she had learned from him, now that she no longer had to live with him. Despite himself, despite his grief and his sense that nothing in his life would ever be right again, he *was* pleased. He resolved to hide it better.

"We can make an arrangement," he said. "You'll have to help. Fully, voluntarily. I don't need 'happily'. You don't have to pretend to like it. With your contacts and your resources, and our troops, we can tamp down on future death. No full Union conquest of Phobos, nothing like that. But a stop that doesn't lead to mass murder."

"Militarists overestimate the benefits of war," she said. "Pacifists underestimate the costs of peace."

"Once you've said that," Kingsman said, "what else is there to say?"

"Did you know I was here, Tony?"

"Sure. That's why I made it up here to talk to you."

"No. Not recently. Before. Long before. I mean, when you sent your message through your channels that you were ready to get the hell out of prison and stick your head into the grinding gears of their disaster to try to stop it."

No one outside of a couple of people high in Union command knew that. No one at the prison had known it. Uy didn't know it. If Ferhat learned it she would probably shoot him.

Kingsman didn't even consider denying it.

"I...yes. I thought there was a good chance you were here. As soon as the Union attacked Phobos, someone got footage in to me. Just so I would be up on the situation, you know. Despite what happened, I had contacts in the Service. People willing to do me favors."

"Because they knew that you might be more useful in disgrace than you ever had been as an eager-beaver officer with sparkling shoulder tabs."

He was startled. "Is that really how you saw me?"

"No, Tony." She reached out and touched his hand. "I just resented it. It's the only thing you've really given your life to. And no matter what they did to you, these are the people whose opinion matters to you. Peace-seeking politicians risked their reputations to get you out of prison—and you still feel contempt for them. You manipulated them, as you manipulated everyone. To get here. What did you see? What made you decide?"

He had hoped that she would never know. "This. Amid all the images of the assault, and all the intelligence reports, there was a tiny fragment that caught my eye. Just this."

Keeping it had been a risk. An intelligence sweep of his records would have noted it, and someone would eventually have connected it back to what he had seen in the darkness of his cell.

Elise had always had a distinctive style and way of moving. He spotted her in the video right away. She was a tall woman, with a swimmer's shoulders. She favored backless outfits to show off her delts, but that day she wore a sensible suit of dark plum, with contrasting butter-yellow cuffs, and a wide hat that tilted down over one eye. Three days before the assault, she slid through a partying crowd like an eel, her attention focused on something unseen.

She watched herself. "It was just a chance then. Just a possibility, one of several places the conflict might break out again. I was hoping it wouldn't be here. Not so much for me, but for this place. This place...you never knew Phobos in its greatest time, did you, Tony?"

He'd never told her that he tried to save up for a vacation for the two of them here. "No."

"There was nowhere else like it."

"Don't forget, you sent me Nam Lo's observations. I may never have seen it myself, but I saw it through the eyes of your husband."

"Please," Elise said. "You've got to let it go. Whatever it was we had. The past. You talk a good game about sunk costs, about playing the pieces where they are on the board, but...you haven't moved on. Is that really what you want it to say on whatever big memorial they put up to you? 'He never moved on'. Please, Tony. No matter how this works out. Tell me you'll do it. It's not like there aren't plenty of directions for you to go."

Elise had certainly moved on, from a husband who wanted to protect her, however clumsily, to one who deliberately put her in an incredibly dangerous situation on the off chance that she might act effectively to further their shared aims.

Kingsman had to face the fact that his wife had left him for a man who was more Kingsman than he was.

"Okay, Elise," he said. "If you tell me one thing."

"Just one?"

It was an old game. "I'll just ask for one. You may feel like giving me more."

"I doubt it. Shoot."

"You decided we were through. The last day of our last vacation in the Adirondacks. I was in the bedroom, you were in the hall. We were talking about something. I don't remember what. Just a normal conversation. Like married people have. And then, in the middle, it was over. I could tell by your voice. I mean, I can tell now, remembering it. Back then, I had no idea."

She was silent.

"Do you remember?" he said.

"I do."

"Then why won't you tell me?"

"Because...well, it will seem dumb. Arbitrary. Petty."

It took all of Kingsman's self control to not say that he had long been used to all of those things from her. This wasn't a marital fight. Not anymore. He was going to promise to let it go. To move on. No matter what she told him. He'd already decided.

Why, then, had he asked this? How would it make a difference?



"Try me," he said.

"I don't remember what we were talking about either. Stuff about getting ready to go, I think. But then you told me someone was coming up the road."

"Okay."

"You were in the bedroom. You couldn't see that window. So I...I asked you how you knew. You said you could see it in the mirror. The one with the broken wedding china set in the frame."

If she wanted to see those broken decorative plates as wedding china, he supposed he wouldn't argue with her. "Yes, of course. I picked that spot—"

"So that you could keep an eye on things. See the road, see what was coming up against you. And I realized...I said this was dumb. I had been thinking things over a lot. Not sure what was wrong, and what I should do about it. Then I realized: I had no idea of how you thought. I had no idea how you saw the world. All I knew was that it wasn't my way. I'm surprised you could hear it in my voice, though. I wasn't really conscious of it."

"That was the day. After that, there was nothing I could do to change it. It took you a couple of months. I kept waiting for it."

"Well, you sure seemed surprised when I told you."

"I was. I reached my conclusions—and then I ignored them. Because I had to. I'd like to say I felt relief that day, but that would be a lie."

"Did I answer your question?"

"You did," he said. "And you have my promise. I will move on."

"Thank you, Tony."

They were both silent for a moment.

"Now, about the other matter we were discussing...." he said.

"The fate of Phobos? Something separate, I hope. Your agreement with me about what happened at the end of our marriage shouldn't imply—"

"Don't play games with me, Elise. You know that you and I are the best hope for this situation."

"Let's say 'least bad'. 'Best' is pushing it. All right. The Union will get something that looks like a victory. And the inhabitants of Phobos will get something that looks like life. You keep casualties to a minimum. And once you're done, there will be a hell of a mess to clean up. Dead children, crying mothers, armless young women, old men

who have lost three generations of their family. Starvation and howling pain. I've seen them all before, I'll see them all again. I'll be at work."

"Thank you, Elise."

"I'm not doing it for you, and I'm not even doing it because I want to."

She was doing it because she trusted him. Was it because of the decision he had made at Kalatra? Even then, he had wondered if he had risked himself that way because he thought that Elise would respect him for that decision. He would never ask her.

Because he was going to move on.

The Union force did get something that looked very much like victory. Enough so that Preceptor Dakila Uy could return to Earth with honors, receiving a promotion that meant he would not ever have to worry about precedence with Kingsman. Kingsman had heard he was considering a political career.

Even though Leila Ferhat had been largely responsible for Uy's victory, she got no thanks for it. For Uy, she would always be the one who knew he had wanted to retreat, and had been balked of that goal by Kingsman's insane ambitions and her own clever tactical plan. She received a minor commendation, and some notes in her fitness report that indicated she had problems understanding the chain of command.

Still, there was a halo around the successful Phobos expedition, and she took advantage of it, before that halo got stained by post-event investigations and news reports of the aftermath. She transferred to a force near Jupiter, and now had a position of some responsibility in the force assaulting Titan. Kingsman knew her commander, and hoped that he understood her value. But he resisted the urge to put in a good word for her. That was the last thing she would want.

Nam Lo was somewhere on Titan. He had not managed to come to join his wife in the reconstruction of Phobos, because he was facing another potential human disaster caused by Union military action.

Phobos would never again be what it was. Centuries of culture lay buried in rubble. Elise fed the hungry, bandaged the wounded, comforted the survivors. Once military operations concluded, there was no further disaster.

No one knew that Kingsman had once again risked soldiers to prevent larger death tolls. This time his risks had paid off, and it seemed like things could have come out no other way.

He was once again an active-duty officer, though his actual authority was now several levels below the ability to call off an entire Union military expedition. In fact, he only commanded a handful of troops.

Officially, this rock in the Mars's trailing Lagrange point was uninhabited. It had served as a base for a while, and then had been abandoned in the run up to Phobos. After that, there were no resources to reactivate it.

But it could be reactivated by someone who had reason to do so. If someone from the outer satellites wanted to take advantage of the confusion following Phobos to mount an assault on the Union forces around Mars, this would be an excellent staging point.

Kingsman gave that event a possibility of one in three within the next six months. That was high enough that he had had no trouble in persuading command to fund and staff his operation.

"No big water here" Tutun stopped in the middle of one of the endless featureless tunnels. It was a spot as good as any other. "No waterfalls."

"No," Kingsman said. "We'll be running our water through our bodies on the average of once a week."

"You know, I could do without the statistics once in a while."

Tutun was one of several of Ferhat's troops who had decided to go with Kingsman after the end of the Phobos expedition.

"Pick a spot," Kingsman said. "Pick it carefully. You're going to be in it for a long time."

Six months was a long time to spend buttoned up in survival pods. Elise had been right about what he needed. The idea that some of the troops who had served with him in Phobos were willing to undertake the difficult duty under his command, on a one third chance that they might face an immensely superior force far from any possible reinforcement and support, gave him a feeling unlike any other. The most difficult part of the operation would be maintaining total detection discipline. As the weeks went by, and no assault manifested itself, the temptation would be to let small things go, to turn on some light and heat in a small room somewhere deep in the rock. The hardest part of Kingsman's job would be maintaining morale when that moment came.

Kingsman settled back against the side of the survival pod. Tutun snored to his right. To his left, Gupta watched something on a tiny screen, grunting occasionally. He wanted to tell her to stop. The unpredictable rhythm of her grunts drove him crazy.

Time enough for that later. He was sure that in a few weeks they would all want to kill each other. Meanwhile, it was time for a nap.

END